
Teachers' Notes



AMANDA COMMANDER: THE CURLY RED RIBBON

Coral Vass / Heidi Cooper Smith

ISBN: 9781761113703

Reading level: 6 to 8 years

BOOK SUMMARY

When Amanda finds out that she has been assigned to buy Bella a Christmas present for the class Secret Santa exchange, she generously buys a much-coveted toy, only to discover that someone forgets to bring a present in for Amanda. She ends up being the only student in the class without a Secret Santa gift. Will Amanda be tempted to take back the gift she gave Bella or will she learn to be generous without expecting anything in return?

It's OPERATION CHRISTMAS PRESENT!

Amanda and her friends learn the true meaning of giving!

THEMES

Friendship • Generosity • Christmas •

Adaptability & Growth • Inclusivity

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Wombat Books, PO Box 302, Chinchilla, Queensland 4413

ABN: 30 137 345 941
admin@wombathriza.com.au

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Amanda Commander Teachers' Notes can be used in schools (independent learning, small groups, and whole classes); at home with caregivers; and as part of mental health support programs facilitated by counsellors, psychologists, children's charities, etc.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Coral Vass is an award-winning children's author, presenter, editor and reviewer. With a background in Media, Coral has more than 25 published children's books. Many of her books have appeared on ABCTV's Playschool, UK's Story Den on Milkshake TV, Storytime with Fergie and Friends, as well as on Australia's StoryBox Library. Coral loves to visit schools, where she runs writing workshops and shares the power of story. Coral is an ambassador for Reading Out of Poverty and is passionate about giving all children an equal opportunity to read.

AUTHOR NOTES

Christmas has always been my favourite time of year. It's a season of giving and receiving, and of practising generosity. As a child, I loved unwrapping gifts, but as an adult I've discovered even greater joy in giving them. There's nothing quite like seeing someone's face light up when they receive something special.

One of the traditions I enjoy with friends is Kris Kringle gifts. The downside, of course, is ending up with a gift that doesn't quite match the effort you put into yours. It's happened to me more times than I can count. But one memory stands out! One year, one of my children took part in a Kris Kringle at school. He chose a wonderful gift for the student he'd been assigned, but when exchange day arrived, the student who was meant to give him a present had simply forgotten. He gave, but didn't receive. It was a real test of staying generous, even when nothing comes back your way.

When I wrote *Amanda Commander: The Curly Red Ribbon*, I wanted to explore that very situation. Would Amanda still choose to be generous, even if it meant she might miss out?

ABOUT THE ILLUSTRATOR



At an early age, Heidi Cooper-Smith knew she wanted to write and illustrate picture books. But during a Visual Arts degree, she fell in love with ceramics and spent the next twenty years covered in clay. Heidi rediscovered her passion for drawing in 2014 when she joined the online 52-week illustration challenge. Six months later, she was offered her first illustration contract with Koala Books for *Two Birds on a Wire*. This wonderful experience inspired her to start writing, and in 2015 and 2016, she won the CYA illustrated manuscript competition. She wrote and illustrated *Kate and the Thing* and was also the illustrator of *The Other Brother*.

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REASONS FOR STUDYING THIS BOOK

The Amanda Commander series promotes kindness, loyalty and friendship while encouraging young readers to think about the choices they make and the impact those choices have on others. Through engaging stories, the series models positive relationships, practical problem solving and creative thinking, while celebrating imagination, art and everyday adventures. With shorter chapters designed to build reading stamina and confidence, the series supports beginner and emerging readers while fostering empathy, inclusion and respect.

In Amanda Commander: The Curly Red Ribbon, children explore the true meaning of generosity through Amanda's experience in a classroom Secret Santa exchange. The story encourages discussion about fairness, disappointment, gratitude and giving without expecting something in return. It provides opportunities to examine empathy by considering how both Amanda and her classmates might feel, while reinforcing the importance of honesty, thoughtfulness and looking out for others. The novel helps children navigate familiar social situations that can arise at school, demonstrating resilience, emotional regulation and the value of kindness, even when circumstances feel unfair.

KEY CURRICULUM AREAS

YEAR ONE

English

AC9E1LE01 – Discuss characters and events in literary texts.

AC9E1LE02 – Share personal responses to texts and make connections to own experiences.

AC9E1LY02 – Use comprehension strategies to understand texts.

Humanities and Social Sciences

AC9HS1K02 – Explore how people interact and care for places and communities.

AC9HS1S03 – Share ideas and opinions respectfully.

Health and Physical Education

AC9HP2P04 – Identify how friendships support wellbeing.

AC9HP2M01 – Practise personal and social skills when interacting with others.

YEAR TWO

English

AC9E2LE02 – Discuss characters, settings and events in literary texts and share responses.

AC9E2LY02 – Identify how texts reflect contexts and experiences.

AC9E2LY05 – Use comprehension strategies to build literal and inferred meaning.

Humanities and Social Sciences

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AC9HS2K03 – Identify how people cooperate to achieve shared goals.

AC9HS2S03 – Participate in discussions and decision-making respectfully.

Health and Physical Education

AC9HP2P04 – Explain how friendships support wellbeing.

AC9HP2P05 – Practise strategies to manage relationships and interact respectfully.

AC9HP2P06 – Describe ways to include others.

YEAR THREE

English

AC9E3LE02 – Discuss how characters are represented and how language is used to describe them.

AC9E3LY05 – Use comprehension strategies to interpret ideas and make inferences.

AC9E3LY06 – Create texts that adapt language features for purpose and audience.

Humanities and Social Sciences

AC9HS3K04 – Explain how people work together to achieve shared goals.

AC9HS3S03 – Develop questions and participate in discussions to explore viewpoints.

Health and Physical Education

AC9HP4P04 – Practise strategies for working cooperatively in groups.

AC9HP4P05 – Investigate how respect and inclusion strengthen relationships.

TEACHING POINTS AND ACTIVITIES

This book may be used in whole class, small group or independent learning activities in schools.

Please note, the following suggestions and activities are suited to a variety of year levels spanning Foundation to Year 6 primary aged children. Some activities may be applicable to early secondary school students, as well.

KNOWLEDGE AND LITERAL UNDERSTANDING

PRE-READING QUESTIONS

1. Show the class the front cover. What clues can you see about what the story might be about? Look at the colours, the characters and their expressions.
2. What do you think is the significance of the 'Curly Red Ribbon'?
3. Read the back cover blurb aloud. Does this give you more information about the story? Were your predictions correct?
4. Where do you think the story is set? How can you tell from the cover illustration?
5. Have you ever been part of a Secret Santa exchange? What was it like?

AFTER-READING QUESTIONS

1. What was your first impression of Amanda at the beginning of the story?
2. What were Amanda's expectations when she heard about the Secret Santa?
3. What was Amanda's emotional journey throughout the story?
4. What challenges did Amanda face during the incident with the Secret Santa?
5. Did the ending happen how you expected it to?
6. Do Amanda or her friends remind you of anyone you know — a friend, sibling or even yourself? In what ways?
7. What lesson do you think Amanda learned by the end of the story?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

GENERAL

- Visualisation - Based on the description of the rainbow- coloured poodle plush toy, draw a picture of it.
- What did Amanda decide to do at the end of Chapter 4?
- How is this different to what Amanda decided to do at the end of Chapter 5? What changed?
- List the reasons Amanda gives for wanting to keep the plush toy herself.
- When Amanda first reads the name 'BELLA' on her piece of red paper, her 'shoulders drooped' and her 'heart sank'. Without knowing anything else about Bella yet, what do Amanda's reactions tell us? Why do you think getting Bella's name made her feel this way, and have you ever been disappointed by something random - like a class partner or a seating arrangement - before you gave it a chance?
- Amanda takes the present from the classroom floor, hides it under her jumper, and shoves it in her locker. She tells herself 'It's not like I stole it', and lists reasons why it's okay: it was hers to begin with, Bella didn't want it, and she didn't get a Secret Santa gift. Are any of Amanda's reasons actually good ones?
- When someone is doing something they know is wrong, why do they sometimes try to convince themselves it's right?

FRIENDSHIP

- In what ways did Amanda's friends help her in this story?
- Write a poem written from Amanda's perspective about friendship.
- 'TRUE FRIENDS WILL CORRECT YOU FOR YOUR MISTAKES. NOT JUDGE YOU FOR THEM!' How did Amanda's friends show signs of being a 'true friend' in chapter 5?
- List one positive thing Amanda learnt about herself and one negative thing she learnt about herself in this story?
- When Amanda confesses, Bella doesn't get angry. She smiles and says 'I thought I was going crazy' about the missing ribbon. How would the story be different if Bella had been upset or angry? Do you think Bella's kind reaction is realistic, or is Amanda just lucky?
- What would you do if a friend told you they had taken something of yours?

GENEROSITY

- What does generosity look like?
- Who showed generosity in this story?
- Give two examples of ways someone was generous in this story.
- The Dolphin Squad's Quote Book says happiness comes from what we give, not what we get. Do you agree with this?
- Can you think of a time when giving something away made you happier than getting something? Can

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you think of a time when getting something made you really happy too? Is the above quote always true, or only sometimes?

- How do you think Amanda felt when she realised the gift she gave was left behind and not appreciated?
- 'HAPPINESS DOESN'T COME FROM WHAT WE GET, BUT FROM WHAT WE GIVE!' Do you agree with this quote or not? Why?

CHRISTMAS

- Have you ever done a Kris Kringle? How did it work out? Was everybody happy?
- List 5 synonyms for the words 'CHRISTMAS PRESENT'
- What are some ways you can Recycle, Reuse, and Regift this Christmas?
- In what ways would Christmas be different if everybody adopted this motto - IT'S ONLY IN GIVING THAT WE RECEIVE? Would Christmas be better or worse?

ADAPTABILITY & GROWTH

- Imagine Amanda was the one who forgot the present for the Kris Kringle. What do you think would have happened?
- When we go through challenging times or have to make tough decisions, it can help 'build character' and make us a kinder person. What tough decisions did Amanda need to make, and how did this 'build her character'?
- Write a diary entry from Amanda's perspective, on how she felt at the end of Chapter 4 and at the end of Chapter 9.
- Recall a time when you had to make a decision between being generous and getting what you wanted. How did you respond to the situation? Looking back, would you have acted differently?

INCLUSIVITY

- Give two examples of the way Amanda showed she was open-minded and inclusive?
- What do you think Ms Tran would have said, if the girls did ask her if they could change groups? How would the story have changed if the Dolphin Squad were in a group altogether?
- Describe a time you were not included? How did that make you feel? Describe a time you initiated including someone else? How did that make you feel?
- Everyone likes to be included. What are some ways you can include people at school?

ACTIVITIES

CLASS QUOTE BOOK

The Dolphin Squad keeps a Quote Book filled with words of encouragement and advice. As a class, create your own Quote Book for the classroom. Each student designs one page featuring a favourite quote, saying or piece of advice from a family member, teacher, book or one they have created themselves. Students should decorate their page with illustrations, colour or patterns that reflect its meaning.

Bind the pages into a class Quote Book and keep it in the reading corner. Students can read a random page whenever they need encouragement or inspiration.

Guidelines:

- Choose a quote that is kind and encouraging.
- Pick something you genuinely believe in.
- Funny quotes are welcome if they are respectful.
- Illustrate your page to match the message.

THE SECRET SANTA SWAP

Hold a class Secret Santa inspired by the story. Instead of buying gifts, each student creates a handmade gift for the person they are assigned, such as a card, drawing, paper craft, joke booklet or written compliment. The goal is to make something the recipient would enjoy.

After the exchange, students write a short reflection explaining what they made, why they chose it and how it felt to give it away.

Discussion:

- Was it easier to make a gift for someone you knew well or someone you didn't know as well? How did your feelings change as you created your gift?

DESIGN A KRIS KRINGLE CARD

Design a festive Kris Kringle card to accompany a Secret Santa gift. Include a cheerful message and decorate it with Christmas-themed illustrations.

CREATE A KRIS KRINGLE POSTER

Design a colourful poster that Ms Tran could use to advertise the class Kris Kringle. Include the event name, date, important details and festive illustrations.

HANDOUT

HONEY-JOY CHRISTMAS WREATHS

You can make one big wreath or individual bite-size wreaths to share with your friends!

Recipe

- 90g butter or margarine
 - 1/3 cup sugar
 - 1 tablespoon honey
 - 4 cups Corn Flakes
 - Green with food dye
 - Red M&Ms
1. Preheat oven to 150°C.
 2. Line a tray with bake paper
 3. Melt butter, sugar and honey together in a saucepan until frothy.
 4. Add Corn Flakes and mix well.
 5. Add green food dye
 6. Spoon onto the tray, moulding into small circles
 7. Bake in a slow oven 150°C for 10 minutes.
 8. Take out of the oven and add red M&Ms around the wreath
 9. Cool in refrigerator for 20 minutes.

MATCH THE RED TO THE EMOTION

Different shades of red evoke different emotions. Match the emotions to the red that best describes that emotion.

Light Red	Joy and Love
Dark Red	Danger and Anger
Fiery Red	Energy and Passion
Bright Red	Power and Wealth

Create a word bank of nouns that represent different shades of red. Think about foods, flowers, plants, gemstones and other objects from nature that could inspire vivid descriptions (e.g. cherry, poppy, ruby, coral, autumn leaf). This encourages students to use precise and imaginative vocabulary in their writing.

WORKSHEET: BOXED SCENARIOS

Each scenario is followed by two ways to respond and a blank line for the student's own idea. Students respond individually then discuss as a class each scenario. There are no wrong answers so think outside the box!

1. You pick someone's name for Secret Santa and you don't know them very well. Do you:	a) ask a friend to swap,
b) try to find out what they like, or	(c) your idea...
2. You find the perfect present but want to keep it for yourself. Do you:	a) buy it for yourself and find something else,
b) give it away like you planned, or	(c) your idea...
3. You see a wrapped present left behind on the classroom floor. Do you:	a) give it to the teacher,
b) leave it where it is, or	(c) your idea...
4. Your friend tells you they did something they feel bad about. Do you:	a) tell them off,
b) help them fix it, or	(c) your idea...

Reflection box: which scenario was hardest to answer and why?