

# **The Cricket in Times Square Study Guide**

**The Cricket in Times Square by George Selden**

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## Plot Summary

Tucker is a mouse who lives in an abandoned drain pipe in the Times Square subway station. He lives close to a newsstand in the station owned by Mario Bellini's parents. It sells everything from newspapers to magazines. Tucker's best friend is Harry Cat, a large tiger cat who also lives with Tucker.

Chester Cricket lives in a tree stump bordering a meadow. One day a group of people come for a picnic. Chester hops down to them and climbs inside one of the picnic baskets, sampling liverwurst, hard-boiled eggs, roast chicken, and beef. He eats and then falls asleep in the basket. When he wakes up, he discovers that one of the picnickers has placed an uneaten sandwich on top of him, pinning him inside. He is stuck inside the basket as people move it into a car and then onto a train, taking him far away from home. When the train finally stops, Chester finds himself in a New York shuttle subway station.

At first, he is too afraid to do more than just lie in the dirt where he landed, until he finally becomes so nervous that he chirps aloud. Mario hears him, pulls him out of the basket, and brings him to the newsstand. Mario feeds him and makes Chester a bed out of a matchbox. Chester soon proves to have remarkable skills and a great memory, being able to play any song after hearing it just once. Soon he is able to play a variety of classical, religious, and even contemporary songs flawlessly. The story soon spreads as more and more people come to witness the musical cricket. Although the newsstand has gained notoriety and he is happy for Mario and his family, Chester wants to go home. He misses the meadow and he misses singing just for the sake of singing, for no reason other than that he feels joyful.



# Chapter One: Tucker

## Summary

Tucker is a mouse who lives in the Times Square shuttle subway station. His home is a drain pipe. He spends each day filling it with bits and pieces - treasures that he collects throughout the day and food that he stores for later. He finishes a piece of Lorna Doone's shortbread and then is immediately sorry that it is gone. He watches Mario, a young boy, as he looks after his father's newsstand. It is late and Tucker can see that Mario may as well go home, as there is little in the way of customers. A conductor named Paul asks Mario how business is and comments on how late he is up. An announcement confirms the arrival of the next train and Paul heads for the shuttle but at the last moment, he tosses a half dollar to Mario and takes a Sunday Times newspaper. He has already left before Mario can give him the twenty-five cents change that he should have received from the sale. Tucker climbs back into his wall niche and thinks about activities for the next day when he hears an unusual chirping sound. Tucker has heard almost every sound that a city can make, but he has never heard anything like this before.

## Analysis

Tucker watches as Mario works the newsstand, observing how late the young boy is there and having watched for long enough to know that he will likely not see enough trade to make his late stay worthwhile. Still, Mario and his family are just barely scraping by, and Mario knows that his father would stay until all hope of further income passed, so he does as well. Mario is a responsible young man who knows the importance of not only his family, but each dollar they make as well. The Bellini family are no strangers to hard work, and Tucker admires them.

The newsstand is cramped for an adult, but Mario is comfortable there. He is a nice young man who makes friends with the conductors easily, and some, like Paul will stop to pick up a paper just to see that Mario's time is not entirely wasted. During the quiet in between shuttles, Tucker hears a sound that while familiar, does not belong in the shuttle station.

## Discussion Question 1

What trend has Tucker observed by watching the Bellini newsstand for the previous year and, based on his observations, what conclusions can be drawn?



## Discussion Question 2

What assumptions can be made about the Bellini family based on the information in this chapter?

## Discussion Question 3

What disturbs Tucker as he is getting ready for bed, and why does he think of it as strange?

## Vocabulary

abandoned, scrounging, subsided, conductor, anxiously, glimmering, thrumming



# Chapter Two: Mario

## Summary

Mario follows the chirping sound, tracing it to a pile of waste and carefully sorts through it until he finds the small insect that he is looking for. Cupping the cricket carefully in his hand, he walks back to the newsstand and lays the it on a Kleenex. Then he takes another tissue from the box and gently taps the cricket's shell, antennae, wings, and legs until the dirt falls away. The cricket is still black, but now he has a glossy sheen. He looks around the station until he finds a matchbox. Then he lays down a folded piece of Kleenex inside and puts the cricket inside. The cricket settles himself in and Mario wonders if he is hungry. He breaks off a small piece of a chocolate bar from his pocket and holds it out on his finger. The cricket eats it. He shows his Mama and Papa when they return, but Mama tells him to throw the 'bug' away. Mario insists the cricket is good luck and begs her to let him keep it. Papa, ever the peace maker, changes the subject and asks Mario how business was. After they discuss the sales of the evening, Papa manages to override Mama's earlier decision about the cricket. He decrees that Mario can keep the cricket but on a trial basis only.

## Analysis

Mario listens, having also heard the sound. When he finds the cricket in the rubble and trash, he tenderly picks it up, careful not to hurt or frighten the insect. In fact, he is so engaged with the business of caring for his tiny new friend that he hardly considers the newsstand and its business at all. He immediately puts his mind and energy into ensuring the small cricket is safe, clean, fed, and has a place to sleep. In fact, there is little he doesn't see to in the way of the little cricket's creature comforts. He is so engrossed with his new friend that he doesn't even hear his parents return, but he is eager to share his extraordinary find with them.

Mama is less than impressed. She wants him to get rid of it and, for a moment, Mario's joy is squashed. To Mama Bellini, this is just an insect who will eventually infest everything they own by calling all of his insect friends to him. She doesn't see that her son has already bonded to a degree with this small creature, seeing it only as something that has no business sharing their living or work space.

Mario doesn't give up easily. He tells them all of the positive things that he knows about crickets, saying that they are intelligent and lucky and demonstrating his desire to keep the cricket he's found. He even promises to fix the screens at home to keep more crickets from coming to the call of this one. Mama continues to come up with reasons that keeping the cricket would be a mistake. She thinks that if Mario is playing with the cricket instead of minding the newsstand, the experience will cost them business, but Papa knows that isn't true. He can see how attached Mario is to the cricket, and how happy he is to have it.



Papa tries to change the subject in an effort to keep the peace. He is the type of man who wants everyone to get along and be happy, especially within his own little family. Even the cricket can tell that things are not as good as they could be, and he hops down into the matchbox bed and hides. Papa finds a way to meet both Mama and Mario in the middle by suggesting Mario keep the cricket in the newsstand instead.

Mario is thrilled with the idea. He has wanted a pet for a long time, and the fact that he has so carefully tended the cricket so far shows his capacity for caring for a pet, and proves that he has the degree of responsibility necessary to ensure the continuity of that care. Mario reminds them that although they'd promised him a dog, he never got one, nor a cat, a bird, or any other pet. Papa realizes that the cricket will fill that void for Mario without the extra cost that a pet such as a dog or cat might incur and decides to let Mario keep it. Once he makes the decision, Mama knows it is final and relents but not without telling her son that his cricket is only there on a trial basis, and any trouble or unexplained illness will end his relationship with this new pet. It is her way of maintaining some control over the situation, despite the obvious fact that Papa Bellini has the last word in their household.

## **Discussion Question 1**

What is so surprising about the cricket that Mario discovers?

## **Discussion Question 2**

How does Mario prove that he is responsible and able to take care of a pet?

## **Discussion Question 3**

How do the opinions of the Bellini's differ where Chester is concerned and why?

## **Vocabulary**

antennae, rummaged, pronounced, intelligent, resigned, scornfully, peculiar



# Chapter Three: Chester

## Summary

As soon as the Bellini family leaves, Tucker scurries over to the newsstand and into a space where the boards are separated far enough to get through. He calls out from under the stool, and at first there is no answer, but then the cricket comes out and they introduce themselves to each other. The cricket's name is Chester. Tucker has never seen a cricket before, but Chester tells him that there are plenty of mice where he comes from in Connecticut. He tells Tucker the story of the events that brought him to the station. Tucker listens, amazed by his story and Chester has just finished when a shadow falls over Tucker. Chester shouts out a warning to Tucker and ducks into his matchbox as he realizes that it is a cat.

## Analysis

In this chapter, the author portrays Tucker as an eavesdropper who enjoys listening to the humans around him. Once the Bellinis have left, Tucker goes over to the newsstand to introduce himself, revealing himself as a forward and self possessed character. Chester soon refers to Tucker as an excitable 'person', the author humanizing the animals in such a way that the reader can easily identify with the characters as the story progresses.

The author also presumes an understanding between the species which starts in this chapter with the beginning of another new friendship for Chester with Tucker. Tucker reveals that he loves listening to stories, so Chester shares how he came to be in New York. It is clear that Chester doesn't believe he'll ever make it home again, and that the thought makes him sad.

As Chester tells his story, it is clear that he was at first terrified by his new surroundings and for three days he huddled in the rubble beside the tracks, too terrified to make a sound. Finally he decided to chirp, the truth being that he simply couldn't think of anything else to do. He is grateful that Mario heard him, revealing that he likely would not have survived otherwise.

Just as Chester finishes telling his story to his new friend, he hears a new noise. Chester sees the cat before his new friend Tucker, and calls out a warning before hiding himself. His experience in the past has taught him that cats and mice are mortal enemies, and despite how frightened he is, he doesn't want anything to happen to his new friend.

## Discussion Question 1

How does Chester end up in New York's Times Square station?





## Discussion Question 2

How does Chester feel about his confinement in the basket at first, and what happens to change that?

## Discussion Question 3

What experience does Chester draw on when he calls out a warning to Tucker Mouse, and why is the warning unnecessary?

## Vocabulary

eavesdropping, wistfully, sympathetically, lurch, forlornly, interrupted, crouching



# Chapter Four: Harry Cat

## Summary

Chester hides, not wanting to see his new friend die, but when there are no sounds of struggle, he lifts his head up and looks behind him at a large tiger cat with gray-green eyes. Chester is surprised when the cat makes no move towards Tucker, and seems to have no animosity towards him at all. Tucker reassures Chester, explaining that he and Harry are actually best friends. He goes on to explain that in the city cats and mice had pretty much given up fighting each other. Tucker introduces Harry Cat and Chester is somewhat ashamed of the fuss he'd made over Harry Cat's arrival. Harry and Tucker discuss the merits of scrounging, and Harry comments that on the East Side, rich people weren't throwing away as much garbage as they once had.

Tucker asks Chester to chirp again, and Chester demonstrates, lifting his wings and using one to stroke against the other. Tucker is the first to compare the sounds Chester makes with singing. Now he sees that the noise is made from rubbing two wings against each other and he compares Chester's actions to that of a violinist. Chester admits that he'd rather use his wings to make music than to fly, and Harry purrs with appreciation. They talk about the newsstand and Tucker mentions that only 'long hairs' would buy most of what is for sale.

Chester doesn't understand the term and Tucker tells him it is an extra-refined person similar to an Afghan hound. Chester is sure that he will never understand the city, but his new friends offer to show him around. Tucker leads them through an underground maze of pipes until they reach daylight above. Despite the late hour, neon signs are still blazing and the noise is almost overwhelming. Chester looks up to see the same star that he used to look at from his meadow. They go down into the station again. As Chester climbs back in his matchbox, he thinks about the star.

## Analysis

This chapter introduces Harry Cat for the first time as an unlikely best friend of Tucker Mouse. Here, the author plays with preconceived notions, this time creating a friendship between two animals that are typically mortal enemies. Chester is embarrassed by his behavior and his new friends make it easier for him to consider that he might not be able to get home again.

Harry discusses the decreasing availability of good things to scrounge in the more affluent neighborhoods, perhaps the author's nod to the result of increased efforts at recycling.

Tucker and Harry continue to display their intelligence as they discuss the Bellini's newsstand, and again the author humanizes their insights, giving Tucker a clear understanding of the supply and demand of the business. The author uses this



opportunity to joke about 'long hairs', letting Tucker describe them as 'extra-refined' rather than as the cultural 'bottom of the barrel' that they were thought to have been in their time. The fact that the author chooses to use Art News and Musical America as the magazines they would be interested in is another poke at the cultural differences as seen between the general public and Tucker and his friends.

The sounds that Chester makes by rubbing his wings together are described as musical by Tucker, and when Chester demonstrates for Harry, the sound makes him want to purr, which he interprets as amazing talent.

Harry Cat suggests that they take Chester up to show him Times Square and while Chester is leery, he still goes along trusting his new friends. The author clearly indicates the assault on Chester's senses as he experiences Times Square for the first time. There is so much noise and light that Chester is overwhelmed, and the author does a credible job of describing how the city can be both beautiful and terrifying at the same time for someone who has never seen or experienced it. At first, Chester suffers from culture shock, crouching low to the ground afraid to move, but gradually he pulls himself together. Looking up, Chester then catches sight of the same star that he used to watch from his meadow. This star - symbolic of home to Chester - is a welcome sight, making him feel a little closer to home and a little less disconnected from everything familiar.

## **Discussion Question 1**

How does Chester's initial meeting with Harry make him feel and why?

## **Discussion Question 2**

What are Chester's first impressions of New York City?

## **Discussion Question 3**

How do Chester's new friends react to his musical ability?

## **Vocabulary**

acquaintance, ashamed, refined, venturing, hiccupping, germs, woodchucks



# Chapter Five: Sunday Morning

## Summary

Usually Mario sleeps in on Sundays, but for once he is up early and ready to go. As soon as the stand is open, he looks and finds Chester waiting for him. Mario brings him a variety of things from home to eat, uncertain as to what he would like, and Chester enjoys the new delicacies. Mario takes him over to a lunch counter next where Mickey the counterman gives him a glass of water. Mickey makes them both a strawberry soda and writes 'cricket' on a paper cup for Chester so Mario can get him water any time. He sees Papa Bellini talking to Mr. Smedley. When Chester chirps for him, Mr. Smedley insists that he chirps in a perfect middle C. Mario asks Papa to be allowed to go to Chinatown to buy a little house for Chester.

## Analysis

Mario takes the responsibility of having a pet seriously, and this is revealed as he immediately sets out a variety of treats for his cricket, trying to figure out what he likes to eat. While in the meadow, Chester had mainly eaten grass, leaves, and bark, he now samples a more human diet including liverwurst, bread, candy, and even Brussels sprouts. When Chester is full, Mario introduces him to Mickey the counterman, expanding Chester's knowledge of the community he is now a part of. Mickey is as charitable as everyone else Chester has met so far, and Chester is learning that although the city is nothing like the meadow he'd left behind, it isn't nearly as frightening to him as it was at first either.

Papa Bellini discusses opera with music teacher Mr. Smedley. Mario shows Mr. Smedley his new pet cricket and the author describes Mr. Smedley as a bit nervous around insects, having been stung as a child. By revealing Mr. Smedley's fear of insects, the author draws a comparison between Chester the cricket as a pet, and what would typically be considered a more commonly accepted pet - a dog. Mr. Smedley's response is typical of one that would have been present had his previous encounter been with a dog. Despite his fear, Mr. Smedley still recognizes that Chester chirps in perfect pitch. He tells Mario the story of Orpheus, comparing Chester's ability to that of Orpheus, and predicts that great things will come to Chester. This foreshadowing by the author provides a clue as to Chester's future.

Mario is determined to provide Chester with the best of everything, and manages to get permission from his Papa to go to Chinatown to find a house for Chester. Mario remembers Jimmy Lebovski once telling him that Chinese people liked crickets a lot and built special places for them to live. Papa loves how happy Mario is and can't deny him this request.



## Discussion Question 1

What inspires Mario to seek further information about Chester? What is he trying to learn and from whom?

## Discussion Question 2

Why is foreshadowed after Chester plays for Mr. Smedley and why?

## Discussion Question 3

How does Mr. Smedley feel around Chester, and what happened to contribute to these feelings?

## Vocabulary

dunking, clustered, din, enchanting, misunderstand, conductor, instinct, prophesy



# Chapter Six: Sai Fong

## Summary

Chester enjoys the subway trip downtown. The buildings near Chinatown are smaller and Mario walks up and down the streets looking for a cricket cage. He finally finds a shop open and the owner, Sai Fong, takes Mario inside when he learns what Mario wants. Sai Fong finds Mario a beautiful seven-tiered pagoda, and Mario thinks that it looks very expensive. Sai Fong tells Mario the story of the first cricket and Chester chirps once when he is done. Convinced the cricket understood the story, Sai Fong offers the cage to Mario for just fifteen cents.

## Analysis

Chester is curious and wants to take in as much of New York as he can. On the subway, Mario is considerate of the small size of his pet, and holds Chester up so that he can see out the window. Chester notices the flowers on the straw hat of a lady sitting near by, and wonders if they are tasty. This is the author's first hint that perhaps Chester's diet is wrong. Chester feels small when he looks around at the size of the buildings, even though they are smaller here than the buildings at Times Square were. Mario looks in the windows of the shops he passes, discouraged that none of them seem to have a cricket cage. Finally, Mario sees a sign that says Sai Fong – Chinese Novelties.

Sai Fong speaks with a different, but musical kind of voice that the author compares to that of a violin. This comparison is reminiscent of the comparison made by Harry and Tucker first hear Chester chirp by drawing his wings against one another. The musical theme continues as Sai Fong tells Mario the story of the first cricket, explaining how he was once a man who spoke only the truth, but now sings beautiful songs of truth and is all knowing.

Sai Fong only asks for only fifteen cents for the pagoda, which by coincidence just happens to be all the money that Mario has. Sai Fong also gives Chester the gift of a small bell the size of a honeybee and gives Mario a fortune cookie, which reveals that good luck is coming his way. Sai Fong warns him to be ready, foreshadowing a change in Mario's life.

## Discussion Question 1

What parable does Sai Fong share with Mario and what lessons or principles can be taken from it?



## Discussion Question 2

What makes Sai Fong think that Chester is remarkable, and what does he do as a result?

## Discussion Question 3

What does Sai Fong consider to be very good advice, and who gets it from where?

## Vocabulary

knickknacks, embroidered, pivot, individual, avalanche, pagoda, spire, emphasize



# Chapter Seven: The Cricket Cage

## Summary

That night, Chester tells Tucker and Harry about his trip into Chinatown. Tucker is so taken with Chester's new house that Chester asks him if he'd like to sleep in it. Tucker jumps at the opportunity. The only thing missing is a soft mattress; he convinces Harry and Chester that dollar bills from the cash register would be perfect. Chester uses one dollar bill as a sheet, and the other to cover himself, but he still needs a pillow. Chester looks deep in the register and finds a single diamond earring. Chester uses it as a pillow, while Harry Cat goes back to the drain pipe to sleep. Chester hops back into his matchbox.

## Analysis

After the Bellinis leave for the night, Chester shares his experiences with Tucker and Harry. Tucker is much more fond of the pagoda than Chester is. Chester prefers the quiet and close quarters of his matchbox bed to the open and highly exposed home that the pagoda provides. In this manner, the author accurately describes the fight or flight instinct both animals have. Chester, as a cricket, is acutely aware of the fact that he is on the menu of a variety of animals and as such is forced to keep himself hidden while he sleeps, but Tucker simply has to avoid cats and traps - and even the cats in Times Square don't chase him. It is logical to assume that Tucker would be much more comfortable than Chester in the pagoda, and Chester has no trouble in exchanging places with him for the night. The author also uses the opportunity to again reveal Tucker's interest in money as he requests dollar bills for use in the pagoda as bedding. It is his dream come alive - to be sleeping in a palace on money. Chester has made friends, and is starting to feel a sense of belonging now.

## Discussion Question 1

What differences are there between Chester and Tucker's opinions of the new pagoda?

## Discussion Question 2

Why is Tucker reluctant to spend too much time in Chinatown?

## Discussion Question 3

What do all of the objects Tucker chooses to make his night in the pagoda comfortable have in common with each other, and how do they reflect on Tucker's personality?



## Vocabulary

admiration, soufflé, register, compartments, contentment, burrowed, spongy

# Chapter Eight: Tucker's Life's Savings

## Summary

Chester is dreaming about his stump at home. He is sitting on top of it and eating a willow leaf, but it isn't as good as usual for some reason. In his dream, there is a storm and he sneezes himself awake. The storm came from the shuttle pulling into the station, and looking down, he sees that the willow leaf that he'd been eating was actually a two dollar bill, and only half of it remains. He rings the silver bell from Sai Fong like a fire alarm, waking Tucker and tells him what he's done.

Tucker suggests he should run away or frame the janitor who hit him with a mop the week before. Tucker is about to suggest stealing money from the lunch counter to replace it when Mama Bellini arrives. She throws a magazine at Tucker and turns to see Chester frozen in place with a half-eaten two dollar bill in his front legs. She tosses him in his cage and locks the gate and then cleans up and knits until Mario and Papa Bellini arrive. Mama tells them that Chester is a money eater, and that he has invited unsavory characters in at night. In the end, Mario is responsible for the money eaten and will have to replace it. Until then, Chester must remain confined.

Mario heads to the grocery store to get a job so that he can pay back the money that Chester accidentally ate. Later that night, Chester tells Harry Cat and Tucker that he is stuck until Mario can pay back the money. They offer to help him get out, but Chester refuses. Finally, Harry tells Tucker to quit stalling and get the money they need. He has been saving all his life, and after many years, he has managed to collect almost three dollars.

They make several trips from the drain pipe to the newsstand to get all of the coins stacked up, and by morning they are done. Mama Bellini opens the stand and Mario comes along to feed Chester. When she opens the cover, Chester is sitting on the pile of change, chirping. She looks in the drawer and sees that the rest of the money is still there. Despite being unable to figure out where it came from, Mama's word is good and Chester is allowed out.

## Analysis

When Chester wakes to discover that he has accidentally consumed half of a two dollar bill, he realizes how acutely this mistake will affect the Bellini family. Tucker offers up several ideas to avoid the trouble entirely, but the author continues to show Chester as an honorable cricket who refuses to repay the Bellini's kindness by lying, cheating or stealing to cover up his own mistake. The degree of honor Chester has makes Tucker sick, because had Tucker been the one to consume the bill, he would likely have run or pretended someone else stole it.



Chester's nobility is lost on Mama Bellini when she arrives that morning, and looking at the half eaten two dollar bill simply confirms every fear and suspicion she had where Chester was concerned. Having found Tucker and Harry in the newsstand as well only reinforces her earlier suspicions that Chester would soon be calling all of his friends to join him. When she'd said that, however, her fear had been that more crickets would follow. Papa continues to support Mario, acting as a buffer and trying to minimize the whole affair. The decision is finally made that since Mario wanted the cricket so badly, he can continue to be responsible for his pet's actions. As such, he is told he will have to repay the two dollars, and until then Chester will remain caged.

Mario accepts their decision, grateful that he wasn't told to get rid of Chester. Mario is industrious and knows he can make the money up. The author uses this opportunity to humanize Chester and his relationship with Mario when Mario compares Chester to a human by maintaining that like all 'people' who were free, Chester would likely rather die than spend his lifetime caged.

Tucker donates almost all of his life's savings to Chester, although doing so obviously causes him more pain than the physical bump he received when Mama Bellini threw a magazine at him earlier. The author has Tucker reveal the reason for his attachment to money, and his determination not to be a poverty stricken mouse. Chester is so moved that he doesn't want to take his friend's money, but the more Chester protests, the more noble he appears and the more stingy Tucker appears which only makes him more determined to donate the funds. Mama Bellini will never admit it, but as far as she is concerned, as long as the money is returned, she doesn't care where it came from. In that way, the author reveals that she is much like Tucker Mouse.

## **Discussion Question 1**

What trait does the author attribute to Chester and how?

## **Discussion Question 2**

What is significant about the amount and denominations of the coins that Tucker gives to Chester?

## **Discussion Question 3**

What do Tucker and Mama Bellini unknowingly have in common, and what behavior proves it?

## **Vocabulary**

furiously, forlornly, concentrated, honorable, evidence, denounced, unsavory



# Chapter Nine: The Chinese Dinner

## Summary

One afternoon, Mario cleans up Chester's cage and takes him to Chinatown to visit Sai Fong. The shop is closed when he arrives just before seven, but when he knocks on the door, Sai Fong opens it. An old Chinese man is sitting by the window and when Mario enters, he stands and bows. Mario bows back and Sai Fong tells the man that he is the cricket boy. The old man bows solemnly to Chester who bows back and chirps politely.

Sai Fong asks Mario if he likes Chinese food and when he admits he does, the old man disappears. Minutes later, he comes back with two robes, helping Mario put one on and donning the other himself. Mario is invited to sit down. Before long, he begins to eat all kinds of Chinese food dishes beginning with chow yuk and continuing with pork, chow mein and then duck with pineapple. Lastly, Sai Fong brings a big pot of tea. Chester is given a selection of delicacies as well.

After a dessert of candied kumquats, Sai Fong finally asks Mario what Chester's problem is. Mario explains the situation and his deduction that Chester must not be getting the right foods to eat. Sai Fong agrees. He and the old Chinese gentleman look through a book about a princess and a cricket who fed her pet mulberry leaves. Sai Fong has a tree outside and they put a few leaves into his cage. Feeling happy, Chester begins to sing. Sai Fong puts some mulberry leaves into a box and gives them to Mario.

## Analysis

Mario continues demonstrating his ability to care for a pet, taking Chester to Chinatown again to see if there is something wrong with his diet or something missing from it. Sai Fong and a Chinese gentlemen friend share their knowledge of crickets. Sai Fong tells Mario another story about a princess who had a cricket for a pet. Again, the cricket is highly valued for his beautiful music. Sai Fong displays his fondness for Chester and, by extension, Mario by feeding them, drinking tea with them and then offering to give Mario an ongoing supply of mulberry leaves for Chester from his own tree. It is a clear example of the strength of community, and the value of friendship.

## Discussion Question 1

How does Mario interpret the sound that Sai Fong and his elderly gentlemen friend's conversation makes?



## Discussion Question 2

What does Sai Fong offer Mario that he has never had before, and what does it contain?

## Discussion Question 3

Why is Mario worried about Chester even after Sai Fong answers his questions, and what causes his concern?

## Vocabulary

solemn, exclaimed, luscious, deduction, dismayed, contented, expressions



# Chapter Ten: The Dinner Party

## Summary

Exactly two months after Chester arrives in New York, the animals decide that they should celebrate. Chester cleans and polishes everything he can in the newsstand. Tucker is in charge of providing the refreshments and had managed to assemble a feast fit for royalty. Harry returns from an outdoor concert of chamber music and helps Tucker to bring over the food and refreshments. They put music on the radio and Chester encourages Harry to sing along with it. Then Harry asks Chester to perform. They clap when he is finished. Harry suggests that Chester play something they know. Though Chester's songs are all his own compositions, he finds that when he listens to a melody, he can repeat it perfectly. They ask him to continue, encouraging him to try folk songs, opera, and even a rumba. Tucker dances around the shelf, and losing his balance, he knocks over the box of matches. One match strikes on the way down and sets fire to the morning's newspapers and in no time, the whole bundle is burning. They try to put the fire out, but end up trapping themselves inside instead. Chester leaps onto the alarm clock, and it begins ringing. Soon they can hear Paul's voice and not long afterward, the cover is pulled off and they all manage to jump or run to safety.

## Analysis

Chester shows a desire to please, and displays the value he places on his new friendships when he cleans his surroundings in anticipation of celebrating his two month anniversary in New York with them. Tucker contributes by supplying the ingenuity necessary to collect an amazing assortment of food and drinks, particularly pleased with the ice for the drinks. The effort that his friends go to in order to make the occasion a special one touches Chester.

Harry returns from an outdoor chamber concert and reports that, though very good, the violinist didn't play nearly as well as Chester could. Chester blushes, embarrassed and pleased to hear that his music is appreciated. When Chester plays for them again, they are appreciative, but encourage him to try a song they might know. Chester reveals the extent of his musical talent when he is able to imitate any tune he hears. Chester is a musical prodigy. This is a theme that the author continues throughout the story, revealing the musical acumen of crickets throughout time, beginning with Hsi Shuai whose music was as beautiful as the truth he spoke when he lived his life as a man.

Tucker is so taken with Chester's music that he can't help but dance, and accidentally starts a fire. Chester manages to remain calm, and set off an alarm to draw help to their circumstances. They escape the fire without injury.



## Discussion Question 1

How is Chester's two-month anniversary in New York celebrated? How does this celebration show how Chester has adapted to his new life?

## Discussion Question 2

What incidents make Mama Bellini think that Chester is a jinx? What might be the author's purpose of including this dynamic between Mama Bellini and Chester?

## Discussion Question 3

How does Chester feel about the fire? Who is responsible and why?

## Vocabulary

reflection, luminous, conferences, insulated, admiration, limbered, compositions, ovation



# Chapter Eleven: The Jinx

## Summary

Chester, Tucker, and Harry sit in the opening of the drain pipe and watch as Paul battles the fire, dragging out the newspapers that he could save and dousing the rest with water. He calls Papa Bellini to tell him what happened, and then waits for him to arrive before going back to work. Chester jumps back onto his shelf as Paul puts the cups and remnants of the party into the garbage, and then hops into his cage to wait.

The Bellini's take a taxi and Mama moans when she sees the scorched magazines and papers. Papa Bellini does his best to comfort her. Paul tells them how he heard the alarm clock ringing, and how Chester, Tucker, and Harry had escaped, but hearing the story gives Mama a place to direct her anger. She insists Chester is a firebug, and has to go. They clean up until the morning rush, and Mario works extra hard, trying to make up for the fire, but Mama just sits on her stool.

After the rush, Chester hears a noise and Tucker peeks out to see if he is okay. Chester tells her that he is being thrown out, and Tucker offers the last of his savings if it will help, but Chester knows it won't. Mama thinks he is a jinx. Feeling sad and without thinking, Chester begins to chirp an Italian folk song that he'd heard. Filled with memories and emotion, Mama begins singing along and Mario is stunned. He has never heard Mama sing before. When Papa returns from the locksmith, Chester is chirping Aida and Mama tells Mario that Chester can stay. Tucker tells Chester that he'll be his manager.

## Analysis

Chester, Harry, and Tucker watch Paul put out the fire after which Chester again demonstrates his responsible character by returning to the stand to wait for the Bellinis to return and accept his part in the fire that destroyed their livelihood despite offers to avoid the issue entirely. Mama is typically hysterical, while Papa continues to try to maintain the peace. Mario is relieved to see Chester is okay, but his relief is short lived. When Paul reveals the parade of animals that escaped the fire, Mama Bellini has a place to put her anger. Mario's assertion that crickets are good luck is not convincing to Mama who calls Chester a jinx.

In this chapter, the author continues to reveal the value of friendship as Tucker sneaks over to check on Chester despite the increased risk of exposure.

This chapter of the story shows how music can be used as a healing tool, or as a way to transport a person or people emotionally to another time and place. Chester does just that with Mama Bellini, taking her in her mind back to the days of courtship with Papa. So swept up by the music playing, Mama Bellini sings along and when Chester continues with opera, she hums along with that as well. Chester's beautiful playing





changes Mama's mind and she decides that nothing that can play so beautifully could be responsible for something destructive like fire.

Tucker doesn't miss this exchange either, immediately offering his managerial skills. Chester agrees, and the author foreshadows the most remarkable week in Chester's life is yet to come.

## **Discussion Question 1**

Which character(s) feel responsibility for the fire, and in what way(s)?

## **Discussion Question 2**

What surprises Mario so much, and what does that reveal about Mario's home life?

## **Discussion Question 3**

What emotional response does Mama Bellini have as a result of Chester's playing, and how does that affect his immediate future?

## **Vocabulary**

reproaches, salvage, commuters, melancholy, astonished, dumbfounded, accompanist



# Chapter Twelve: Mr Smedley

## Summary

Tucker, Harry, and Chester talk about the turn of events. While Tucker is sure that there is money to be made from Chester's chirping, he isn't sure how to go about it. One thing he does know is that human beings are more likely to want to hear songs that they have created themselves instead of original compositions by Chester, so they begin his training that night, listening to the radio. By the end of the first evening, he'd learned three symphony movements; a solo violin concerto, half a dozen songs from musical comedies, and four hymns that he heard on a late night religious program.

The next day is Sunday and the Bellini family comes to work to see if Chester will sing again. Mario gives him breakfast and he eats slowly before stretching and then launching into "Rock of Ages." Nobody dares breathe a word until Mr. Smedley arrives. Mario tells him that Chester chirps hymns and Mama and Papa add opera and Italian songs to Chester's list of accomplishments. Next, Chester chirps "Onward Christian Soldiers" and Mr. Smedley is stunned. Papa gets him a chair so that he can sit and pull himself together. Chester chirps another two hymns and follows them with a violin concerto. Mr. Smedley praises his phrasing and as Chester continues, a crowd assembles, clapping after each piece. Chester performs for an hour and Mr. Smedley is so delighted that he decides to write a letter to the New York Times' music editor.

## Analysis

The author again clearly identifies Chester as a talented 'person' in this chapter. Tucker considers his position as Chester's manager carefully, revealing that he takes his new responsibility seriously. Tucker insists that a talent such as Chester's should not be wasted, as it is rare and precious - a clear statement that natural talent should not be squandered or hidden.

Tucker is also convinced that Chester is an untapped gold mine, insisting that people will pay to hear Chester if only he were able to play a larger variety of popular songs. This is another example of Tucker's business acumen, and his desire for wealth. Tucker doesn't want to be thought of as a 'greedy rodent' so he quickly explains that while at first appearing as a self serving ideal, Tucker reminds Chester and Harry that if Chester is successful, the Bellinis by association will be as well. Chester agrees with that, and continues to be portrayed as a musical genius, able to play using perfect recall. This foreshadows a more positive swing in the Bellini's financial future.

The Bellini's arrive the next day wondering if the miracle they witnessed the day before was just a one time thing. Chester enjoys the tension that builds in the air and the anticipation that everyone is feeling much as any musician might feel before a concert.



Mr. Smedley is introduced in this chapter, his opinion and endorsement of Chester's talent serves as a New York seal of approval. The fact that Mr. Smedley is a music teacher aids the author in lending credibility to Chester's ability. Music theory is briefly touched on in this chapter as Chester's phrasing is praised by Mr. Smedley who appreciates Chester's ability to play each passage completely without allowing notes to slide from one passage into another. Mr. Smedley can see and hear the heart in Chester's music and his decision to write to the New York Times continues foreshadowing much attention for Chester and the Bellinis in the near future.

## **Discussion Question 1**

How does Tucker react to his newfound position as Chester's manager, and what can the reader presume from his behavior?

## **Discussion Question 2**

In what ways is Chester much the same as any talented musician, and what is exceptional about his talent?

## **Discussion Question 3**

What is Mr. Smedley's initial reaction to Mario's claims regarding Chester, and how and why do these impressions change?

## **Vocabulary**

compositions, suspicious, magnificent, recital, perchance, triumphant, illustrious



# Chapter Thirteen: Fame

## Summary

The music editor of the New York Times prints Mr. Smedley's letter. The Bellini family gets to the newsstand early and Papa reads the letter to Mario and Mama. The station begins to fill up and people start to form a crowd around the newsstand. Mama Bellini has never seen so many people around the newsstand. She grabs a bundle of the Times and works her way through the crowd, offering the paper. In less than an hour, they are sold out of the Times. Mama presses an armload of music magazines into Papa's hands and tells him to take them out next. Soon, all copies of Musical America are gone as well. Harry and Tucker listen from the drainpipe.

On the first day alone, almost eight hundred people are late for work because they'd stayed to listen to Chester. Other papers run the story and business booms. Chester begins concerts at 8 a.m. and again at 4:30 p.m., playing for an hour plus encores each time. No matter how many magazines and papers they ordered, the newsstand would sell out each day. Before the end of the week, Chester is New York's most famous musician. Slowly, the joy of chirping leaves Chester. He continues, but finds it exhausting.

Then, three things happen. First, he sees from the papers that it is September 1st. Fall is coming now and Chester feels lost. That night, a brown leaf blows into the station and lands beside his cage. The worst thing though was when he finished chirping and someone tries to steal the little silver bell that was a gift from Sai Fong. Papa notices and chases the man off. Mario tells Chester that it is safe to come out, but he refuses. Papa puts the bell in the cash register to keep it safe. Mario knows Chester is unhappy and tells his parents that he almost wishes Chester had never come to New York if he isn't happy there. Chester hears and thinks about it all night. Finally, he makes up his mind.

## Analysis

In this chapter Chester gains almost instant fame largely as a result of the article in the New York Times sent in by Mr. Smedley. People gather around to listen, some thinking the Bellinis are faking the music somehow, and others who are as captivated as the Bellinis are. The crowd grows as Chester plays, and Mama takes advantage of the group selling as many copies of the New York Times as they had. Soon she'd sold them out. The uniqueness of the situation isn't lost on New Yorkers either as almost eight hundred people were late for work having stopped to listen.

Chester's notoriety and instant fame are shown in a light that allows the reader to see fame and fortune from the inside as well. The Bellinis certainly increased their income several fold with Chester's playing, and Mama even begins creating special treats for



Chester, but although Chester loved to play, the constant pressure to perform slowly robs him of the joy he used to get from just making music. Once again, this follows a human theme as musicians have struggled with this issue world wide.

The Bellinis' lives change as a result because their business increases exponentially. As such, they struggle to maintain enough stock to make it through each night, but no matter what they bring in, they continue to sell out. Soon Chester is the most famous musician in New York - but also the unhappiest. He has gone from loving music to being exhausted, entertaining people who crowd, poke and even try to take what little possessions Chester has as souvenirs. It wasn't long before even the countless eyes on him made Chester uncomfortable. When the calendar turns over August to reveal September first, Chester begins to feel very small. On that day, Chester sees a single brown leaf, which to him signifies the change in seasons going on all over the country. Then later, a stranger pokes his fingers into the pagoda in an effort to steal Chester's bell. Chester hides, and Mario puts the bell in the register where it will be safe. Mario is concerned about Chester when he has to return to school. He can tell that Chester isn't happy.

## Discussion Question 1

How does Mama Bellini's attitude towards Chester change, and which of her actions reflects this change?

## Discussion Question 2

What song does Chester learn that delights Harry and Tucker for its multi-faceted meanings, and what layered meanings do they recognize with this particular piece?

## Discussion Question 3

Why does Chester lose the joy he has for chirping, and how is this related to his sudden rise to fame?

## Vocabulary

celebrity, recital, encores, intermissions, appreciation, entomologist



# Chapter Fourteen: Orpheus

## Summary

Tucker and Harry show up and Tucker immediately wants to get to work. Tucker turns on the radio but Chester just isn't inspired to play. Tucker doesn't understand why, and Chester tries to explain that he misses Connecticut. Tucker offers to take him to Central Park, but Chester tells him it isn't the same. He tells them that he is planning to retire and wants to go home. Tucker tries to change his mind, and when he isn't able to, he tries to enlist Harry's help but Harry sides with Chester, telling Tucker that it is his life to do with as he wishes. He reminds Tucker that other people have retired at the peak of their careers. Tucker begins to see how giving it all up now might be advantageous.

Chester worries that the newsstand might suffer as a result, but Harry assures him that won't be a problem, so Chester decides to leave the following night. Chester feels better having made the decision, and they go to the drain pipe to celebrate. The next night, just before six, Chester is getting ready for his last performance. He plays a song from one of Mama and Papa's favorite operas, hoping they would remember him for the piece. Tucker and Harry are the only ones who know it is his last performance in New York.

Throughout the station, everyone stops what they are doing to listen. Through a grate in the sidewalk, a man walking above hears him and stops to listen. Around him, others stop until a crowd forms and even cars begin to stop. No one yells or honks. No one hurries or chastises. For the duration of the song, they just listen.

## Analysis

In this chapter, Chester suffers from homesickness. He calls it 'feeling Septemberish', but the truth is that he misses Connecticut. He shares visions of home with them, and announces his plans to retire. Chester already knows that Mario just wants him to be happy, but Tucker is a harder sell. Tucker asks Harry's opinion, and Harry supports Chester. It isn't long before Tucker comes around, and together they decide that Friday night is Chester's final performance.

As usual, people crowd around the newsstand, so many now that police are required to keep walkways open. This time, to honor those who sheltered him, Chester plays an Italian opera, and Mario feels a sense of pride that it is his pet everyone is enjoying. The author humanizes Harry and Tucker further as he describes their critique of Chester's offering. Throughout the station, people listen and are affected positively by Chester's playing. Soon the station is so silent that Chester's playing can be heard above ground too, and people stop in their tracks to listen. Traffic stopped, and for a brief moment in time, everyone just listened and Times Square was as silent as Chester's home in Connecticut at night.



## **Discussion Question 1**

What factors affect Chester's decision to return to Connecticut?

## **Discussion Question 2**

How does Chester's last night of playing affect his friends; the Bellinis; and the people who stop to listen, and what is the author saying about music?

## **Discussion Question 3**

How far does Chester's song carry, and how can this be compared to the story of Orpheus?

## **Vocabulary**

ambling, suggestion, flustered, miserable, scornfully, dreadfully, gesture, commuters



# Chapter Fifteen: Grand Central Station

## Summary

After the concert, Mario is left alone at the newsstand. He sits down and eats a sandwich, giving Chester a mulberry leaf. For dessert, he shares a Hershey bar and afterward they just enjoy each other's company, playing games until Mario began to get tired. Then Chester began to play one of his own compositions for him, playing so softly that they weren't interrupted. Slowly, Mario falls asleep. Chester finishes his song, and Tucker whispers to him from below that he should hurry. His train would leave in an hour. Chester hops up into Mario's hand and chirps lightly, and Mario smiles in his sleep.

Then he hops into the register drawer and retrieves the bell that Sai Fong had given him – something to remember New York by. Tucker packs a supper for Chester to take on the train, and Harry and Tucker show Chester the way to Grand Central Station. Chester rides on Harry's back, both for safety and to save time. Harry leads them through a series of deserted rooms, pipes, and back halls to where the trains waited. As they wait for the train to leave, Harry suggests that he should try to get back for a visit if he can. Then the train pulls out and Tucker promises to look after the Bellini family.

Harry and Tucker make their way back to the Times Square Station to find Mario still sleeping. Papa shakes him until he wakes and Mama is the first to notice that Chester is gone. They search everywhere, but when Mario searches the register drawer and sees that the bell is gone, he knows Chester won't be returning. They put the cover on the newsstand and leave. Tucker and Harry know that Mario misses Chester, but that he is glad that Chester was able to go home. Tucker and Harry are also glad for Chester. Tucker settles into some shredded newspaper, but he can't sleep. He asks Harry if maybe they can go and visit Chester in the summer and Harry agrees that maybe they can.

## Analysis

Mario is happy to be able to spend some time alone with Chester, having no way of knowing that this is his last night with him. They eat together and Chester plays a private recital for Mario who dozes off as he listens. Tucker comes to collect Chester when it is time to go, and Chester grabs his bell as a memento of his time in New York. Despite his desire to return to his home, Chester knows he will miss his new friends, and he finds it difficult to say goodbye. Even Tucker and Harry are at a loss as to how to part with Chester, their lives having changed so dramatically and so completely in the short time he'd been with them. As Chester's friends, they understand his need to return home, but they will miss him.





Tucker worries how Chester will know where his home is, but Chester assures them that he will be able to smell and feel it when he is home. Like old friends, they talk about return engagements and visits before the train pulls out and Tucker and Harry stay for a long time after, listening for the last chirp goodbye. Tucker worries about how unhappy Mario will be when he wakes and sees that Chester is gone, but Mama is the first to notice.

Mario has a feeling, and he looks in the cash register drawer to confirm that the bell is gone. Since only he and the Bellini family knew that the bell was there, it is logical to assume Chester has left. After only a second, Mario says he is glad, and Papa stops Mama from encouraging him to continue looking. Tucker and Harry are relieved. Chester is gone, but Mario is okay, and so are they. Neither Tucker or Harry is able to sleep, thinking about Chester, and Tucker quietly suggests that perhaps in the summer they could take a trip to the country in Connecticut. It is clear that Harry was thinking along the same lines. Chester had only been with them a short time, but his impact was large and when he left, the lack of his presence is felt by all.

## Discussion Question 1

How have the Bellini family members, Tucker, and even Harry been affected by Chester's brief stay with them?

## Discussion Question 2

Why is Chester so confident that he will be able to find his way home, and what obvious obstacle exists for him?

## Discussion Question 3

How does Mario know that Chester is really gone, and how does the Bellini family respond to this?

## Vocabulary

compartment, expression, rummaged, kidnapped, abruptly, exclaim, swished



# Characters

## Chester

Chester is a cricket who lived in a stump that borders on a meadow. He is only about an inch long all together, and has six legs, two antennae, and a pair of wings that he keeps folded on the top of his back. He is black in color, but it is a bright kind of black with a glossy sort of sheen. Chester has a soft spot for certain foods and when picnickers settle in the meadow near his home for an afternoon picnic, he is attracted to the smell of liverwurst from their picnic basket. He makes his way into the basket and enjoys a variety of the foods that he finds there before he gets tired and dozes off. He wakes up because one of the picnickers has put a leftover sandwich down on top of him; he is pinned down and cannot move. At first he doesn't panic, but when the basket is taken from a car to a train, he begins to worry. He finally frees himself when the train pulls into the Times Square shuttle station. Chester hops out, landing in a pile of dirt near the tracks and remains there for three days, too frightened to move. Then he finally chirps. Mario hears him and rescues him, cleaning him off and bringing him back to the newsstand. Chester chirps his appreciation and they become fast friends.

Mario gets permission to keep Chester in the newsstand, and even buys him a pagoda-style house although if Chester had to be honest, he didn't really like to be confined in it. He much preferred the tree stump that was his home in Connecticut. It is sadness that makes Chester bring his wings together to create the music that melts Mama Bellini's heart. A fire had almost destroyed the newsstand one night and though it was only an accident, Mama sees him as a jinx. He plays a folk song that happens to be her favorite and instead of the eviction notice he'd been given, he is cleared of all suspicion.

The novelty of a cricket who can play any music after listening to it is compelling to New Yorkers who have never seen before. Soon, Chester is the subject of a full page article in the Times newspaper, and crowds gather around to hear him play. Unfortunately, Chester is not happy. He never wanted his chirping to become a scheduled job and the joy he feels when he creates music is dwindling. In only one week he goes from famous to retired as he tells his friends that he wants to go home. Tucker Mouse and Harry Cat make sure that he is able to do so; they understand Chester's desire to go home. They part as friends and hope to see each other again.

## Tucker

Tucker is a mouse who lives in the Times Square shuttle subway station. His home is an abandoned drain pipe which goes a few feet into the wall and then opens up into a pocket where Tucker keeps his most valuable things. Tucker lives with his best friend Harry Cat. They both spend their days scrounging for whatever they can find. When Tucker isn't scrounging or sleeping, he sits in the drain pipe's opening and watches the world. Tucker enjoys watching Mario as he tends to his father's newsstand business.



Tucker is a shrewd mouse who knows a good deal when he sees one. He is savvy enough about money to know that he will need to save now, and in his short time has managed to assemble almost three dollars in change. When Chester accidentally chews through half of a two dollar bill, Tucker volunteers enough of his change to replace the two dollars eaten and buys Chester a reprieve from confinement. When Chester plays and reveals his gift for music, Tucker immediately offers his services as his manager, and in a single week, Chester's fame spreads throughout New York City.

Tucker is also a good friend, both to Harry Cat and to Chester. While he and Harry have shared a drain pipe for some time already, he still offers to shelter Chester as well when they accidentally set fire to the newsstand. He provides a meal for Chester to take with him when he goes home, and even wants to visit Chester himself the following summer if possible. Tucker is loyal and a friend to the end.

## Mario Bellini

Mario Bellini is a young boy who works in his father's newsstand. On the weekends, he works late, allowed to stay up to tend the stand until all hope of trade is gone. The Bellini family does not make much money with the newsstand so each sale is important. One night, Mario hears a sound that will change all of their lives for a time. A single chirp gets his attention and after some investigation, he finds a solitary cricket in the dirt and rubble beside the train tracks.

Mario brings the cricket back to the newsstand and adopts him as a pet. Since Mario's parents had promised him a pet several times, and Mario still didn't have one, they decide to let him keep the cricket. Mario spoils Chester, bringing him food of all kinds, buying him a pagoda-style cricket house to live in, and even investigating a proper diet so that Chester is soon eating mulberry leaves with enthusiasm.

Chester surprises Mario when he reveals his musical talent. In a short time, the Bellini family business skyrockets as music lovers from the area gather to hear Chester's music. When Chester becomes unhappy, Mario is the first to notice; he wonders if Chester is sorry to be away from his home. He tells his parents that if Chester was unhappy, it would be better if he could go home. Chester hears him and makes up his mind to retire at the height of his career. Mario spends a last night with Chester and when he wakes up, Chester is gone. As soon as he sees that his bell is also gone, Mario knows that Chester is not coming back, but he is secretly relieved that his friend is going home where he will be happy.

## Harry Cat

Harry Cat is a large tiger cat with gray-green eyes. His voice is silky and his body has black stripes. His best friend is Tucker Mouse and they live together in the shuttle station under Times Square where they share an abandoned drain pipe. Harry likes to go scrounging as well and favors the garbage cans on the East Side. Harry likes Chinese food, often browsing Chinatown's garbage cans as well. Harry and Tucker



make Chester feel welcome in New York and show him the sights. Harry is an intelligent cat who likes music and tells Chester he has talent. Harry even lets Chester ride on his back when it is time for Chester to go home.

## Sai Fong

Sai Fong is an older Chinese man who owns a store in Chinatown. He wears a shirt that has red embroidered dragons on it. He wears a vest over the shirt. Sai Fong smokes a long white clay pipe and had been in the United States for many years. His voice is soft, but becomes excited when he hears about Mario's cricket. Sai Fong has a great appreciation for crickets, telling Mario the story of the first cricket and then later of the princess and the cricket. These stories foreshadow Chester's importance in Mario's future and to the story itself.

Sai Fong is instrumental in helping Mario to care for Chester, giving him a cricket house shaped like a pagoda for only fifteen cents when he first meets them. Sai Fong even gives Chester the gift of a tiny bell which Chester treasures and takes home with him as a memento of his time in New York. Later Sai Fong add information about Chester's diet and provides an ongoing supply of mulberry leaves from his own tree.

## Jimmy Lebovski

Jimmy is a friend of Mario's who taught him about crickets the summer before when they were in Long Island on vacation. He told Mario that crickets are lucky, and that the Chinese like them so much that they built special cages that are like houses for them. Jimmy is largely responsible for not only Mario's limited knowledge about crickets, but also for Mario's choices in searching for answers when he runs into issues he is unable to solve.

## Mr. Smedley

Mr. Smedley is a music teacher who stops at the Bellini family newsstand every morning. He is the best customer that the Bellini newsstand has and regularly buys a copy of Musical America on the last Sunday of each month. He is a church-going man who always carries a long and neatly rolled up umbrella. Papa Bellini and Mr. Smedley share a love of opera and most of their conversations revolve around that subject. Mr. Smedley is skeptical when Mario first tells him that his cricket is musical, and proves it by encouraging Chester to chirp. When he does so, and the sound is a perfect middle C, Mr. Smedley is enchanted. His appreciation of Chester only deepens when Chester is able to duplicate a simple scale and he compares the small musical prodigy to Orpheus. He predicts great things for Chester and he is correct.

Mr. Smedley is so taken with Chester that he immediately writes a letter to the New York Times, and as a result of the editor's decision to print it, Chester becomes an overnight sensation. Soon Mr. Smedley is coming to the newsstand twice a day to listen to



Chester play and to give short lectures on music during intermissions. By writing his letter, Mr. Smedley is instrumental in the increased business that the Bellini's enjoy from that point forward.

## Papa Bellini

Papa Bellini is an industrious man who built the newsstand that supports his family many years earlier. Papa smokes a pipe occasionally and keeps a box of matches in the newsstand for just that purpose. Papa is a tall man who walks somewhat bent over, and has a kindness that radiates from him. He is a good father, who sometimes even overrides Mama's decisions where his son is concerned. Papa is the kind of man who always looks like something inside of him is smiling.

Papa Bellini gives his approval for Mario to keep Chester despite the fact that Mama is dead set against it at first. He sees the joy on his son's face, and knows that one small insect is a small price to pay for that kind of happiness. Papa is the calm in any storm, able to adapt easily even when the newsstand catches fire, or when they discover a half eaten two dollar bill one morning. He is not one to be over emotional, and allows common sense to guide his behavior tempering the outbursts that occasionally occur from Mama.

## Mama Bellini

Mama Bellini is a short and stout woman who should be in better condition than she is. A simple flight of stairs has her wheezing her way up or down. Her physical conditioning is so poor that even her face turns red as she walks up the stairs.

Mama has little use for Chester at first, calling him a bug and telling Mario to throw him away, sure that he will bring germs into their environment. Papa overrides her when she insists Chester will be nothing but trouble, and at first it almost seems as though she is correct. When the newsstand is set on fire, she is ready to get rid of the jinx that she believes Chester is, but Chester, overwhelmed with sorrow over the current situation, plays an Italian folk song, and she all but melts reversing her opinion. She knows that Chester must be special and that his character is proven to be worthy by the music he plays. When she realizes how special Chester is, she even creates special meals for him and watches out for him and when he returns home, she is the one who wants to keep searching for him, sure that he'd been kidnapped or worse.

## Hsi Shuai

Hsi Shuai was a man who lived long ago, when there were no crickets in the world. He was a very wise man who spoke only the truth. He knew all of the secrets of men and animals. He even knew the destinies of the stars and sun. The high gods loved him because he only spoke the truth. Men from all over came to learn their fate from him, but some men were not happy with what they heard and wanted to kill Hsi Shuai. The



high gods turned him into a cricket before the wicked men could kill him. Sai Fong tells Mario the story of the First Cricket who began life as the most wise man who knew all things. The high gods turned Hsi Shuai into a cricket before a group of wicked men killed him for telling them the truth. As a cricket, he sang songs of beauty and truth that only the gods understood, but that men loved to hear.



# Symbols and Symbolism

## Newsstand

The Bellini newsstand is located in the shuttle station under Times Square in New York. The Bellini family sell newspapers and magazines out of the newsstand, but business is scarce and they struggle. Made by Mario's father many years earlier, the newsstand is big enough to accommodate Mario easily, but small enough that both his Mama and Papa are cramped when they stand inside.

The newsstand is the Bellinis' sole source of income, and before Chester comes into their lives, they are barely making ends meet. This changes when Chester begins to play for the public, and gains notoriety as a result of Mr. Smedley's letter to the New York Times. From then on, the newsstand is the busiest place in the station, and the crowd seems to grow exponentially each day. As such, the Bellinis enjoy a business bonanza that will likely last long after Chester has returned home.

## IRT local Subway

The IRT local Subway is the subway that Mario takes on Sunday to get to Chinatown to find Chester a house. It is the first time that Chester is able to see where he is going.

## Matchbox

Mario uses a matchbox to create a bed for Chester. It is the first home that he creates for Chester, and it is the place that Chester returns to when he is frightened or wants to hide from the crowds closing in. In fact, Chester prefers his matchbox home to the pagoda that Mario gets from Sai Fong later, preferring the privacy it affords him.

## Liverwurst

Liverwurst is one of Chester's favorite foods. The smell of liverwurst prompts him to hop into a picnic basket early on in the story. It is also the first gift of friendship that comes from Tucker when he realizes Chester's preference for the food.

## Cricket Pagoda

The Cricket Pagoda is a seven-tiered structure in the shape of a pagoda that Sai Fong brings out for Chester. It is topped with a slim golden spire while the lower levels are painted green and red. Sai Fong says that it is an ancient cricket cage once owned by the Emperor of China and he willingly sells it to Mario for only fifteen cents when he meets Mario and Chester for the first time. The pagoda is much larger than the



matchbox, but Chester is eager to be free of it. In fact, he prefers his matchbox and offers to let Tucker sleep in the pagoda since he is so taken with it.

## First Cricket

Sai Fong tells Mario the story of the first cricket, which is about a man named Hsi Shuai who only spoke the truth. When wicked men came to kill him, the high gods turned him into a cricket. This story foreshadows Chester's importance and value, and hints at the fact that Chester is musical like Hsi Shuai was.

## Late Local Express

The Late Local Express is the train that Tucker and Harry assure Chester will take him back to Connecticut.

## Track 18

Track 18 is the track where the Late Local Express will leave from and where Chester is taken by Tucker and Harry when it is time for him to go home.

## Musical America

Musical America is the magazine that Mr. Smedley buys at the end of each month.

## Cash Register

The cash register in Bellini's newsstand refused to open one day. To ensure that never happens again, Papa Bellini built a wooden box to close in the newsstand entirely. He locks it with a padlock from the outside now. The cash register is symbolic of the Bellini's income and keeps their valuables safe. Mama Bellini's earrings and even Chester's bell from Sai Fong are kept there for safekeeping. The fact that the bell is missing from the cash register after Chester goes home is what tells Mario that he is gone.

## Jinx

Mama Bellini insists Chester is a jinx after a second 'bad luck' incident occurs at the newsstand during his brief stay with them. She is convinced that rather than being lucky, Chester is a jinx. So far, he had accidentally eaten half of a two dollar bill, and been partially responsible for the fire that almost cost the Bellini's their livelihood. Chester loses his status as a jinx after Mama hears him play an Italian opera that reminds her of the days when Papa courted her.



# Settings

## Times Square Shuttle Station

The Times Square Shuttle Station is the shuttle station under Times Square where people can catch a shuttle train from the subways on the east side of New York to the lines on the west side. It is also where the Bellini family has their newsstand and where Tucker and Harry Cat live.

## East Side

The East Side area of New York City is where Harry Cat likes to scrounge around.

## Nedick's Lunch Counter

Nedick's Lunch Counter is a local site of interest that Tucker and Harry show Chester when they show him around.

## Loft's

Loft's is a candy store located in the shuttle station under Times Square.

## Chinatown

Chinatown is where Mario goes to find a house for Chester.

## Canal Street

Canal Street is the stop that Mario and Chester get off at on their way to Chinatown.



# Themes and Motifs

## Boundaries of Friendship

In "The Cricket in Times Square" by George Selden, there are several examples of unusual friendships that cross the boundaries of what is considered normal. The most obvious of these examples is the relationship between Tucker, a mouse, and Harry Cat. It is a well-known fact that cats and mice are mortal enemies and that most cats would consider a mouse to be a quick snack at best. Harry is different however. He forms a friendship with Tucker Mouse. They share a home in a drain pipe in Times Square's shuttle station. Together, they watch the Bellini family struggle to eke out a living in the station.

Another example of a friendship that crosses boundaries would be the friendship between Chester and Mario, which blossoms when Mario first finds him in the shuttle station and brings him back to the newsstand. Mario cleans him and creates a home for him in a matchbox.

The boundaries of friendship are once again explored when Chester meets Tucker and Harry for the first time, and again when Mario takes Chester to the lunch counter to meet Paul. While most people and most animals would ignore a simple insect like Chester, his new friends appreciate him and enjoy listening to him. Friendships can be found in any shape or size. Not all friendships are traditional, and not all follow the established protocols of the past, as is clearly shown in this story. In fact, a good moral to this story would be when choosing friends, one should look beyond outside appearances and instead, look for inner character.

## Transitions of Life

This novel nicely reveals the transitions of life from several perspectives. The first and most obvious are the transitions made by Chester himself. His first transition is geographical. In the process of following his nose and stomach, he finds himself caught in a hamper and taken to New York, which is a tremendous distance away from his meadow in Connecticut, especially from the perspective of a cricket. In New York, he meets an entirely new group of people that soon become friends. He learns that he is able to chirp with such beauty that everyone around him will stop to listen. While at first he is pleased to be able to give such pleasure to all who hear, he soon realizes that his transition from ordinary cricket to virtuoso is not all that it is cracked up to be. He begins to lose the simple pleasure that he used to get just from playing when inspired and instead, his ability is scheduled. Soon he loses all desire to play. He makes the decision to return home to his meadow, despite the transitions he has made from home to cricket house; from cricket to cricket virtuoso; and from country life to city life.



Another character who goes through transitions in his life is Tucker Mouse. Tucker is already different from the mice that Chester knew at home. For one thing, his best friend is a cat - something unheard of where Chester comes from. Tucker also values money, having collected change for as long as he can remember, and managing to amass almost three dollars, which is quite a feat for a mouse. When he meets Chester, he finds a friend that he values even more than the nest egg that he has saved, and he willingly gives it up to free Chester from confinement. He trades his coin in for a chance to manage the prodigy cricket, but before he can figure out how to capitalize on Chester's talent, Chester decides to go home. The next transition he makes is from Chester's manager to his friend again when he accepts that Chester needs to go home, and even suggests that the following summer he will go with Harry to visit Chester in Connecticut.

Another character who makes obvious transitions in life is Mama Bellini. When Chester is first brought back to the newsstand, Mama insists that he is little more than a bug and should be thrown out immediately. She relents when she is reminded that Mario has been promised a pet for some time but has yet to get one, and she allows Chester to remain in the newsstand under probation. When she catches Chester with a half-eaten two dollar bill, she confines him to his cage until Mario can repay the money. True to her word, she lets him out when Tucker repays the debt. Her genuine transformation occurs when she hears Chester play for the first time and realizes that any creature that can play so beautifully can't possibly be a firebug.

Other transitions are to be found as well. The newsstand transitions from a business that is hardly surviving, to a business that is known throughout New York and can hardly keep enough papers in stock to sell each day. The story is filled with the magic that transitions in life can bring.

## Country vs City Life

There are many differences between life in the country and life in the city. The author touches on a few of them in this story. Chester is a country cricket and for good reason - the country is where crickets belong. They require a natural habitat to survive, eating bark and leaves, and enjoying room to grow and raise their families. A country cricket has few things beyond natural predators to worry about. A country cricket merely has to avoid birds or other cricket-eating predators, and have a warm place to go when the weather is bad. Other than that, food in the country is plentiful for a cricket, and days of sunshine are filled with hopping games and songs sung to the countryside.

City life is an entirely different lifestyle, and holds many hazards that a cricket would have to be aware of. The first and most pressing of these is the myriad of things that can kill a cricket in the city. A cricket is so small and the city is so large that a cricket can be killed crossing the street, or even just from being stepped on in a crowded subway station. There is less food as most cities are a conglomerate of metal and glass buildings, which offer little for a cricket to eat. There are few stumps within which to make a home. Food like bark and leaves are harder to come by, if they are available at



all. Green spaces are spread out so far apart that even finding one would be a challenge for a cricket.

Friends are also different in the city. Natural predators in the country end up forming unlikely alliances in the city such as the one that exists between Tucker, a mouse, and Harry, a cat. City life is not all bad of course. There is a variety of unusual food stuff to be consumed and transportation by subway is easy if you can read or follow directions from friends. There is also a larger audience for a musician to be appreciated by, and media attention you can receive if you are any good.

Country life however is likely preferable to a cricket, even one as talented as Chester. He realizes in just one week that his life in the meadow is one he wants more than anything else - even fame and fortune.



# Styles

## Point of View

George Selden tells the story of *The Cricket in Times Square* from a limited and omniscient point of view. In this manner, the author adopts a 'god-like' perspective, moving from one character's perspective to another. He is able to reveal details from the personal point of view of each character, often switching from one to another within a chapter or segment.

The limited, omniscient viewpoint is revealed shortly after Mario finds Chester and Chester meets Tucker and Harry for the first time. Selden gives each of these characters a first-person perspective during interactions. Selden does a wonderful job of transitioning from one character to another and there is never a situation where the reader is confused as to whose mind or perspective is being revealed. The author gives voice not only to the creatures in this story, but to the people as well, allowing them to interact, despite being unable to understand each other. The story could have been told by a single first-person perspective quite easily, but it would have lost the depth and variety that having several perspectives allows.

## Language and Meaning

*The Cricket in Times Square* by George Selden is a children's story, told in simple and straightforward English language. There are few complicated words or phrasing, allowing for the story to be absorbed easily by any age group. The story is about a cricket named Chester who inadvertently finds himself on a train from his meadow home in Connecticut to New York's Times Square shuttle station. The story reveals Chester's journey from simple cricket to musical genius and back again. The journey is one of self-awareness, both for Chester and his friends (both animal and human) as they learn about each other and themselves.

When Chester first reveals his musical aptitude, he opens the hearts and minds of those around him, even those who didn't believe in his abilities at first. From Mama Bellini to Mr. Smedley, Chester changes the opinions of those around him, and his music reveals the deeper character that exists in what formerly was thought of as a mere insect that should be thrown out. Those who mock his ability at first become his most staunch supporters, and Chester finds himself playing for more and more people, yet enjoying it less all the time. After just one week of fame, Chester discovers that while he enjoys making people smile, and likes that people enjoy his music, he still misses the days when he sang just because he felt great and wanted to share that feeling. He soon realizes that to be happy again he must return home.

All the characters learn something about themselves and also find generosity of spirit and mind among themselves.



## Structure

The Cricket in Times Square by George Selden is a story of only eighty pages in length. The story is divided into 15 chapters that range in length from 4-7 pages with an average of 5 pages per chapter overall. Each chapter is further titled to reveal the main subject matter within, many of them titled by name as the character named is introduced. The remaining chapters are given titles that reflect the main subject matter contained within. For example, "The Cricket Cage" reveals the acquisition of the pagoda style cage that Mario purchases for Chester; "Tucker's Life Savings" reveals the money collected by Tucker, its purpose, and his donation of two thirds of his wealth to free his friend Chester from his confinement; and "Fame," which tells of Chester's meteoric rise to fame as he plays his music for an ever-growing crowd of appreciative music lovers.

The story transitions smoothly from the subway shuttle station to the meadow in Connecticut where Chester originates and then repeats as Chester adapts to life in New York and then finally returns home to his meadow again. In the first five chapters, Tucker Mouse, Mario and his parents, Harry Cat and Chester are introduced and the newsstand is discussed. Chester is found and brought back to the newsstand where Mario convinces his parents to allow him to keep him as a pet. Chester is given a home in a matchbox and seems content to stay there. Tucker and Harry introduce themselves and Chester begins to learn some of the differences of city life. Chapter 6 takes the reader into Chinatown where Mario and Chester meet Sai Fong and Mario buys a cricket cage for Chester. Sai Fong is so taken with Chester that he gives him a small bell as a gift. From chapter 7-11, Chester faces trials as he accidentally eats half of a two dollar bill, (money which is replaced by Tucker to free Chester), and then is at least partially responsible when Tucker inadvertently sets the newsstand on fire. Mama Bellini is convinced that Chester is a jinx, but then Chester plays an Italian folk song that brings tears to Mama's eyes, and she realizes that there is more to Chester than she first thought. Chapters 12-15 reveal Chester's rise to fame largely due to a letter written by the music teacher Mr. Smedley and his decision to go home.

This is a well-rounded children's story with good moral and ethical direction.



## Quotes

The poor kid might as well go home.  
-- Tucker Mouse (Chapter 1 paragraph 5)

**Importance:** This quote reveals the fact that the Bellini's newsstand is struggling to survive, and that fact is not going unnoticed by either the Bellini family or those who watch unnoticed from the drain pipe.

He'll whistle to his friends - they'll come from all over - we'll have a houseful of cricketers.  
-- Mama Bellini (Chapter 2 paragraph 20)

**Importance:** This quote reveals Mama Bellini's first reaction to Mario's new pet and her obvious distaste for the idea of keeping crickets, regardless of how lucky they are supposed to be.

A couple of tuffets away from my stump the meadow begins, and there was a whole bunch of people having a picnic.  
-- Chester (Chapter 3 paragraph 29)

**Importance:** Chester tells the story of how he happened to find himself stuck on a train for New York when his home is in a stump in a Connecticut meadow.

In the country maybe, but in New York we gave up those old habits long ago.  
-- Tucker Mouse (Chapter 4 paragraph 8)

**Importance:** This quote reveals just one of the many differences that Chester will experience in the city, as Tucker shows him how different things really are now and why he is best friends with a cat rather than enemies.

I prophesy great things for a creature of such ability, Mario.  
-- Mr. Smedley (Chapter 5 paragraph 37)

**Importance:** As a music teacher, Mr. Smedley can identify the clear notes and scales that Chester is able to play. He compares Chester to one of the greatest musicians of all time, trained perfectly by Mother Nature herself.

So when wicked men raise swords above Hsi Shuai, high gods change him into cricket.  
-- Sai Fong (Chapter 6 paragraph 23)

**Importance:** Sai Fong tells Mario the story of the first cricket, who was once a man named Hsi Shuai. This was a man who spoke only the truth and all of the secrets of life were open to him, but his honesty was too much for some wicked men who tried to kill him for his honesty. The high gods turned him into a cricket at the last moment who now sings songs that men do not understand but love them anyway.



I dreamed it was a leaf and I ate it.  
-- Chester (Chapter 8 paragraph 8)

**Importance:** This is the first of two incidents that almost banish Chester from Mario and the Bellini family for good. His accidental eating of a dollar bill while sleeping is a mistake that horrifies poor Chester.

Just as silkworm who eat of mulberry tree spin beautiful silk, so cricket who eat leaves spin beautiful song.  
-- Sai Fong (Chapter 9 paragraph 31)

**Importance:** This quote by Sai Fong reveals that Chester is indeed getting a diet that is lacking in the essentials for good health and song and requires mulberry leaves.

Now play us something we know.  
-- Harry Cat (Chapter 10 paragraph 40)

**Importance:** During a dinner party that Chester, Harry and Tucker have one evening, they are listening to the radio and Tucker begins to sing to a song he likes. They encourage Chester to play next and he performs one of his own compositions, but then Harry suggests that he play something they know. This leads to the discovery that Chester is able to chirp anything perfectly after hearing it just once.

Mario, no cricketer who sings 'Torna a Surrento' so beautifully could possibly start a fire.  
-- Mama Bellini (Chapter 11 paragraph 50)

**Importance:** This quote from Mama Bellini reveals her change of heart after hearing Chester play. She had made up her mind that Chester was a jinx, calling him good luck in reverse until he plays her favorite song and several others afterward. She realizes that Chester couldn't possibly play so beautifully and still be a fire bug as well.

Why, I believe I shall write a letter to the music editor of The New York Times.  
-- Mr. Smedley (Chapter 12 paragraph 37)

**Importance:** This statement made by Mr. Smedley is the catalyst for Chester's fame. He does indeed write a letter to the New York Times that extols the virtues of the musical genius. The letter is published, bringing Chester to the attention of all music lovers in New York.

I didn't mean to tell you yet, but you may as well know. I'm going to - I'm going to retire.  
-- Chester (Chapter 14 paragraph 15)

**Importance:** This quote from Chester reveals his desire to retire and return to the meadow again. He is feeling the arrival of September. He tells his friends that he longs for the meadow, his stump, and the shock of corn that grows nearby. He misses the sights and sounds of home.