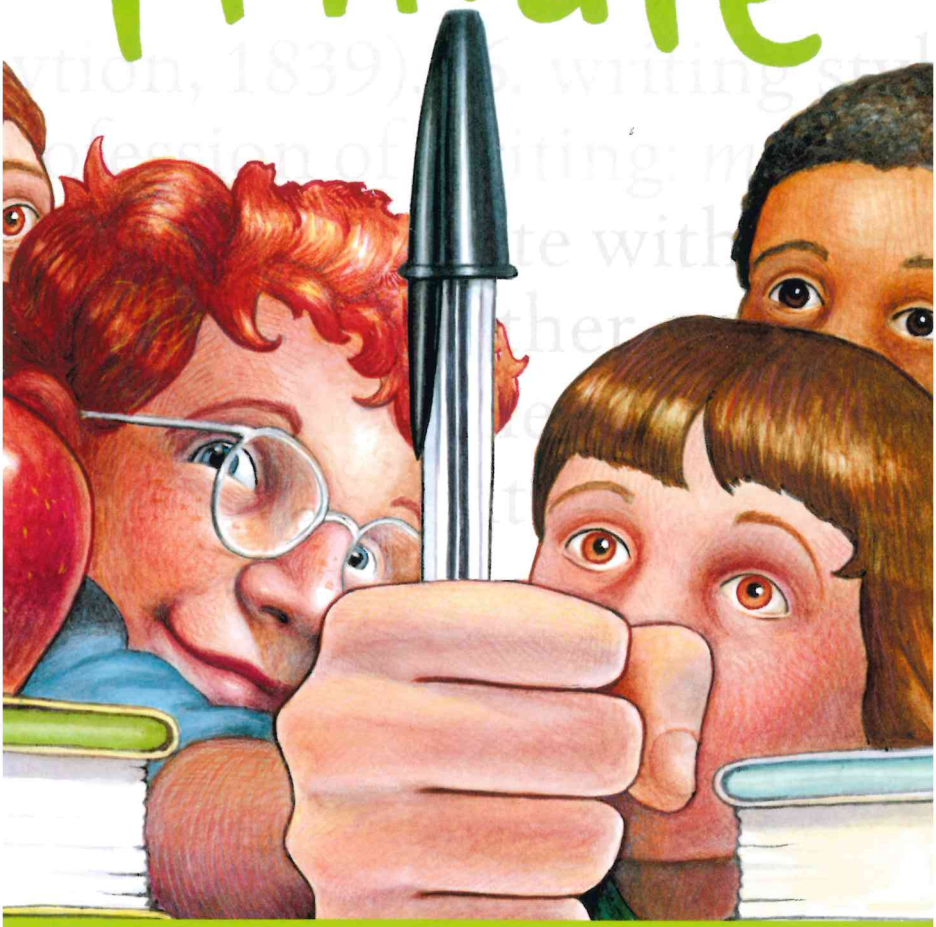
Frindle



★"Will have readers smiling all the way through. . . . Hilarious."—*The Horn Book*, starred review

Andrew

Clements

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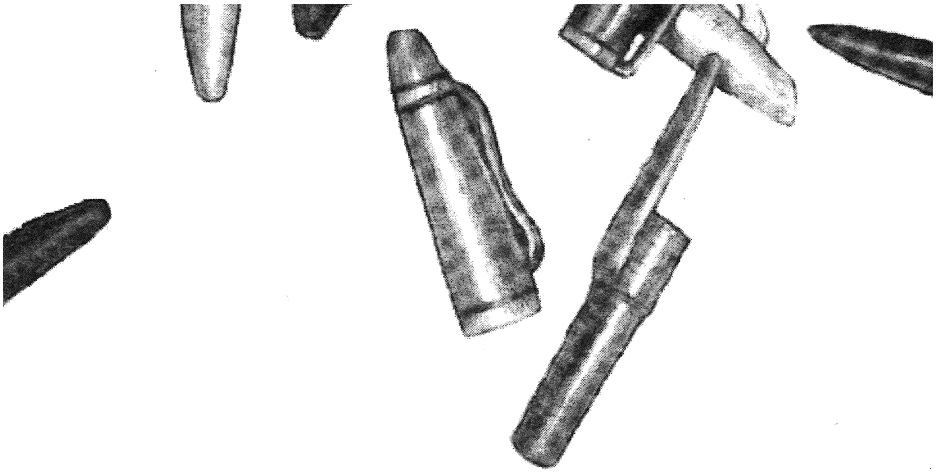

Frindle

Andrew Clements

Illustrated by Brian Selznick

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Nick, age 2 months

one

Nick

IF YOU ASKED the kids and the teachers at Lincoln Elementary School to make three lists—all the really bad kids, all the really smart kids, and all the really good kids—Nick Allen would not be on any of them. Nick deserved a list all his own, and everyone knew it.

Was Nick a troublemaker? Hard to say. One thing's for sure: Nick Allen had plenty of ideas, and he knew what to do with them.

One time in third grade Nick decided to turn Miss Deaver's room into a tropical island. What kid in New Hampshire isn't ready for a little summer in February? So first he got everyone to make small palm trees out of green and brown construction paper and tape them onto the corners of each desk. Miss Deaver had only been a teacher for about six months, and she

was delighted. "That's so *cute*!"

The next day all the girls wore paper flowers in their hair and all the boys wore sunglasses and beach hats. Miss Deaver clapped her hands and said, "It's so *colorful*!"

The day after that Nick turned the classroom thermostat up to about ninety degrees with a little screwdriver he had brought from home. All the kids changed into shorts and T-shirts with no shoes. And when Miss Deaver left the room for a minute, Nick spread about ten cups of fine white sand all over the classroom floor. Miss Deaver was surprised again at just how *creative* her students could be.

But the sand got tracked out into the hallway, where Manny the custodian did not think it was creative at all. And he stomped right down to the office.

The principal followed the trail of sand, and when she arrived, Miss Deaver was teaching the hula to some kids near the front of the room, and a tall, thin, shirtless boy with chestnut hair was just spiking a Nerf volleyball over a net made from six T-shirts tied together.

The third-grade trip to the South Seas ended. Suddenly.

But that didn't stop Nick from trying to liven things up. Lincoln Elementary needed a good jolt once in a while, and Nick was just the guy to deliver it.

About a year later, Nick made the great blackbird discovery. One night he learned on a TV show that red-wing blackbirds give this high-pitched chirp when a hawk or some other danger comes near. Because of the way sound travels, the hunter birds can't tell where the high-pitched chirp is coming from.

The next day during silent reading, Nick glanced at his teacher, and he noticed that Mrs. Avery's nose was curved—kind of like the beak of a hawk. So Nick let out a high, squeaky, blackbird "peep!"

Mrs. Avery jerked her head up from her book and looked around. She couldn't tell who did it, so she just said, "Shhh!" to the whole class.

A minute later Nick did it again, louder. "Peeep!" This time there was a little giggling from the class. But Mrs. Avery pretended not to hear the sound, and about fifteen seconds later she slowly stood up and walked to the back of the classroom.

Without taking his eyes off his book, and without moving at all, Nick put his heart and soul into the highest and most annoying chirp of all: "Peeeeep!"

Mrs. Avery pounced. "Janet Fisk, you stop that this instant!"

Janet, who was sitting four rows away from Nick, promptly turned white, then bright crimson.

"But it wasn't me . . . honest." There was a catch in Janet's voice, as if she might cry.

Mrs. Avery knew she had made a mistake, and she apologized to Janet.

"But someone is asking for big trouble," said Mrs. Avery, looking more like a hawk every second.

Nick kept reading, and he didn't make a peep.

At lunchtime Nick talked to Janet. He felt bad that Mrs. Avery had pounced on her. Janet lived in Nick's neighborhood, and sometimes they played together. She was good at baseball, and she was better at soccer than most of the kids in the whole school, boys or girls. Nick said, "Hey Janet—I'm sorry you got yelled at during reading. It was my fault.

I was the one who made that sound."

"You did?" said Janet. "But how come Mrs. Avery thought it was me?"

So Nick told her about the blackbirds, and Janet thought it was pretty interesting. Then she tried making a peep or two, and Janet's chirps were even higher and squeakier than Nick's. She promised to keep everything a secret.

For the rest of Nick's fourth-grade year, at least once a week, Mrs. Avery heard a loud "peeeep" from somewhere in her classroom—sometimes it was a high-pitched chirp, and sometimes it was a *very* high-pitched chirp.

Mrs. Avery never figured out who was making that sound, and gradually she trained herself to ignore it. But she still looked like a hawk.

To Nick, the whole thing was just one long—and successful—science experiment.

And Janet Fisk enjoyed it, too.

two

Mrs. Granger

FIFTH GRADE WAS different. That was the year to get ready for middle school. Fifth grade meant passing classes. It meant no morning recess. It meant real letter grades on your report cards. But most of all, it meant Mrs. Granger.

There were about one hundred fifty kids in fifth grade. And there were seven fifth-grade teachers: two math, two science, two social studies, but only one language arts teacher. In language arts, Mrs. Granger had a monopoly—and a reputation.

Mrs. Granger lived alone in a tidy little house in the older part of town. She drove an old, pale blue car to school every morning, rain or shine, snow or sleet, hail or wind. She had a perfect attendance record that stretched back farther than anyone could remember.

Her hair was almost white, swept away from her face and up into something like a nest on the back of her head. Unlike some of the younger women teachers, she never wore pants to school. She had two skirt-and-jacket outfits, her gray uniform and her blue uniform, which she always wore over a white shirt with a little cameo pin at the neck. And Mrs. Granger was one of those people who never sweats. It had to be over ninety degrees before she even took off her jacket.

She was small, as teachers go. There were even some fifth graders who were taller. But Mrs. Granger seemed like a giant. It was her eyes that did it. They were dark gray, and if she turned them on full power, they could make you feel like a speck of dust. Her eyes could twinkle and laugh, too, and kids said she could crack really funny jokes. But it wasn't the jokes that made her famous.

Everyone was sure that Mrs. Granger had X-ray vision. Don't even think about chewing a piece of gum within fifty feet of her. If you did, Mrs. Granger would see you and catch you and make you stick the gum onto a bright yellow index card. Then she would safety-pin the card

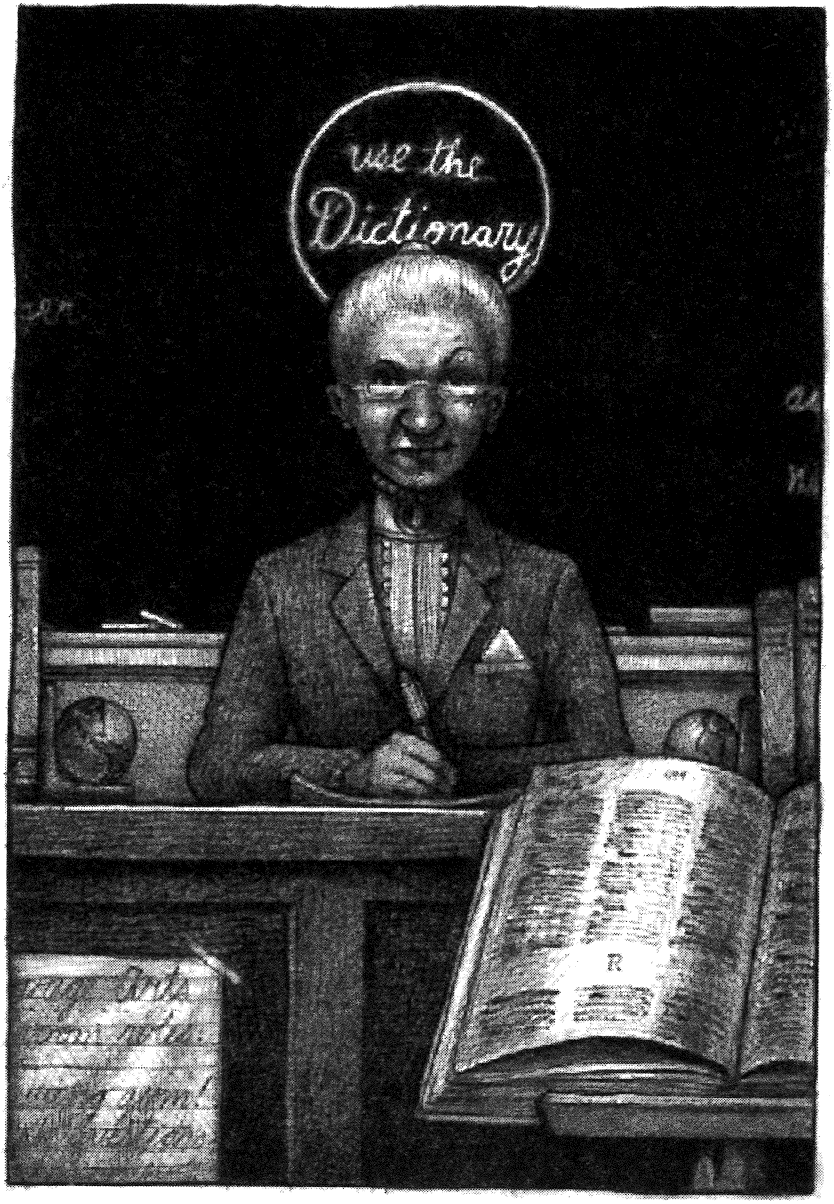
to the front of your shirt, and you'd have to wear it for the rest of the school day. After that, you had to take it home and have your mom or dad sign the card, and bring it back to Mrs. Granger the next day. And it didn't matter to Mrs. Granger if you weren't in fifth grade, because the way she saw it, sooner or later, you would be.

All the kids at Lincoln Elementary School knew that at the end of the line—fifth grade—Mrs. Granger would be the one grading their spelling tests and their reading tests, and worst of all, their vocabulary tests—week after week, month after month.

Every language arts teacher in the world enjoys making kids use the dictionary: "Check your spelling. Check that definition. Check those syllable breaks."

But Mrs. Granger didn't just enjoy the dictionary. She *loved* the dictionary—almost worshipped it. Her weekly vocabulary list was thirty-five words long, sometimes longer.

As if that wasn't bad enough, there was a "Word for the Day" on the blackboard every morning. If you gave yourself a day off and didn't write one down and look it up and learn



Mrs. Granger loved the dictionary

the definition—sooner or later Mrs. Granger would find out, and then, just for you, there would be *two* Words for the Day for a whole week.

Mrs. Granger kept a full set of thirty dictionaries on a shelf at the back of the room. But her pride and joy was one of those huge dictionaries with every word in the universe in it, the kind of book it takes two kids to carry. It sat on its own little table at the front of her classroom, sort of like the altar at the front of a church.

Every graduate of Lincoln Elementary School for the past thirty-five years could remember standing at that table listening to Mrs. Granger's battle cry: "Look it up! That's why we have the dictionary."

Even before the school year started, when it was still the summer before fifth grade for Nick and his friends, Mrs. Granger was already busy. Every parent of every new fifth grader got a letter from her.

Nick's mom read part of it out loud during dinner one night in August.

> *Every home is expected to have a good dictionary in it so that each student*

can do his or her homework properly. Good spelling and good grammar and good word skills are essential for every student. Clear thinking requires a command of the English language, and fifth grade is the ideal time for every girl and boy to acquire an expanded vocabulary.

And then there was a list of the dictionaries that Mrs. Granger thought would be "acceptable for home study."

Mrs. Allen said, "It's so nice to have a teacher who takes her work this seriously."

Nick groaned and tried to enjoy the rest of his hamburger. But even watermelon for dessert didn't cheer him up much.

Nick had no particular use for the dictionary. He liked words a lot, and he was good at using them. But he figured that he got all the words he needed just by reading, and he read all the time.

When Nick ran into a word he didn't know, he asked his brother or his dad or whoever was handy what it meant, and if they knew, they'd tell him. But not Mrs. Granger. He had heard all about her, and he had seen fifth graders

in the library last year, noses stuck in their dictionaries, frantically trying to finish their vocabulary sheets before English class.

It was still a week before school and Nick already felt like fifth grade was going to be a very long year.

three

The Question

THE FIRST DAY of school was always a get-acquainted day. Books were passed out, and there was a lot of chatter. Everyone asked, "What did *you* do over the summer?"

Periods one through six went by very smoothly for Nick.

But then came period seven. Mrs. Granger's class was all business.

The first thing they did was take a vocabulary pretest to see how many of the thirty-five words for the week the kids already knew. *Tremble, circular, orchestra*—the list went on and on. Nick knew most of them.

Then there was a handout about class procedures. After that there was a review paper about cursive writing, and then there was a sample sheet showing how the heading should

look on every assignment. No letup for thirty-seven minutes straight.

Nick was an expert at asking the delaying question—also known as the teacher-stopper, or the guaranteed-time-waster. At three minutes before the bell, in that split second between the end of today's class work and the announcement of tomorrow's homework, Nick could launch a question guaranteed to sidetrack the teacher long enough to delay or even wipe out the homework assignment.

Timing was important, but asking the right question—that was the hard part. Questions about stuff in the news, questions about the college the teacher went to, questions about the teacher's favorite book or sport or hobby—Nick knew all the tricks, and he had been very successful in the past.

Here he was in fifth grade, near the end of his very first language arts class with Mrs. Granger, and Nick could feel a homework assignment coming the way a farmer can feel a rainstorm.

Mrs. Granger paused to catch her breath, and Nick's hand shot up. She glanced down at her seating chart, and then up at him. Her sharp

gray eyes were not even turned up to half power.

"Yes, Nicholas?"

"Mrs. Granger, you have so many dictionaries in this room, and that huge one especially . . . where did all those words come from? Did they just get copied from other dictionaries? It sure is a big book."

It was a perfect thought-grenade—KaPow!

Several kids smiled, and a few peeked at the clock. Nick was famous for this, and the whole class knew what he was doing.

Unfortunately, so did Mrs. Granger. She hesitated a moment, and gave Nick a smile that was just a little too sweet to be real. Her eyes were the color of a thundercloud.

"Why, what an interesting question, Nicholas. I could talk about that for hours, I bet." She glanced around the classroom. "Do the rest of you want to know, too?" Everyone nodded yes. "Very well then. Nicholas, will you do some research on that subject and give a little oral report to the class? If you find out the answer yourself, it will mean so much more than if I just told you. Please have your report ready for our next class."

Mrs. Granger smiled at him again. Very sweetly. Then it was back to business. "Now, the homework for tomorrow can be found on page twelve of your *Words Alive* book. . . ."

Nick barely heard the assignment. His heart was pounding, and he felt small, very small. He could feel the tops of his ears glowing red. A complete shutdown. An extra assignment. And probably a little black mark next to his name on the seating chart.

Everything he had heard about this teacher was true—don't mess around with The Lone Granger.

four

Word Detective

IT WAS A BEAUTIFUL September afternoon, bright sun, cool breeze, blue sky. But not for Nick.

Nick had to do a little report for the next day. Plus copy out all the definitions for thirty-five words. For Mrs. Granger. This was not the way school was supposed to work. Not for Nick.

There was a rule at Nick's house: Homework First. And that meant right after school. Nick had heard his older brother, James, groan and grumble about this rule for years, right up until he graduated from high school two years ago. And then James wrote home from college after his first semester and said, "My grades are looking great, because when I came here I already knew how to put first things first." That letter was the proof Nick's mom and dad had been

Homework First

looking for. "Homework First" was the law from September to June.

This had never bothered Nick before because he hardly ever had homework. Oh sure, he looked over his spelling words on Thursday nights, and there had been a few short book reports in fourth grade, but other than that, nothing. Up to now, schoolwork never spilled over into his free time. Thanks to Mrs. Granger, those days were gone.

First he looked up the definitions in the brand-new red dictionary that his mom had bought—because Mrs. Granger told her to. It took almost an hour. He could hear a baseball game in John's yard down the street—yelling and shouting, and every few minutes the sharp crack of a bat connecting with a pitch. But he had a report to do. For Mrs. Granger.

Nick looked at the very front of the dictionary. There was an introduction to the book called "Words and Their Origins."

Perfect! Nick thought. It was just what he needed to do his report. It would all be over in a few minutes. Nick could already feel the sun and the breeze on his face as he ran outside to play, homework all done.

Then he read the first sentence from the introduction:

> *Without question this modern American dictionary is one of the most surprisingly complex and profound documents ever to be created, for it embodies unparalleled etymological detail, reflecting not only superb lexicographic scholarship, but also the dreams and speech and imaginative talents of millions of people over thousands of years—for every person who has ever spoken or written in English has had a hand in its making.*

What? Nick scratched his head and read it again. And then again. Not much better. It was sort of like trying to read the ingredients on a shampoo bottle.

He slammed the dictionary shut and walked downstairs.

Nick's family did a lot of reading, so bookshelves covered three of the four walls in the family room. There were two sets of encyclopedias—the black set was for grown-ups, and the red set was for kids. Nick pulled out the

D volume from the red set and looked up *dictionary*. There were three full pages, with headings like Early Dictionaries, Word Detectives, and Dictionaries Today. Not very exciting. But he had to do it, so Nick just plopped down on the couch and read all of it.

And when he was finished with the kids' book, he opened up the black encyclopedia and read most of what it said about dictionaries, too. He understood only about half of what he read.

He leaned back on the couch and covered his eyes with his arm, trying to imagine himself giving a report on all this boring stuff. He'd be lucky to have three minutes worth. But because Nick was Nick, he suddenly had an idea and it brought a grin to his face.

Nick decided that giving this report could actually be fun. He could make it into something special. After all, Mrs. Granger had asked for it.

five

The Report

BY LUNCHTIME the next day, Nick had a bad feeling in the pit of his stomach. Seventh period was coming. He was going to have to stand up in front of Mrs. Granger's class. The eyes of everyone in the class would be glued to his face. And Mrs. Granger's eyes would be cranked up to maximum punch power.

He looked over his notes again and again—the first English dictionary, the growth of the English language, William Shakespeare, words from French and German, new words, old words, new inventions, Anglo-Saxon words, Latin and Greek roots, American English—it all became a big jumble in his mind. And his grand plan from the night before? In the harsh fluorescent light of the school day, it seemed impossible.

What is it with the clocks in school? When you're planning to go to the carnival after school, the clocks in every class practically run backward, and the school day lasts for about three weeks. But if you have to go to the barber or go shopping for clothes after school, zzzzip—the whole day is over before you can blink. And today? After lunch, periods five and six went by in two ticks.

As the seventh-period bell rang, Mrs. Granger walked into the classroom, took four steps to her desk at the side of the room, flipped open her attendance book, glanced out at the class, and made two little check marks. Then looking up at Nick, she said, "I think we have a little report to begin our class today. Nicholas?"

Fifteen seconds into seventh period, and Nick was onstage. *This lady plays for keeps,* thought Nick. He gulped, grabbed his crumpled note cards and his book bag, and walked to the front of the room. He stood next to the giant dictionary on its little table, and Mrs. Granger walked to the back of the classroom and sat primly on a tall stool next to the bookcases. She was wearing her blue uniform.

Taking a deep breath, Nick began. "Well, the

first thing I learned is that the first English dictionary—"

Mrs. Granger interrupted. "Excuse me, Nicholas, but does your report have a title?"

Nick looked blankly at her. "A title? N-no, I didn't make a title."

"Class, please remember to include a title whenever you prepare an oral or written report. Now, please go on, Nicholas," and she smiled and nodded at him.

Nick began again. Looking right at Mrs. Granger he said, "The Dictionary." A couple of kids thought that was funny, but Nick played it straight, and just kept talking. "A lot of people think that the first English dictionary was put together in the 1700s by a man named Samuel Johnson. He lived in London, England. He was real smart, and he wrote a lot of books, and he wanted all the other smart people to have a good dictionary to use, so he made one. But there were other dictionaries before his. The thing that was different about Johnson's dictionary was its size, first of all. He had over forty-three thousand words in it."

The class made a bunch of noise at this big number—"Ooh," and "Wow!" and stuff like

that—and Nick lost his concentration. He glanced up at Mrs. Granger, expecting to see those eyes drilling a hole in him. But they weren't. They were almost friendly, in a teacher-y kind of way. She shushed the class and said, "Go on, Nicholas. That's a fine beginning."

Nick almost smiled, but he saw all the kids staring at him, so he gripped his note cards even tighter, and jumped back in.

"The other thing that Samuel Johnson did that was special was to choose the words he thought were most important, and then give lots of examples showing how the words got used by people. For example, he showed how the word *take* could be used in one hundred thirteen different ways. . . ."

Nick's report went on smoothly for twelve minutes. Nick was surprised at how easy it was to stand there and talk about this stuff. At the end of the first five minutes Mrs. Granger had had to stop Nick again to say, "Class, it is not good manners to yawn out loud or to put your heads down on your desks when someone is giving an oral report." No one in the class cared one little bit about the report. Except Mrs. Granger.

Every time Nick glanced up, she was smiling.

And her eyes were not the least bit icy or sharp. She was eating this stuff up, listening, and nodding, and every once in a while she would say, "Very good point" or "Yes, that's exactly right."

But the next time Nick looked up, he saw Mrs. Granger sneaking a look at her watch. Eighteen minutes gone. Maybe his idea was going to work after all. Time for phase two.

Reaching into his book bag, Nick pulled out the red dictionary he had brought from home, the one most of the kids had—the one Mrs. Granger said they should use. Nick said, "This is the dictionary that I use at home for my vocabulary work, and . . . and I opened it up last night to the very front, and right there I found out a lot about how the dictionary was made . . . right in this book. So I thought some of the ideas would be good as part of my report. It says here . . ."

"Nicholas?" Nick looked up. Mrs. Granger got off her tall stool, and its wooden legs made a screech on the linoleum. Heads snapped to attention, and the class was alert again. Mrs. Granger smiled, raised her eyebrows and pointed at her watch. "Nicholas, I think the class should read that at home themselves. Now . . ."

John's hand was up in the air, and at Mrs. Granger's nod he said, "But I don't have that dictionary at home, Mrs. Granger. I have the blue one." And several other kids immediately said, "Me, too."

Mrs. Granger tried not to show that she was annoyed. "Very well, Nick, but it shouldn't take too long. We have other things to do today."

Nick kept his eyes open wide and nodded, adjusted his glasses on his nose, and began to read.

> *Without question this modern American dictionary is one of the most surprisingly complex and profound documents ever to be created, for it embodies unparalleled etymological detail, reflecting not only superb lexicographic scholarship, but also the dreams and speech and imaginative talents of millions of people over thousands of years—for every person who has ever spoken or written in English has had a hand in its making. . . .*

It was a long article, and the kids were bored to death. But no one looked bored at all. Every kid

in the room knew now that the period was more than half over, and that Nick's report wasn't just a report. It was one of the greatest time-wasters he had ever invented.

Mrs. Granger knew it, too. She had edged around from the back of the room to the side near the windows. Nick glanced up at her now and then as he read, and each time, Mrs. Granger's eyes clicked up to a new power level. After eight minutes of Nick's best nonstop reading, her eyes were practically burning holes in the chalkboard behind him. There were only ten minutes left in seventh period.

When he took a breath to start a new paragraph, Mrs. Granger cut him off. "That's a fine place to stop, Nicholas. Class, let's all give him a round of applause for his report." The applause didn't last long.

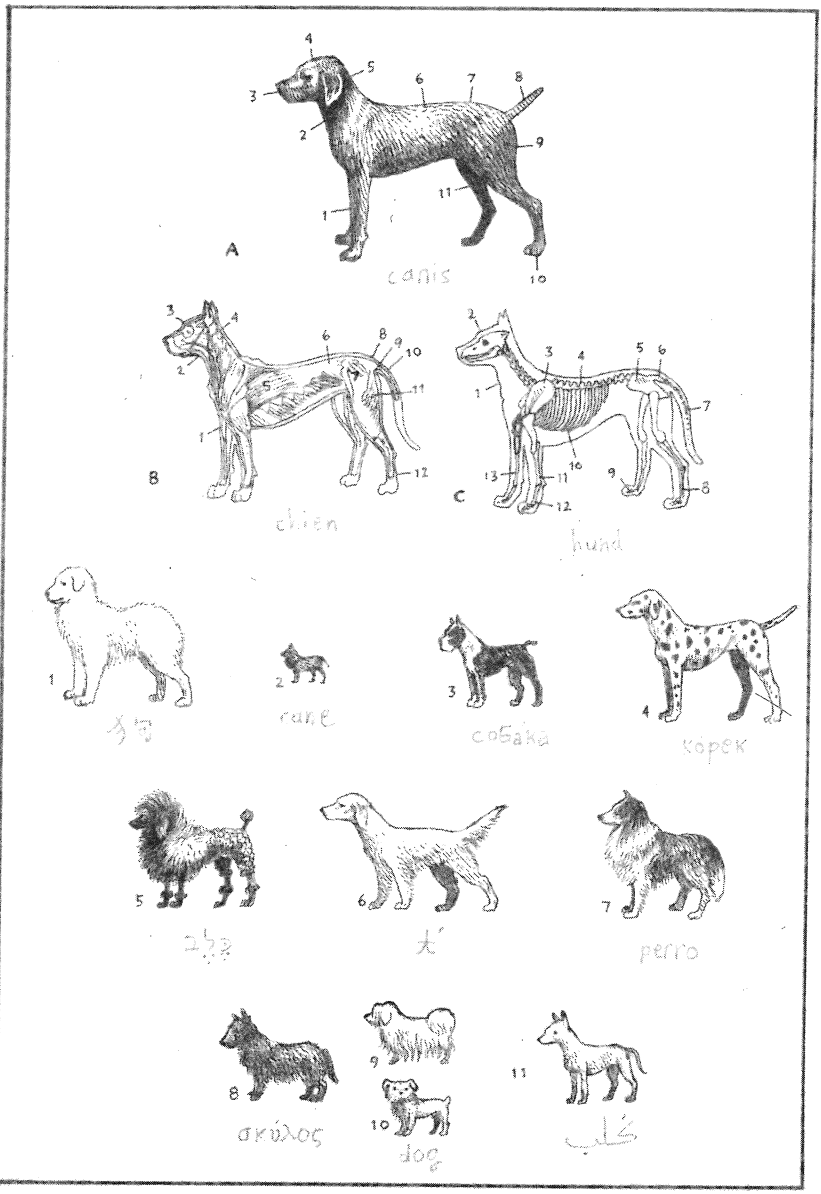
As Nick took his book bag and notes and sat down, Mrs. Granger's eyes went back to almost normal, and she actually smiled at him. "Although your report was a little long—"she paused to let that sink in—"it was quite a good one. And isn't it fascinating that English has more different words than any other language used anywhere in the world?" She pointed at

her large dictionary. "That one book contains the definitions of more than four-hundred fifty thousand words. Now, wasn't I right, Nicholas? All this will mean so much more since you learned about it on your own."

Mrs. Granger was beaming at him. Nick sank lower in his chair. This was worse than writing the report, worse than standing up to give it. He was being treated like—like the teacher's pet. And he had the feeling she was doing it on purpose. His reputation was in great danger. So he launched another question.

He raised his hand, and he didn't even wait for Mrs. Granger to call on him. "Yeah, but, you know, I still don't really get the idea of why words all mean different things. Like, who says that d-o-g means the thing that goes 'woof' and wags its tail? Who says so?"

And Mrs. Granger took the bait. "Who says *dog* means dog? You do, Nicholas. You and I and everyone in this class and this school and this town and this state and this country. We all agree. If we lived in France, we would all agree that the right word for that hairy four-legged creature was a different word—*chien*—it sounds like 'shee-en,' but it means what d-o-g means to



Who says dog *means dog?*

you and me. And in Germany they say *hund*, and so on, all around the globe. But if all of us in this room decided to call that creature something else, and if everyone else did, too, then that's what it would be called, and one day it would be written in the dictionary that way. *We* decide what goes in that book." And she pointed at the giant dictionary. And she looked right at Nick. And she smiled again.

Then Mrs. Granger went on, "But of course, that dictionary was worked on by hundreds of very smart people for many years, so as far as we are concerned, that dictionary is the law. Laws can change, of course, but only if they need to. There may be new words that need to be made, but the ones in that book have been put there for good reasons."

Mrs. Granger took a look at the clock, eight minutes left. "Now then, for today you were to have done the exercises beginning on page twelve in your *Words Alive* book. Please get out your papers. Sarah, will you read the first sentence, identify the mistake, and then tell us how you corrected it?"

Mrs. Granger jammed the whole day's work into the last eight minutes, a blur of

verbs and nouns and prepositions, and yes, there was another homework assignment.

And Nick didn't try to sidetrack Mrs. G. again. He had slowed her down a little, but had he stopped her? No way.

She was unstoppable . . . at least for today.

six

The Big Idea

THREE THINGS HAPPENED later that same afternoon.

Nick and Janet Fisk had missed the bus because of a school newspaper meeting, so they walked home together. They were seeing who could walk along the curb without falling. It took a lot of concentration, and when Janet stepped off into the street, Nick said, "That's three points for me."

But Janet said, "I didn't fall. I saw something. . . . Look." She bent down and picked up a gold ballpoint pen, the fancy kind.

That was the first thing—Janet finding the pen.

They got back on the curb, and Nick followed Janet, putting one foot carefully in front of the other on the narrow concrete curb.

And while he stepped along, he thought back over the school day, especially about his report. And what Mrs. Granger had said about words at the end of the period finally sank in.

That was the second thing—understanding what Mrs. Granger had said.

She had said, "Who says *dog* means dog? You do, Nicholas."

"You do, Nicholas," he repeated to himself.

I do? Nick thought, still putting one foot in front of the other, following Janet. *What does that mean?* And then Nick remembered something.

When he was about two years old, his mom had bought him one of those unbreakable cassette players and a bunch of sing-along tapes. He had loved them, and he played them over and over and over and over. He would carry the tape and the player to his mother or his big brother or his father and bang them together and say, "Gwagala, gwagala, gwagala," until someone put the cassette in the machine and turned it on.

And for three years, whenever he said "gwagala," his family knew that he wanted to hear those pretty sounds made with voices and instruments. Then when Nick went to preschool, he

learned that if he wanted his teacher and the other kids to understand him, he had to use the word *music*. But *gwagala* meant that nice sound to Nick, because Nick said so. Who says *gwagala* means music? "You do, Nicholas."

"No fair!" yelled Janet. They were at the corner of their own street, and Nick had bumped into her, completely absorbed in his thoughts. Janet stumbled off the curb, and the gold pen in her hand clattered onto the street.

"Sorry . . . I didn't mean to, honest," said Nick. "I just wasn't watching. . . . Here . . ." Nick stooped over and picked up the pen and held it out to her. "Here's your . . ."

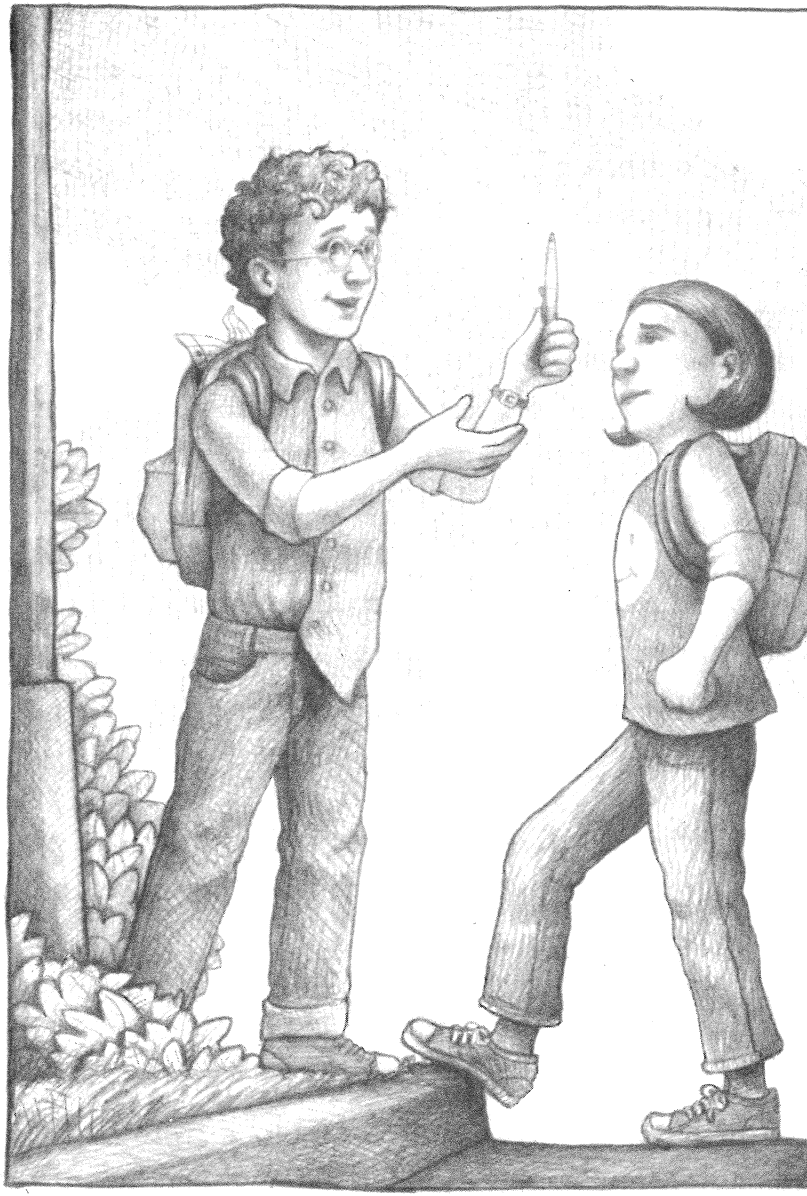
And that's when the third thing happened.

Nick didn't say "pen." Instead, he said, "Here's your . . . frindle."

"Frindle?" Janet took her pen and looked at him like he was nuts. She wrinkled her nose and said, "What's a *frindle?*"

Nick grinned and said, "You'll find out. See ya later."

It was there at the corner of Spring Street and South Grand Avenue, one block from home on a September afternoon. That's when Nick got the big idea.



The big idea

And by the time he had run down the street and up the steps and through the door and upstairs to his room, it wasn't just a big idea. It was a plan, a whole plan, just begging for Nick to put it into action. And "action" was Nick's middle name.

The next day after school the plan began. Nick walked into the Penny Pantry store and asked the lady behind the counter for a frindle.

She squinted at him. "A what?"

"A frindle, please. A black one," and Nick smiled at her.

She leaned over closer and aimed one ear at him. "You want *what?*"

"A frindle," and this time Nick pointed at the ballpoint pens behind her on the shelf. "A black one, please."

The lady handed Nick the pen. He handed her the 49¢, said "thank you," and left the store.

Six days later Janet stood at the counter of the Penny Pantry. Same store, same lady. John had come in the day before, and Pete the day before that, and Chris the day before that, and Dave the day before that. Janet was the fifth kid that Nick had sent there to ask that woman for a frindle.

And when she asked, the lady reached right for the pens and said, "Blue or black?"

Nick was standing one aisle away at the candy racks, and he was grinning.

Frindle was a real word. It meant *pen.* Who says frindle means pen? "You do, Nicholas."

Half an hour later, a group of serious fifth graders had a meeting in Nick's play room. It was John, Pete, Dave, Chris, and Janet. Add Nick, and that's six kids—six secret agents.

They held up their right hands and read the oath Nick had written out:

> *From this day on and forever, I will never use the word PEN again. Instead, I will use the word FRINDLE, and I will do everything possible so others will, too.*

And all six of them signed the oath—with Nick's frindle.

The plan would work.

Thanks, Mrs. Granger.

seven

Word Wars

SCHOOL WAS THE PERFECT place to launch a new word, and since this was a major historical event, Nick wanted it to begin in exactly the right class—seventh-period language arts.

Nick raised his hand first thing after the bell rang and said, "Mrs. Granger, I forgot my frindle."

Sitting three rows away, John blurted out, "I have an extra one you can borrow, Nick."

Then John made a big show of looking for something in his backpack. "I think I have an extra frindle, I mean, I told my mom to get me three or four. I'm sure I had an extra frindle in here yesterday, but I must have taken it . . . wait . . . oh yeah, here it is."

And then John made a big show of throwing it over to Nick, and Nick missed it on purpose.

Then he made a big show of finding it.

Mrs. Granger and every kid in the class got the message loud and clear. That black plastic thing that Nick borrowed from John had a funny name . . . a different name . . . a new name—*frindle.*

There was a lot of giggling, but Mrs. Granger turned up the power in her eyes and swept the room into silence. And the rest of the class went by according to plan—her plan.

As everyone was leaving after class, Mrs. Granger said, "Nicholas? I'd like to have . . . a word with you," and she emphasized the word *word.*

Nick's mouth felt dry, and he gulped, but his mind stayed clear. He walked up to her desk. "Yes, Mrs. Granger?"

"It's a funny idea, Nicholas, but I will not have my class disrupted again. Is that clear?" Her eyes were lit up, but it was mostly light, not much heat.

"Idea? What idea?" asked Nick, and he tried to make his eyes as blank as possible.

"You know what I mean, Nicholas. I am talking about the performance that you and John gave at the start of class. I am talking

about—this," and she held up her pen, an old maroon fountain pen with a blue cap.

"But I really didn't have a frindle with me," said Nick, amazed at his own bravery. And hiding behind his glasses, Nick kept his eyes wide and blank.

Mrs. Granger's eyes flashed, and then narrowed, and her lips formed a thin, hard line. She was quiet for a few seconds, and then she said, "I see. Very well. Then I guess we have nothing more to discuss today, Nicholas. You may go."

"Thanks, Mrs. Granger," said Nick, and he grabbed his backpack and headed for the door. And when he was just stepping into the hallway, he said, "And I promise I won't ever forget my frindle again. Bye."

eight

Mightier than the Sword

TWO DAYS LATER the photographer came to take class pictures. The fifth-grade picture would be taken last, right after lunch.

That gave Nick and his secret agents plenty of time, and they whispered something into the ear of every fifth grader. All the individual pictures had been taken, and finally it was time for the group picture. Everyone was lined up on the auditorium stage, everyone's hair looked great, and everyone was smiling.

But when the photographer said, "Say cheeese!"—no one did.

Instead, every kid said, "Frindle!" And they held one up for the camera to see.

The photographer was out of film. So that

shot was the only fifth-grade group picture he took. Six of the fifth-grade teachers were not pleased. And Mrs. Granger was furious.

No one had really wanted to make the teachers mad. It was just fun. It also got all the kids in the school talking about the new word. And when people pick up a new word, they say it all the time. The kids at Lincoln Elementary School liked Nick's new word. A lot.

But not Mrs. Granger. The day after the class picture she made an announcement to each of her classes, and she posted a notice on the main bulletin board by the office.

> *Anyone who is heard using the word* frindle *instead of the word* pen *will stay after school and write this sentence one hundred times: I am writing this punishment with a pen.*
>
> *—Mrs. Granger*

But that just made everyone want to use Nick's new word even more. Staying after school with The Lone Granger became a badge of honor. There were kids in her classroom every day after school. It went on like that for a couple of weeks.

One day near the end of seventh period, Mrs. Granger asked Nick to come talk to her after school. "This is not detention, Nicholas. I just want to talk."

Nick was excited. It was kind of like a conference during a war. One side waves a white flag, and the generals come out and talk. General Nicholas Allen. Nick liked the sound of it.

He stuck his head in Mrs. Granger's doorway after school. "You wanted to talk with me?"

"Yes, Nicholas. Please come in and sit down."

When he was settled she looked at him and said, "Don't you think this 'frindle' business has gone far enough? It's just a disruption to the school, don't you think?"

Nick swallowed hard, but he said, "I don't think there's anything wrong with it. It's just fun, and it really is a real word. It's not a bad word, just different. And besides, it's how words really change, isn't it? That's what you said."

Mrs. Granger sighed. "It *is* how a word could be made up brand new, I suppose, but the word *pen*? Should it really be replaced by . . . by that other word? The word *pen* has a long, rich history. It comes from the Latin word for

feather, *pinna*. It started to become our word *pen* because quills made from feathers were some of the first writing tools ever made. It's a word that comes from somewhere. It makes *sense*, Nicholas."

"But *frindle* makes just as much sense to me," said Nick. "And after all, didn't somebody just make up the word *pinna*, too?"

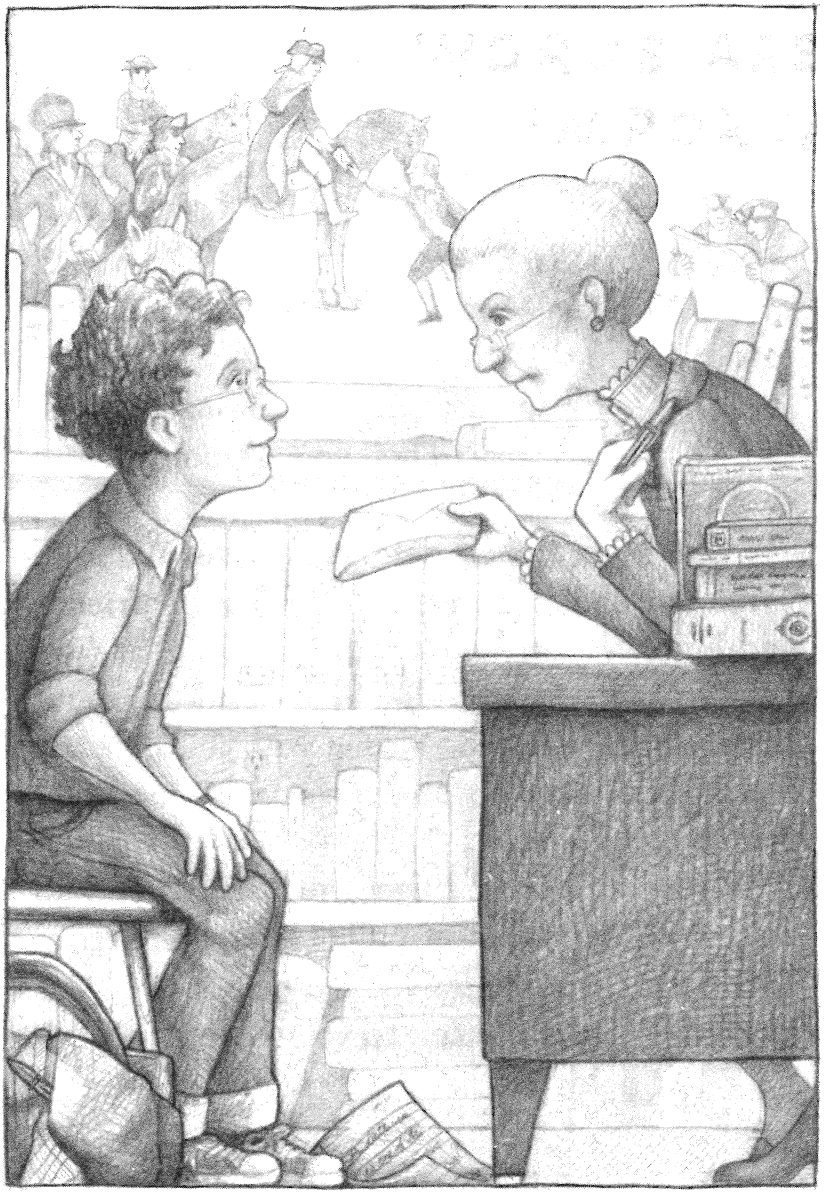
That got a spark from Mrs. Granger's eyes, but all she said was, "Then you are not going to stop this?"

And Nick looked right in her eyes and said, "Well, me and . . . I mean, a bunch of my friends and I took an oath about using the word, and we have to keep our promise. And besides, I don't think there's anything wrong with it. I like my word." Nick tried to look brave, like a good general should.

"Very well then. I thought it would end up this way." Mrs. Granger pulled a fat white envelope from her desk drawer and held it up. "This is a letter I have written to you, Nicholas."

Nick held out his hand, thinking she was going to give it to him. But she didn't.

"I am not going to send it to you until all this is over. I want you to sign your name and put



Like a conference during a war

today's date across the back of the envelope. When you read it, whenever that may be, you will know it is the same letter, and that I have not made any changes to it."

"This is weird," Nick said to himself. But to Mrs. Granger he said, "Sure," and he signed his name in his best cursive, and put the date under it.

Then Mrs. Granger stood up abruptly and said, "Then that is all for today, Nicholas. And may the best word win."

There was a frown on her face, but her eyes, her eyes were different—almost happy.

And Nick was halfway down the hall before it hit him—"She likes this war, and she wants to win real bad!"

Walking to school the next day, Pete had a great idea. "How 'bout we see if we can get every kid in the whole fifth grade to go up and ask Mrs. Granger, 'Can I borrow a frindle?'"

"You mean 'Mrs. Granger, *may* I borrow a frindle?'" said Dave. "Got to use good grammar. Don't wanna upset Dangerous Grangerous."

"Sounds good to me," said Nick. "She can't keep everyone after school, can she?"

Almost eighty kids stayed after school with Mrs. Granger that day. They filled her room and spilled out into the hallway. The principal had to stay late to help, and they had to arrange two special late buses to get all the kids home.

And the next day, all the fifth graders did it again, and so did a lot of other students—over two hundred kids.

Parents called to complain. The school bus drivers threatened to go on strike. And then the school board and the superintendent got involved.

And about this time the principal of Lincoln Elementary School paid a little visit to the home of Mr. and Mrs. Allen. She wanted to talk to them about their son. The one in fifth grade. The one named Nick.

nine

Chess

MRS. MARGARET CHATHAM had been principal of Lincoln Elementary School for eighteen years. She knew Mr. and Mrs. Allen, because they had all served together on the building committee when the old Lincoln School was torn down and the new one was built six years ago.

When she telephoned on the afternoon of October first to set up the meeting, Mrs. Chatham had asked Nick to be there, too. It was 6:30 when she knocked, and Nick opened the door.

"Good evening, Nick," she said. No smile.

"Hi, Mrs. Chatham," said Nick, backing away as she filled the doorway. She was a large person, as tall as Nick's dad, with wide shoulders. Nick guessed she would play linebacker on

The game was not over

a football team, because that's what his dad had played in college.

"Hello, Mr. and Mrs. Allen," she said, stepping into the living room. She was wearing a long black raincoat with a red silk scarf tied loosely around her neck. She kept her coat on, but took off the scarf and tucked it into her left pocket. She shook hands stiffly with both of Nick's parents before sitting down on the chair to the left of the couch. Nick's mom and dad sat on the couch, and Nick sat on the rocking chair that faced Mrs. Chatham across the low coffee table.

"This is not an easy visit for me. We are having some trouble at school, and it appears that Nick is in the middle of it."

Then while Nick's parents listened, Mrs. Chatham laid out the story as she saw it—Nick encouraging the other kids to use his new word, Mrs. Granger forbidding it, the ruined fifth-grade class picture, hundreds of kids staying after school, and a general feeling that there was a rebellion at school, with no one respecting the rules anymore.

Nick watched his mom and dad while Mrs. Chatham talked, looking from one face to

another. His dad was listening carefully, nodding and frowning. He looked embarrassed about the trouble. But his mom looked—kind of annoyed.

And when Mrs. Chatham finished her story, Nick's mom was the first one to speak. "But doesn't all this seem like a lot of fuss about something pretty silly?"

Nick sat quietly, but in his mind he shouted, *Hurrah for mom, hurrah for mothers everywhere!* His mom wasn't annoyed with him! She was annoyed with Mrs. Granger, maybe even annoyed with Mrs. Chatham. This was getting interesting.

Mrs. Allen was still talking to the principal. "I mean, is there really any harm in the children making up a funny word and saying it? Does there have to be a rule that a word like this may not be used?"

Mrs. Chatham sighed and said, "Yes, I suppose it does seem silly. But Mrs. Granger thinks that it's rather like keeping children from saying 'ain't'—there have to be standards. That's why we have dictionaries. And really, the problem isn't so much the word itself. It's the lack of respect for authority."

Mr. Allen said, "Mrs. Granger's right about

that. There have to be standards. We can't have kids walking around saying 'ain't,' can we?"

And that's when Nick piped in. "You know that big dictionary in Mrs. Granger's room? The word *ain't* is right there in the book. I looked it up, and there it was. I don't see why I can't use a word if it's in the dictionary. Mrs. Granger even said that her big dictionary was the law." Nick looked from face to face to face. That stumped them all. He had just launched a first-class thought-grenade.

"Well, yes . . . but . . . well, as I said, the word *ain't* and even the word *frindle*—these are not the real issue here," said Mrs. Chatham.

Mrs. Allen said, "Well, I think the real issue is Mrs. Granger's reaction to a harmless little experiment with language—it's an overreaction, don't you think so, Tom?" And Mrs. Allen looked at her husband.

It was Mr. Allen's turn to look from face to face to face. He was lost. "Yes, well sure . . . I—I guess so . . . I mean, it's not like anybody's been hurt . . . umm . . . I mean, it's not like vandalism or stealing or something like that . . ." His sentence trailed off, and he rubbed his chin and stared thoughtfully through the

window on the wall behind Mrs. Chatham.

And while the three grown-ups sat there in an uncomfortable moment of silence, Nick had a sudden vision of what was really going on here. It was a chess game, Nick against Mrs. Granger. Mrs. Granger had just tried to end the game by using her queen—Mrs. Chatham in her black raincoat, the black queen.

Nick didn't know it until the attack was under way, but he had a powerful defender of his own—good old Mom, the white queen. And the game was not over. It would go on until there was a winner and a loser.

Mrs. Chatham didn't stay much longer. There was a little more talk back and forth across the chessboard about how children have a right to explore new ideas, about the importance of respecting teachers and the work they do, about everybody needing to keep up standards and make school a safe place to learn.

Then Mr. Allen offered Mrs. Chatham some coffee and banana bread, but she said, "No thanks, I really must be going now."

She thanked Nick's parents and they thanked her. Nick opened the door, and said, "Good night, Mrs. Chatham." Then the black

queen put on her red scarf and walked off into the October twilight.

"Nick, I think we'd better talk a little more about this," said his mom, sitting back down on the couch. "If I find out that you have been disrespectful to Mrs. Granger or any other teacher at school, then you really will be in big trouble."

"I haven't been disrespectful. Honest. I did get everybody started using my word, but like you said, it's not hurting anybody. And I'm sorry if me and Dave and Pete got everybody to ask Mrs. Granger to borrow a frindle. That was mean, I guess . . . but she started it by making kids stay after school and write a hundred sentences just for saying my word once. All the kids like to use my word. It's just fun, that's all."

"Well," said Nick's dad, "if it gets everyone upset and makes the principal come talk to your mother and me, then it must not be fun for everybody, is it? And I think you should just tell all your friends to knock it off, right now . . . I mean, tomorrow."

Nick shook his head. "I can't, Dad. It won't work. It's a real word now. It used to be just mine, but not anymore. If I knew how to stop it, I think I probably would. But I can't." And Nick

looked at both of their faces to see if that idea was sinking in. It was. "Like I said, I won't be disrespectful, but I do like my word. And I guess now we're just going to have to see what happens."

And the chessmen—Nick's king and queen—had to agree.

The game would go on.