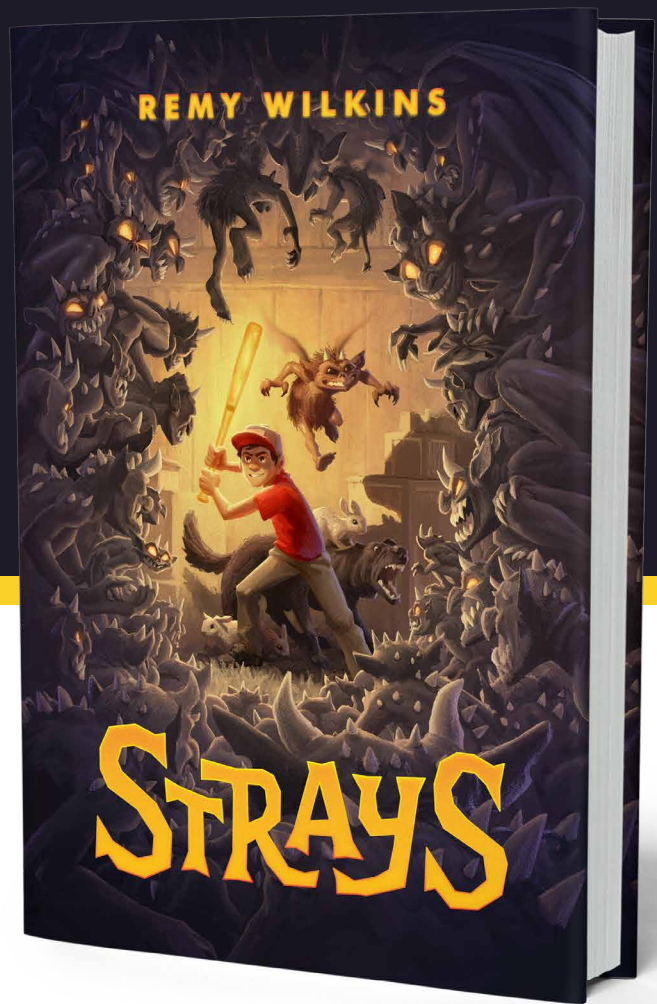




EDUCATOR'S GUIDE

Strays by Remy Wilkins is an unusual Middle Grade / Young Adult adventure story that's part C.S. Lewis's *Screwtape Letters* and part *Tom Sawyer*. The focus of the story isn't on simple lessons, but is instead the story of a lonely boy realizing there is more to the heavens than stars, more to books than facts, and more to his weird Uncle Ray than tie-dye shirts and honeybees.

When twelve-year-old Rodney's parents are separated, and he is deposited at his uncle Ray's beehive-shaped house for the summer. Rodney is shocked out of his own problems when he is attacked in his room by a demon named Birthless. He starts to think there might be more to his uncle's strange stories and carvings than he had thought and he begins to investigate his uncle's secrets. Little does Rodney know that the Honeycomb House has become the target of an army of demons with names like Murkpockets, Garglenails, and Itchpot. Armed with a baseball bat and aided by bunny rabbits, it will be up to Rodney to stop them—and to start learning about a world he never thought existed.



PRE-READING ACTIVITY

Each chapter of *Strays* is named for a phrase in Martin Luther's hymn "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God" so make sure that students are familiar with the song, and perhaps introduce it to the class either by singing it or listening to a recording.

The book also includes many allusions to Gen. 3:16, which says that the seed of the woman will crush the seed of the serpent (a promise that Jesus will crush the head of Satan). In this way, Rodney reminds us of Jesus, and the Sky Serpent (along with the other demons) is a symbol of Satan.

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THEMATIC CONNECTIONS: QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

STRAYS—The book doesn't have this strange title for no reason. All of the main characters are misfits or outcasts for some reason. Have students explain how all the important characters are "strays."

In chapter sixteen, Rodney accuses Ray of being one of the bad guys and Lucasta points out that Rodney, not Ray, has strayed (p. 261). What does Lucasta mean here? Why is this an important moment for the character?

THANKFULNESS—When Rodney arrives at his uncle's house, he is tired, cranky, and lonely. While his uncle is eager to show him around and play baseball, Rodney is generally sullen and unresponsive. Uncle Ray makes an effort to enjoy things and repeats how much he loves stuff each time—just like Rodney's mom does. He even does so with things he doesn't like, such as carrots, and he says, "How else will I learn to like them if I don't practice?" (p. 64). Why should we bother practicing loving things we don't like? How does the baseball bat reveal Rodney's change of attitude (compare pp. 60-63 to pp. 317-318)? How is it used as a symbol throughout the story?

EASTER THEMES—The novel is full of other important themes and symbols you and your readers will notice (and perhaps wonder about!). They are almost all symbols (or reminders) as well. For example, bunny rabbits and honey are reminders of Easter and the new life of the Resurrection, which we have in Jesus Christ. Can your readers think of more symbols for life after they read the book? What do bees, colors, light, and constellations signify? (They also signify new spiritual life and more.)



NAMING—Names are highly significant and transformative in the world of *Strays*. Rodney is uncertain about whether he wants to keep his father's name at the beginning of the book (p. 11), but does not think it's too important; Uncle Ray disagrees (p. 30) and Ray's perspective is vindicated. For instance, in one of the most meaningful moments in the book, Birthless is captured when Rodney says "Jesus" out loud in terror. As the two become friends Rodney insists on naming him Pinwheel, and is later further transformed and named Peter because he came like a rock from heaven (an allusion). By the end of the story Rodney has accepted his own name as well (p. 321). What does your name mean? What is its cultural heritage?

MEANING—In chapter six, Ray thinks this: "He didn't understand the point of having pet rabbits. Ray would throw a beachball into the pen and watch the rabbits bump it around with their noses, but aside from that and petting them there didn't seem much use to having rabbits. Ray certainly didn't eat them" (p. 88). How is Ray's choice of a pet vindicated by the story? How does this book make us love Ray's quirky home and lifestyle? Are there any things in your life that might be more full of meaning than you think?

CONNECTING TO THE CURRICULUM

LANGUAGE ARTS—Since every chapter begins with a line from *A Mighty Fortress*, see how Remy Wilkins connects the events of each chapter to the title. He does so in some surprising ways. The best allusions do not distract you from the story but add to it. The demons of the book are based on the demons from C.S. Lewis's all-time classic *The Screwtape Letters*, which includes demons with names like Lewis's Screwtape, Wormwood, Slubgob, Slumtrimpet, Glubose, Triptweeze, Scabtree, and Toadpipe. Let students enjoy the sound of the names. Also, before students read chapter five, teachers might have language students try to translate the Latin and Italian that Rodney finds in the blueprint (pp. 58-59). Challenge students to try to figure out the meaning of other characters' names, such as Ray, Lucasta, Spica, En-ki Ab-zu, Liv-ya-than, the angeloi, and the diaboloi.

SOCIAL STUDIES—*Strays* is set in Alabama, and you can feel that Wilkins is drawing deeply on Southern culture where he lives—from the Appalachian rock formations with Indian legends to the old Baptist church. One of the most important scenes is when Ray takes Rodney to see the stone serpent on Snake River, since it foreshadows key events later in the book. Get students to look up some of the popular foods, songs, and legends that can be found in Alabama or their own locations. Assign students to find out about some of the historical landmarks or monuments in their own towns. There is always some history to the places where students live that they do not know about.

ASTRONOMY—Ray shows Rodney the stars (pp. 93-96). This is a good opportunity to look at a few constellations or pictures of some—such as the Big and Little Dippers, Polaris, Draco, Scorpio, and Ophiuchus. Discuss how the stars are used today. Ray and Rodney make fun of astrology and horoscopes—but not of stars themselves. In *Strays*, as in C.S. Lewis's *Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, stars are angels. Similarly, in the Bible, angels are described as “the host of heaven” (Heb. 12:22). What else does the Bible say about stars? Consider reading Job 38:7; Gen. 22:17; Is. 55:9; 1 Cor. 15:41; Dan. 12:2-3.

VOCABULARY AND METAPHOR—As you will see, Wilkins is very fond of exotic and bizarre words, whether it's the Alvarium Maleficarum or the many croaks, belches, and coughs of the demons. He also likes metaphors: “The last dregs of the day were swallowed and a darkness settled around him” (p. 15). Have students identify additional examples of this device in the story. (See, for instance, pages 23, 57, 103, 116, 125, 191, and 198.)

Ask students to jot down unfamiliar words and try to define them, taking clues from the context. Such words may include: buoyant (p. 2), emitting (p. 5), paunch (p. 60), preternaturally (p. 62), chortled (p. 78), stocky (p. 93), gnarled (p. 97), puckered (p. 105), globular (p. 130), slathered (p. 157), gingerly (p. 186), evasiveness (p. 193), and melee (p. 242).

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Remy Wilkins was born on one side of the Mississippi River and lives on the other. He teaches at Geneva Academy in Monroe, Louisiana, and he writes at home where his wife paints and his five boys raise a ruckus.