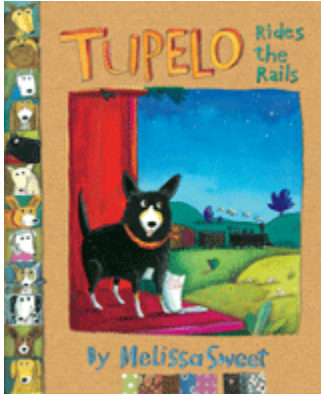


A Teacher's Guide



Tupelo Rides the Rails

by [Melissa Sweet](#)

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About the Book

Through creative language and brilliant illustrations, award-winning author and illustrator Melissa Sweet introduces Tupelo, an abandoned dog, who must find a new home for herself and her sock toy, Mr. Bones. Tupelo meets animals along the way and eventually uses her keen nose to find the BONEHEADS, a pack of stray dogs much like herself. The dogs follow the hobo Garbage Pail Tex on a train ride to find homes and reunite with their owners. Dog lovers everywhere will delight in Tupelo's story and find satisfaction in its resolution, which proves that home can be found in the most unexpected places.

Themes for Classroom discussion

HOME: The story begins with Tupelo left on the side of a road, unable to return home. Discuss the idea of home with students—what it means to them, what it means for Tupelo, and how its meaning changes throughout the story.

COMPANIONSHIP: Tupelo must search for companionship. Discuss what companionship means with students. Why is human companionship so important to each of the BONEHEADS? Encourage students to talk about their relationships with their own dogs or other pets.

DISASTER: Ask students to think about the circumstances that left Tupelo alone and the other BONEHEADS separated from their owners. The story suggests that maybe a disaster occurred. Ask students to think of circumstances when people would leave their pets behind. For a specific example, discuss the pets abandoned in New Orleans during Hurricane Katrina and the later efforts to rescue them.

DOGS: In many ways, *Tupelo Rides the Rails* is a tribute to dogs and their relationship to humans. The book celebrates dog heroes of past and present, from Rin Tin Tin to Lassie. (For more examples, see the timeline in the front of the book.) Ask your students if they have dogs or know dogs and what they like about them. Ask them to think of other dogs in books, on television, or in movies. How do dogs uphold their title as “Man’s Best Friend?”

WISHING: The BONEHEADS' "ancient bone-burying ritual" involves burying a bone in the ground and wishing on Sirius, the Dog Star. Ask students what they think of this ritual. The dogs are hopeful that they will find homes again. Why is this faith important? Tupelo has no bone, but later in the story, he buries Mr. Bones, his sock toy. How is this a sacrifice? Does Tupelo's wish come true?

Discussion Questions

- The story begins with a Van Gogh quote: "To look at the stars always makes me dream." How does this idea connect to the BONEHEADS' wishing on Sirius?
- Why do you think Tupelo was left on the side of the road with Mr. Bones? Where do you think she came from? *There are no wrong answers.*
- Even though she's been abandoned, Tupelo says, "Everyone belongs somewhere." Where does Tupelo belong and how does she find that place?
- What advice does the frog give Tupelo? How does it help her find the BONEHEADS?
- Who are the different members of the BONEHEADS? What do they wish for? Do you learn anything about each dog and where they may have come from based on their wish?
- Who is Garbage Pail Tex? What does it mean to be a hobo? How does he help the BONEHEADS? Why is he a good companion for Tupelo?
- The story ends with Tupelo once again on a train. Why is the train important to the story? Can you think of places that Tupelo and Garbage Pail Tex might travel to together?
- How are Tupelo and Garbage Pail Tex similar to Sirius and Orion?

Activities and Further Learning

Melissa Sweet's illustrations are comic-like. Ask your class to draw their own storyboard about Tupelo and Garbage Pail Tex's next adventure.

Have your students look at the timeline in the front of the book. As a group, pick a topic other than dogs and create a large timeline. Ask each student to contribute one piece of information. As a group, they should work out where each piece of information fits and illustrate the timeline. Ideas for topics include (but are not limited to): pizza, frisbees, cats, baseball, ice cream, trains. Students should be encouraged to contribute information from popular culture, literature, mythology, news, and history. Depending on the topic some research may be involved.

Learn about the constellations. The book mentions Canis Major ([Latin](#) for "big dog"). There are 87 other constellations. Have your students give group presentations on a constellation, including when and where it can be seen and the picture it creates in

the sky.

Learn about efforts to rescue animals after natural disasters. Hurricane Katrina is an example that your students should be familiar with. Discuss efforts to find homes for the pets that were left behind. For more immediate information about animal rescue, visit a local animal shelter or invite an employee or volunteer from a local shelter to visit your classroom.

The name BONEHEADS stands for "Benevolent Order of Nature's Exalted Hounds Earnest and Doggedly Sublime." As a class you may choose to define some of these words. Ask students to come up with words to describe themselves using the letters in their name. Adjust this activity depending on the grade level of the students. Have more advanced students create a sentence, much like the BONEHEADS did. Younger students can stick to descriptive words that match the letters in their name.