

Dear Mr. Henshaw

By Beverly Cleary

This is a collection of letters and dairy entries so I found it difficult to capture what was happening in a way that was concise, yet preserved the depth of feeling in the book. I'm sorry if you find the summaries lengthy.

Page 1 – 11 (Letters May 12 – Nov. 15)

Leigh Botts first discovers the books of Mr. Henshaw (Mr. H). He has read "Ways to Amuse a Dog" (WAD) and finds personal connections with the father-son relationship in the story. He signs the letter – "Your friend", emphasizing the "end" in friend. This foreshadows Leigh's troubled family history, his longing for a father figure, and the burgeoning friendship between author and boy. Leigh's class is asked to write to an author for book week thus Leigh selects Mr. H. He has made a diorama of "Ways to Amuse a Dog". Leigh asks the author to handwrite his letter this time as the old one was typed. He again makes positive references to the father figure in the story and makes connections between the boy and himself. Leigh begins to reveal his inner thoughts to Mr. H such as his frustration with grown ups and their rules. We learn he lives in a mobile home park. Leigh tells Mr. H he wants to grow up to be an author just like him and he encloses a photo of himself. Leigh writes to Mr. H to tell him received an A- on the book report he wrote about WAD. He receives a letter from Mr. H telling him to read another book and he does, "Moose on Toast" by Mr. H. It's about a boy whose father shoots a moose and the various ways his mother tries cooking the 1,000 lbs. of meat. In the next letter, Leigh has moved to a new town. His 6th grade class is writing report on authors, so Leigh asks Mr. H several questions and demands that he answer the letter by Friday so that he can complete his report. Many students don't receive answers to their letters. Leigh does, but not in time and this disappoints him. He manages to complete his report by using the autobiography printed on the cover of one of the author's books. Mr. H gives silly answers to the questions Leigh posed. i.e., his real name is Messing A. Round, and he likes purple monsters that eat kids who ask a lot of questions. Leigh reads the letter aloud to his class, although, he doesn't want to, and everyone laughs. Mr. H asks Leigh to answer questions about himself, but Leigh refuses.

Pages 12-22 (Nov. 16-Nov. 24)

Leigh's mom finds the letter and tells him that he has to answer Mr. H's questions. She explains to Leigh that the author took time out of his day to respond, so Leigh should return the courtesy. After more nagging from his mother, Leigh finally responds to two of Mr.'s questions – Who are you? What do you look like? Leigh's answers reveal that he feels average, bordering on below average, but he insists that he is "not stupid". We learn that his parents' names are Bill and Bonnie. Leigh's mother says that he is like her, "thank goodness" which indicates that his parents don't always see eye to eye. We learn his nickname used to be "Leigh the Flea" and that he sees himself as "the most mediumest boy in the class". Leigh's mother won't repair the TV because it's "rotting his

brain”, so he answers the question - What is your family like? We learn that his father left with the dog and that his parents are divorced. His dad is a trucker who bought his own big rig. Leigh clearly admires his father’s truck and shares trucker factoids with Mr. H. Leigh tells Mr. H that he “treats mom and dad the same”, so he’ll tell him about her in the next letter. We learn that Leigh’s mother is from Taft, CA. She works part time for a catering company and is studying to be an LVN at the local community college. Leigh tells Mr. H that she is a great cook, but wishes that she would cook at home more often. His mom’s boss Katy sends home delicious treats for his lunch which he likes and his mom is almost always waiting for him when he gets home which he also likes. Where do you live? Leigh and his mom moved from Bakersfield, CA to Pacific Grove, CA after the divorce. They live a small run down house next door to a gas station because that is all they can afford. They also live close to some shops and restaurants and his mom is adamantly against him “hanging around” those places. At night when it’s quiet Leigh can hear the ping of the gas station service bell, the ocean and the sea lions.

Pages 23-33

Do you have any pets? Leigh used to have a pet named Bandit who now travels with his dad. Bandit hopped into the cab of his dad’s truck one day and that’s how he became a part of the family. He had a red bandana around his neck, thus the name. Leigh tells Mr. H that sometimes he lies awake at night listening to the ping of the gas station service bell and thinks about his dad and bandit traveling up and down I-5. Do you like school? Leigh replies that he likes school because that’s where the kids are. He also says that “the best thing about sixth grade is that if I hang in, I’ll get out.” This reveals that although Leigh doesn’t exactly like school, he knows that school is a way for him to better himself. Who are your friends? Leigh is a bit of a loner in a new school; he feels that people are more interested in the delicious treats he has packed in his lunch than him. His mom says maybe he’s a loner, but it’s clear from his letter that he doesn’t want to be. He spends time kicking the ball around after school with the other kids, but not because anyone invites him to. He describes himself as the cautious new kid, giving us the impression that he doesn’t trust easily and is afraid of being hurt. Who is your favorite teacher? Leigh says he doesn’t have one, but he likes Mr. Fridley (Mr. F) the custodian because he’s fair and easy going. When a student threw up in the hallway, Mr. F called it “whooping it up”. Leigh said his mother used to get upset with his father for “whooping it up”, but she didn’t mean throwing up; she meant staying out late at the truck stop. What bothers you? Many things bother Leigh: the people who steal things from his lunch, kids with runny noses, walking to school slow (or backwards) because home is too quiet and lonely to stay home. He’s bothered that his father doesn’t call him Leigh or tell him he misses him. Leigh’s bothered that his dad doesn’t call him enough or see him enough. What do you wish? Leigh wishes that people would stop stealing from his lunch. He wishes that one day his father and Bandit will show up in the morning to pick him up in his rig and drop him off in front of the entire school, so that everyone can see how great his father’s rig is. He wishes that his father would write this trip down in his log, so that Leigh can feel as if he were a worthwhile “destination”. Leigh reveals that he actually enjoys writing to Mr. H. He also tells Mr. H that he feels

lonely. This letter is more conversational than previous letters and reflects Leigh's desire to have friends and make connections. He asks Mr. H to be his pen pal.

Pages 34-44

Leigh receives a postcard from Mr. H in Wyoming, in which he suggests that Leigh keep a diary. Leigh realizes that the author can't write a lot of lengthy letters to him since he's writing a book right now. Leigh confides to Mr. H that "something nice" happened to him. He was asked to come to school early, so that he can help raise the flags in the morning. Leigh liked that he was noticed for a change. He buys a composition book and writes KEEP OUT on the cover of the diary, but he can't quite figure out what to write in the book yet or how to begin. Mr. H sends another postcard, this one with Bears on it in which he suggests that Leigh write his diary entries as letters. Leigh thinks about addressing them to his dad, but his dad has never answered his letters in the past, so he chooses to address them to Mr. H instead. Leigh begins writing in his journal, addressing each entry to "Mr. Pretend Henshaw". He will not mail them. Two stuffed mushrooms were stolen from Leigh's lunch and he is determined to find out who the culprit is. He decides to write a fictitious name on his bag in order to confuse the thief. Dec. 23rd arrives and no Christmas package from his dad. Leigh asks if his dad will come to visit, but his mom replies, "We're divorced. Remember?" Leigh writes that he remembers...all the time. Dec. 24th comes, but still no package. Leigh reminisces about last Christmas when his family was together and his mom cooked a turkey dinner; his dad rushed home to be with them. Over dinner they discussed the single shoes his dad often sees on the road and how he wonders what happened to their mates. His mom says that it sounds like a sad country western song and the family spends the evening making up songs about them. His parents laughed a lot that night and this made Leigh happy. On Dec. 25th his dad has a fellow trucker deliver his gift; a quilted jacket. This is just what he wanted and the fact that it came in time for Christmas made Leigh very happy. He and his mom have Christmas dinner with Katy and a few other single mothers and their children. His mom called it a lovely Christmas dinner for lonely hearts.

Pages 45-55

During Christmas break Leigh goes to the dentist and buys new shoes. Leigh puts a "pseudonym" on his lunch box to fool the thief and it works. His dad calls him from Hermiston, Oregon. Leigh asks his dad if he can ride with him next summer, but his father gives a non-committal answer. His dad sends the child support check and apologizes for forgetting. Leigh continues to wish that his dad would come back and live with them again. Leigh has begun talking a lot about the custodian Mr. F who he's starting to look to as a male role model now that he isn't sending his writings to Mr. H anymore. The thief is back to stealing Leigh's lunch and this gets him down. Mr. F suggests he put a burglar alarm on his lunch, so Leigh wraps his lunch in scotch tape. Leigh expectantly waits for his father's next call. Leigh's curiosity about the divorce is slowly growing. He asks his mom why she left his dad. All she tells him is that "it takes two people to get a divorce". He even writes a short "play" about a conversation they might have if he spoke to her about it. In it he asks her why she hasn't married again.

She responds that it isn't easy to meet people. Leigh wants his mom to find someone. At school, Leigh is stopped by the librarian and is given Mr. H's latest book "Beggar Bears" because she noticed that he really enjoys Mr. H's books. This pleases Leigh because someone other than Mr. F pays attention to him.

Pages 56-67

Leigh finishes "Beggar Bears", a book about a mother bear and her cubs, in two nights. The mother bear dies because she is fed the wrong foods by tourists and the cubs are left alone to fend for themselves. This book gets Leigh to thinking about fathers and why they aren't around. Leigh is disappointed that his dad didn't call when he said he would; this leads him to believe that his dad isn't much interested in him. He also worries about his mom because she is "smaller than most moms" and she works really hard to take care of them. Mr. H sends Leigh another postcard and this makes him happy. Leigh writes back and tells Mr. H that he feels better when he writes in his diary. Leigh also receives a postcard from his dad. Leigh dreams of going to meet Mr. H with his dad. He also muses about becoming a famous author one day. Leigh's teacher tells him his writing is improving and encourages him to enter a story into the young readers' contest that the school is having. The winners will have lunch with a famous author. In his diary, Leigh writes that he is having difficulty creating an original work. Meanwhile, the lunch thief strikes again; plus Leigh is disappointed and hurt that his dad has forgotten to call again. Mr. F tells him not to think that he's the only one who has a dad that forgets. This pep talk prompts Leigh to wish that he had a grandfather like Mr. F. As time passes without a call from his dad, Leigh's mom tells Leigh not to be so hard on his dad because the life of a trucker is busy. But he continues to feel bad. His mom tells him that his dad loves the power of the truck and the unknown landscape. Leigh wonders why his dad doesn't love him like that. Now Leigh is angry at his parents for divorcing. He writes that he's lonely when his mom is at her night classes. His dad has started hauling cross country and Leigh thinks he'll never see his dad again. One day Leigh's mom has a few friends to visit and they spend the day venting about men, money and landlords, so Leigh remains in his room and writes about the memory of riding with his dad. He loved that day and was so proud when his dad introduced him as his son.

Page 67-78

Leigh announces that he hates his dad. After endlessly waiting for his dad to call, Leigh decides to phone him at his trailer, expecting no one to answer, but he does. He's hurt that his dad didn't call because he was home and not on the road, like Leigh imagined him to be. To make matters worse his dad lost Bandit on the road during a snow storm, and to top it off he hears the voice of another boy in the background asking his dad when they were going out to grab some pizza. Finding out that his dad might potentially have a new family crushes him. He feels as if his dad is replacing him. Leigh's diary entries have become increasingly insightful and complex. This entry reads like a story, complete with dialogues and narrative. Leigh tells the story of the painful night his dad called. His mom arrives home from her night classes and they discuss what happened. He asks his mom why she married his dad and they have a candid discussion about how

she was young, foolish and in love. They talk about her small town life and her limited opportunities; they even discuss how she and her father grew apart after Leigh was born. She stayed home caring for Leigh while his father continued trucking. Leigh and his mom go out for a bucket of chicken and park the car at the beach. Its pouring rain outside and they listen to the tapping of the rain, the swish of the windshield wipers and the crash of the waves. Tonight, Leigh comes to understand that the divorce isn't his fault and that life is very complicated and sometimes unfair. He learns from his mom that no matter how difficult life is, it will still go on.

Pages 79-90

Leigh is in a bad mood when he sets off to school. He's started to write "Ways to Catch a Lunch Thief", but doesn't like the title because it sounds like one of Mr. H's books. He doesn't arrive in time to help put the flag up and doesn't take any measures to protect his lunch from the infamous lunch thief so his cheesecake is stolen. In his anger he decides to kick someone's lunch down the hall, but Mr. F stops him and tells him that he should realize that he isn't the only one with problems; that he should take the time to realize that. This makes Leigh think. One afternoon he is feeling pretty down, so he takes a walk after school and stumbles upon a grove of trees specifically meant to house butterflies. Leigh stands among those trees and is filled with joy as the butterflies fly about. On the way home he notices a metal box at the gas station marked "Alarm System", this gives him an idea. Leigh decides to pack his lunch in a metal box and rig it with an alarm. He begins writing a new story called "The Ten Foot Wax Man" which is about a 10 ft tall wax trucker who slowly melts every time he crosses the desert until one day he can't reach the gears or the pedals. Leigh receives \$20 and a note from his dad telling him he's sorry for losing Bandit which makes Leigh very angry because it's offhanded. Leigh saves the \$20 for a typewriter because he feels that a real writer needs one. Leigh decides to write to Mr. H because he needs help completing his story.

Pages 91-102

Leigh receives a response from Mr. H and learns that even the author had difficulty writing stories at his age. He's told to not to be so hard on himself because maybe he isn't ready to write a story. Mr. H teaches Leigh that in a story a character should change in some way. Leigh isn't sure if his character can change or how it could possibly happen because he can't imagine it. Leigh begins Volume 2 of his diary because he's already filled up the first composition book. He's also bought an old beat up black lunch box and begun researching ways to put an alarm on it. He's given up on finishing his story about the wax trucker and considers writing a poem about butterflies, but learns that several girls have already started something similar. One thing he hasn't given up on is inventing a lunch box alarm. Leigh takes his \$20 and heads to the hardware store where a nice store clerk calls him "son" (which makes Leigh very happy) and helps him purchase the wires, battery and bell he needs for his alarm. He puts the alarm together and shows it to his mom who gives him a tip on how to keep his sandwich from smothering the alarm bell. He takes his lunch to school and waits anxiously for the alarm to sound, but it never does. Leigh is forced to trigger it himself, in front of the whole school. Everyone is

fascinated by his invention and the Principal compliments him on it. He finds out that he isn't the only one having lunch items stolen. Although Leigh is pleased that people have taken notice of him, one thing continues to bother him; he still doesn't know who the thief is.

Page 102-112

Leigh's school mate Barry asks him to come over to his house and help him put an alarm on his bedroom door, but they don't have the right pieces, so they end up playing with Barry's models. He writes a short thank you letter to his dad for the \$20. Afterward Leigh worries that his dad will marry "the pizza boy and his mom." The next week several kids have lunch boxes with alarms on them. The thief has ceased stealing from his lunch and although he never found out whom the thief was Leigh is glad he didn't. He imagines that the thief might not have had enough to eat or had a really terrible lunch. As Leigh's capacity to write and express his feelings improves, his imagination and understanding of the world improves right along with it. Leigh's dad calls in response to his letter and they have a short awkward talk. The next day Leigh visits the Butterfly Grove again and muses to himself about the lives of butterflies, but decides to write about the day he and his dad rode together in his dad's rig. Leigh and Barry's acquaintance has progressed into a full friendship and Barry is asked over for dinner. Having Barry over, makes Leigh consider scrubbing the mildew off of the bathroom tile. He also learns that although he envies Barry's big house and bustling family, Barry in turn envies Leigh's privacy and quiet life. It's a lot like Mr. F said - everyone has problems. Leigh begins thinking about how lonely his dad sounded on the phone and wonders what happened to the "pizza boy". He asks his mom if his dad will ever get married again, and why it is that they don't get remarried, but his mom tells him that they never will.

Page 113-123

Leigh doesn't place in the contest, but wins Honorable Mention for his Young Author's entry "A Day on Dad's Rig". Some kids are mad that they haven't placed and vow never to write again which Leigh dismisses as foolish. The day of the luncheon, he is asked to join the lunch because one winner's work was discovered to be plagiarism. Leigh joins the Young Author winners for lunch and meets the author Angela Badger. Leigh is shy in the company of the author and can't think of what to say to her, so he listens and eats salad from the salad bar until she asks him what he wrote for the yearbook. Leigh replies that he has only written a short story about a ride on a truck. The author immediately recognizes his story and even remembers its title. She compliments him on his work and praises him for writing so honestly. She tells him that she enjoyed his work because he wrote from his heart and didn't try to sound like someone else. Leigh is proud that she calls him an author. From Ms. Badger Leigh learns that Mr. H is a "very nice young man with a wicked twinkle in his eye". Leigh falls asleep wishing his father was there, so he could talk to him about the day. Leigh writes to Mr. H about winning the honorable mention.

Page 124-134

In his diary Leigh writes that he and Barry mail his letter to Mr. H and walk over to the Butterfly Grove together. When the boys return to Leigh's house they see a giant rig and trailer sitting in front of the house. Leigh runs ahead in excitement and tells Barry (who according to Leigh, knows all about the divorce) he'll see him later. Leigh's father has come to return Bandit. He called out to fellow truckers until he found him. Another driver had picked up Bandit in a snowstorm; they eventually ended up in the same weighing station at the same time and Bandit was returned. Leigh notices that his dad's stomach is a little bigger and he doesn't seem as tall as he used to. Leigh finds out that broccoli brings his dad to town and at first this hurts Leigh until he realizes that although the load brought his dad to Salinas, he came the rest of the way specifically to see him. His dad stays for dinner during which he tells Leigh that he is not like him; that Leigh is smarter than he was. Before dinner is over Leigh's dad asks his mother if there is a chance for them to try again. Leigh is present during this conversation, but wishes he wasn't. He hears his mom tell his dad that it won't work because it's too painful staying up at night wondering where he is, and that it's too lonely waiting for him to come home. At this his dad collects his things to leave and tells Leigh that he is proud of him and that he'll do his best not to let him down. Leigh tells his dad to keep Bandit; he doesn't like the idea of his dad being lonely on the road. At the end of the book, Leigh tells us that he feels sad because he knows that things can't go back to the way they used to be, but he also feels better because he knows that his dad loves him and hasn't forgotten him.