

Henry Reed, Inc. Short Guide

Henry Reed, Inc. by Keith Robertson

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Overview

Henry Reed, Inc. humorously, yet respectfully, portrays the progress of young people towards the goal of selfsufficiency. The main characters in the book are two adolescents who try to learn how to make a living in the way that is best suited to them as individuals. Many strange and funny things happen in their semirural neighborhood as a result of their attempts to run a very small business during summer vacation. Yet the author generates sympathy, even admiration, for their experiment. Their enthusiasm is inspiring. Henry Reed and his companion, Margaret "Midge" Glass, are fairly normal American kids, except they are a bit smarter than average and Henry is unusually well-traveled. They have flaws, but these make them seem all the more real to the reader.

Through his characters, Robertson demonstrates his ideas about what young people need to be happy and to progress toward a happy and productive adult life. He offers insight to young readers about how to enjoy, or at least cope with, the varieties of other people— young, middle-aged, and old—that they will encounter in the normal course of living. But his most important idea is that a happy life is a memorable one, even if it is chaotic at times. In defense of Henry and Midge and other imaginative youngsters like them, it should be said that if they bring some disorder to the neighborhood, they also bring much life.

About the Author

Keith Carlton Robertson was born on May 9, 1914, in Dows, a small town on the Iowa River in northern Iowa.

The son of a merchant who often moved, Robertson grew up on farms and in small towns in five different states in the central United States. He set aside a boyhood interest in writing to join the U.S. Navy in 1931.

Robertson served as a radioman on a destroyer for two years. He then entered the U.S. Naval Academy, graduating with a bachelor of science degree. Robertson worked as a civilian refrigeration engineer until the outbreak of war in 1941. An officer on destroyers in both the Atlantic and the Pacific, he served until World War II ended in 1945, when he retired into the reserves with the rank of captain.

He found a job as a salesman for a children's book publisher and married Elizabeth Hexter in 1946. The daily exposure to children's literature revived his interest in writing. With the publication of *Ticktock and Jim* (1948), his first book for children, he decided to write full time. Living in semirural New Jersey with three young children, Robertson found plenty of inspiration for his books.

Between 1947 and 1958, he wrote nineteen mysteries and adventures for youngsters. *Outlaws of the Sourland* (1953), for example, explores the sometimes harsh relationship between man and nature. *The Mystery of Burnt Hill* (1952) introduces Stephen "Swede" Larson and Neil Lambert, the two teen-age proprietors of the Carson Street Detective Agency. These two characters return in the better-known *Three Stuffed Owls*, in which a stolen bicycle leads to their involvement in the investigation of a major crime. In 1958 Robertson started a ceramics manufacturing firm, published his first mystery book for adults under the name Carlton Keith, and produced three books for young people. One of these was *Henry Reed, Inc.*

Henry Reed has proved to be the most popular and enduring of Robertson's characters. The mixture of dry humor and everyday mix-ups that somehow snowball into local legend has appealed to a wide audience of youngsters and critics. *Henry Reed, Inc.* and *Henry Reed's Babysitting Service* received the William Allen White Children's Book Award. The latter book also received the Pacific Northwest Library Association Young Readers' Choice Award in 1969.

The fifth and latest book in the series, *Henry Reed's Think Tank*, was a Junior Literary Guild Selection.

Robertson has written other books for young people in the thirty years since *Henry Reed's* first appearance, among them the popular *Year of the Jeep* (1968). The further adventures of the Carson Street detectives are detailed in *The Money Machine*. Robertson has also produced more adult mystery fiction under his pen name, Carlton Keith. *The Crayfish Diner* (1966), *A Taste of Sangria* (1968), and other works have

reached an international audience. Reed retired from the ceramics business in 1969 and died in 1991 of cancer at his home in New Jersey.

Setting

The novel takes place during the 1950s in Grover's Corner, a small cluster of country homes a few miles outside of Princeton, New Jersey, home of Princeton University. Henry Reed, also known as "Hank," is the thirteen-year-old son of a consul in the U.S. Diplomatic Service. He has come from his family's latest posting in Naples, Italy, to spend the summer with his Uncle Al and Aunt Mabel. He has spent most of his life away from his native country, but he feels quite American. His parents want him to spend an extended time in the States in order to get to know America and his family. For class credit from his school, he decides to detail his daily activities in a journal. The class has been studying American-style free enterprise, so Henry decides to open his own small business for the summer.

Social Sensitivity

The plot of *Henry Reed, Inc.* hinges on the consequences of an active youth and on the existence of troublesome people in the world. Because these realities of life cannot be avoided, Robertson shows how they can be dealt with by ordinary reasonable folk. This sensitivity on the part of the author makes *Henry Reed, Inc.* a socially positive book. It suggests facing and solving problems instead of ignoring them, and it provides many examples.

It is true that Henry and Midge's activities result in a traffic jam, havoc at a garden club meeting, a power failure in Grover's Corner, and even a neighbor's pet taking an unplanned jaunt into the blue yonder. But these mishaps occur while the youngsters work on projects that are harmless in themselves, such as moving donated equipment or conducting a semiscientific experiment. Not only can most people, especially young people, fail to foresee or control such events, but the fact remains that many worthwhile pursuits are not quiet or sedentary. Often there is just no substitute for an activity. The only way for a youngster to be as unobtrusive as the Apples require is to do little and learn nothing.

The Apples are the true banes of the neighborhood, although they would like to place that distinction elsewhere. They have moved to the country to "get away from it all." But they have either not moved to an isolated enough area or not realized that it is impossible to get away from all disruptions of routine and still have neighbors. Indeed, Mr. Apple moves too fast against Henry, which suggests that it is either children or life itself that he does not like. The Apples have no children of their own and no saving sense of humor. Henry's Uncle Al mediates as best he can between Mr. Apple's demands and Henry's interests, but he supports Henry when it becomes plain that Mr. Apple refuses to be reasonable. The Apples eventually get their comical comeuppance as a result of their own excesses.



Literary Qualities

Henry Reed, Inc. is, in many ways, a straightforward story of domestic adventure. Robertson employs no symbolism to tell his story, for the issues he deals with are neither complex nor subtle. This is not to say that they are unimportant. Good humor and a sense of proportion, as Henry, his friends and family show, make for a happy and productive daily life; they also help when calamity arises. Robertson demonstrates this truism by having his young characters and their animals accidentally start problems such as traffic jams, then showing the difference between the reactions of different adults. Sensible adults such as Uncle Al help unsnarl problems; he laughs at the silliness of the situation but not at the kids. Foolish adults such as the Apples blow minor problems out of proportion and end up causing more trouble for themselves.

They fail to squelch the kids as they intended.

The story is told solely through one character, the earnest Henry Reed himself. He confides his private thoughts as well as his adventures through the daily entries in his journal. Henry is a sympathetic narrator, an engaging and likable person who endeavors to make his narrative interesting. His story is all the funnier at times because he seems so straightforward, not prone to exaggerate the story of the crazy events in Grover's Corner or to leave out things he does not understand, such as Uncle Al's wry sense of humor.

The author creates a rationale to explain why so many funny things happen in so small an area as Grover's Corner.

It ties the events of the book together and prepares the reader for Henry's family's acceptance of what might otherwise be a most puzzling summer. Henry has more strange things happen to him in one season than happen to a typical teen-ager in five. His uncle claims that Henry's penchant for attracting excitement is hereditary and comes from the boy's mother. So Uncle Al, at least, is mentally prepared for Henry's visit, even if the rest of Grover's Corner and the surrounding countryside is not.

Henry Reed, Inc.'s strongest qualities are the plot, which portrays plain virtues; the sympathetic narrator; the variety of interesting characters and situations; the narrative's genuine humor; and the inclusion of a rationale that unifies the unusual events in the story and makes them more believable.



Themes and Characters

Bespectacled Henry, a seriousminded, physically active teen-ager, is sensible but still fun-loving. He wants to become a naturalist, or maybe an artist, but he experiments with different approaches to making a living. He sets up Henry Reed, Inc., a research firm fashioned after those in the nearby university town, in an old barn.

Midge Glass, the daughter of a research chemist and, at twelve years old, the only person close to Henry's age in Grover's Corner, soon joins him. An active, skinny girl with a freckled face and hair pulled back into a practical ponytail, Midge is a sharp businesswoman. She is somewhat odd but smart enough to make a good summer companion. She becomes Henry's guide to the neighborhood and adds a practical view to their ideas. Accompanied by Henry's adopted beagle, Agony, Henry and Midge set out to make some money from small projects. Neither of them intends to cause mischief, but chaos seems to emerge from their most innocent actions.

Henry's Uncle Al and Aunt Mabel are a plump, good-natured couple in their fifties; Henry is very fond of them. Upon request, Uncle Al offers solid business advice, and he helps the young entrepreneurs when other adults give them needless trouble. Henry and Midge's problems with adults begin when Mr. Apple, a sour and secretive neighbor who takes himself a bit too seriously, tries to shut down Henry Reed, Inc., the day after the firm opens. Uncle Al helps Henry find a solution to the problem, but Mr. Apple remains a source of trouble all through the summer.

Human characters include state troopers, garden club members, farmers, newspaper reporters, construction workers, and professors. But the animals instigate most of the summer's madness. In addition to Agony the beagle, there are Jedidiah the outlaw rabbit and his consort Mathilda; Siegfried, the Apples' obnoxious cat; and restless painted turtles. Even machines have minds of their own, beginning with Uncle Al's tractor.

The book's themes are not heavy, but they are nevertheless worthwhile.

Henry's adventures demonstrate the value of resourcefulness, curiosity, and diplomacy. Resourcefulness enables Henry to see the potential in researching and solving problems as a way to learn about free enterprise. Curiosity brings Midge over to investigate Henry's sign and make a bid to join the firm.

Diplomacy allows Henry to get past the differences between his personality and Midge's and discover that she makes a solid business partner. The three traits come in handy repeatedly throughout the summer.

Topics for Discussion

1. Henry's parents send him to visit relatives in the United States instead of letting him spend his summer in Italy because Henry has spent most of his thirteen years in countries other than his native one. Other than the reasons Henry's parents state, how might he benefit by living for a few months with his mother's family?

2. Why does Henry decide to go into the research business? Is it a good business for him? For his neighbors? If yes, cite examples from the book where Henry benefits the people around him.

If no, cite examples of the harm he has done.

3. Henry and Midge, except for their ages, are not alike, yet they run a successful business together. How is this possible? What does it mean when people are said to have complementary personalities?

4. In the novel, Henry raises earthworms for sale, drills for water, and paints turtles. What kinds of talents does he have? What kinds of talents does Midge have? Why might it be important for them to find out what these talents are?

5. An old saying goes, "There's a bad apple in every bunch." Do you think the author was aware of this saying? How do you know?

6. In a newspaper article about the stalled tractor crisis, Midge Glass is asked why she joined the research business. "Money," she said, "and you can quote me." What does this say about Midge? Is she being entirely accurate?

7. Henry Reed, Inc. is a funny story. Do we need to take it seriously? Is it enough that the humor be a joy in itself? Is humor a good vehicle for ideas?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Henry says he wants to become a naturalist when he grows up. What kinds of talents and training does this ambition require? Who are some famous naturalists and what did they accomplish? If you think that Henry has the potential to be a good naturalist, cite specific examples from the book.

2. Both Henry and his nemesis, Mr. Apple, create problems for those around them. Do they create the same kinds of problems? Would you rather have Henry or Mr. Apple for a neighbor? Is Henry an asset to the neighborhood?

3. Henry's Uncle Al is a big, slowmoving, easy-going person. Although he and Henry do not seem very much alike, Henry likes him very much. Referring to examples in the book, assess Uncle Al's character for yourself. Does he make a good summertime guardian for a young person?

4. Henry Reed, Inc. is a story of American boyhood, as well as a summer adventure. What does the author seem to feel are the best aspects of growing up in America? Research the typical activities of boys Henry's age in other regions of the world. How do their boyhoods differ?

5. Some authors choose the names of characters or places in their books for effect, trying to evoke certain qualities in association with that character or place.

Think about some names in Henry Reed, Inc. Do any of them suggest qualities of the characters? (Example: Midge is short for Margaret, but a midge is also a tiny but persistent flying insect. Midge Glass is small and quite determined.)

6. Henry Reed, Inc. and the third book in the series, Henry Reed's Babysitting Service, both received the William Allen White Children's Book Award. The first sequel to Henry Reed, Inc. is the popular Henry Reed's Journey. Compare the three books. Why do you think the second book did not receive an award?

Do you agree with the award decisions?

For Further Reference

Commire, Anne, ed. *Something about the Author*. Vol. 1. Detroit: Gale Research, 1971. The article on Robertson provides some interesting information about how he came to be a writer and about his inspirations and work habits. It also contains a good-sized photograph of the author and two of Robert McCloskey's amusing illustrations from Henry Reed's *Journey*.

Kinsman, Clare, and Mary Ann Tennenhouse, eds. *Contemporary Authors*, First Revision Series. Vols. 9-12.

Detroit: Gale Research, 1974. The entry on Robertson covers his personal and career background and lists his publications and other sources of information on his life and work.

The Writer's Directory 1988-90. Chicago: St. James Press, 1988. Contains a brief biographical entry on Robertson, a list of his publications, and the address of his publisher.

Related Titles

Henry Reed, Inc. is the first in a series of five humorous books that detail the summertime adventures of young Henry Reed and his stalwart companion, Midge Glass. The second is Henry Reed's Journey, the story of Henry's tour of the U.S.

from the West Coast to the East. He travels in a station wagon with Midge and her parents, encountering Native Americans, horned toads, gold rushes, and even more material for his planned travel book. In the third Henry Reed book, Henry Reed's Babysitting Service, Henry and Midge find and fill a crying need in the Grover's Corner area. They cope with a variety of eccentric children, harried parents, unfair competition, and a little red sports car with the gift of being in the right place at the wrong time. Next is Henry Reed's Big Show, in which Henry returns to Grover's Corner, this time to become a theatrical producer. After attending a summer stock theater performance, he and Midge recruit local talent for their own production. The latest novel in the series, Henry Reed's Think Tank, is written as though the events in the previous four books happened over two summers instead of four. Henry is fifteen, and he and Midge set up a new type of research firm. Most of their clients are younger kids who need answers to problem parents. The two teen-agers, with occasional advice and assistance from sympathetic adults, solve the children's dilemmas with diplomacy in this energetic book. The Henry Reed series is a witty and intelligent contribution to the field of young adult literature, written with affection and respect for the subject of adolescence, as well as for the young reader.



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