

Charles

Shirley Jackson

"Well, Charles was
bad again today."

The day Laurie started kindergarten, he renounced corduroy overalls with bibs and began wearing bluejeans with a belt; I watched him go off the first morning with the older girl next door, seeing clearly that an era of my life was ended, my sweet-voiced nursery-school tot replaced by a long-trousered, swaggering character who forgot to stop at the corner and wave goodbye to me.

He came home the same way, the front door slamming open, his cap on the floor, and the voice suddenly become raucous shouting, "Isn't anybody *here*?"

At lunch he spoke insolently to his father, spilled Jannie's milk, and remarked that his teacher said that we were not to take the name of the Lord in vain.

WORDS TO OWN

renounced (ri·nouns'd') v.: gave up; abandoned.

insolently (in'sə·lənt·lē) adv.: with bold disrespect.



"How *was* school today?" I asked, elaborately casual.

"All right," he said.

"Did you learn anything?" his father asked.

Laurie regarded his father coldly. "I didn't learn nothing," he said.

"Anything," I said. "Didn't learn anything."

"The teacher spanked a boy, though," Laurie said, addressing his bread and butter. "For being fresh," he added with his mouth full.

"What did he do?" I asked. "Who was it?"

Laurie thought. "It was Charles," he said. "He was fresh. The teacher spanked him and made him stand in a corner. He was awfully fresh."

"What did he do?" I asked again, but Laurie slid off his chair, took a cookie, and left, while his father was still saying, "See here, young man."

The next day Laurie remarked at lunch, as soon as he sat down, "Well, Charles was bad again today." He grinned enormously and said, "Today Charles hit the teacher."

"Good heavens," I said, mindful of the Lord's name, "I suppose he got spanked again?"

"He sure did," Laurie said. "Look up," he said to his father.

"What?" his father said, looking up.

"Look down," Laurie said. "Look at my thumb. Gee, you're dumb." He began to laugh insanely.

"Why did Charles hit the teacher?" I asked quickly.

"Because she tried to make him color with red crayons," Laurie said. "Charles wanted to color with green crayons so he hit the teacher and she spanked him and said nobody play with Charles but everybody did."

The third day—it was Wednesday of the first week—Charles bounced a seesaw onto the head of a little girl and made her bleed and the teacher made him stay inside all during recess. Thursday Charles had to stand in a corner during story time because he kept pounding his feet on the floor. Friday Charles was deprived of blackboard privileges because he threw chalk.

On Saturday I remarked to my husband, "Do you think kindergarten is too unsettling for Laurie? All this toughness and bad grammar, and this Charles boy sounds like such a bad influence."

"It'll be all right," my husband said reassuringly. "Bound to be people like Charles in the world. Might as well meet them now as later."

On Monday Laurie came home late, full of news. "Charles," he shouted as he came up the hill; I was waiting anxiously on the front steps, "Charles," Laurie yelled all the way up the hill, "Charles was bad again."

"Come right in," I said, as soon as he came close enough. "Lunch is waiting."

"You know what Charles did?" he demanded, following me through the door. "Charles yelled so in school they sent a boy in from first grade to tell the teacher she had to make Charles keep quiet, and so Charles had to stay after school. And so all the children stayed to watch him."

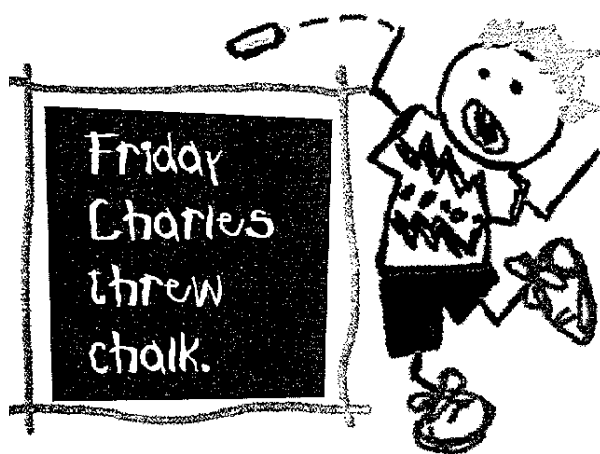
"What did he do?" I asked.

"He just sat there," Laurie said, climbing into his chair at the table. "Hi Pop, y'old dust mop."

"Charles had to stay after school today," I told my husband. "Everyone stayed with him."

"What does this Charles look like?" my husband asked Laurie. "What's his other name?"

"He's bigger than me," Laurie said. "And he



doesn't have any rubbers and he doesn't even wear a jacket."

Monday night was the first Parent-Teachers meeting, and only the fact that Jannie had a cold kept me from going; I wanted passionately to meet Charles's mother. On Tuesday Laurie remarked suddenly, "Our teacher had a friend come see her in school today."

"Charles's mother?" my husband and I asked simultaneously.

"Naaah," Laurie said scornfully. "It was a man who came and made us do exercises. Look." He climbed down from his chair and squatted down and touched his toes. "Like this," he said. He got solemnly back into his chair and said, picking up his fork, "Charles didn't even *do* exercises."

"That's fine," I said heartily. "Didn't Charles want to do exercises?"

"Naaah," Laurie said. "Charles was so fresh to the teacher's friend he wasn't *let* do exercises."

"Fresh again?" I said.

"He kicked the teacher's friend," Laurie said. "The teacher's friend told Charles to touch his toes like I just did and Charles kicked him."

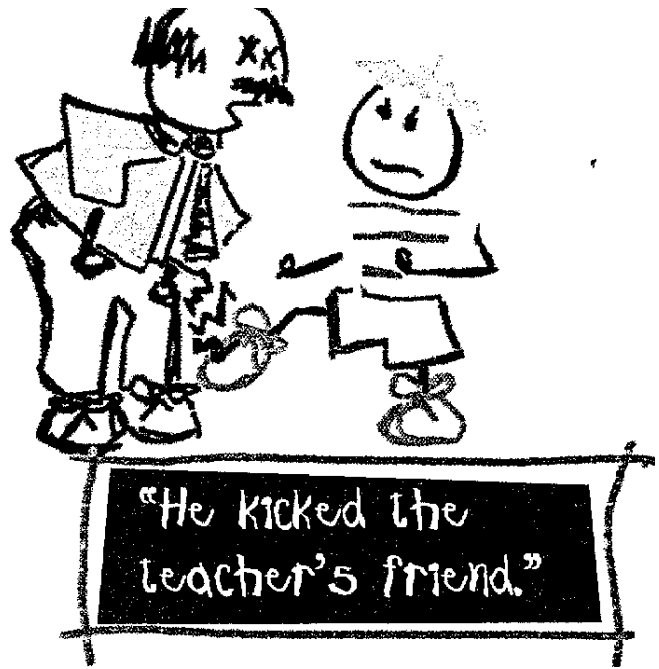
"What are they going to do about Charles, do you suppose?" Laurie's father asked him.

Laurie shrugged elaborately. "Throw him out of school, I guess," he said.

Wednesday and Thursday were routine; Charles yelled during story hour and hit a boy in the stomach and made him cry. On Friday Charles stayed after school again and so did all the other children.

With the third week of kindergarten Charles was an institution in our family; Jannie was being a Charles when she cried all afternoon; Laurie did a Charles when he filled his wagon full of mud and pulled it through the kitchen; even my husband, when he caught his elbow in the telephone cord and pulled telephone, ash tray, and a bowl of flowers off the table, said, after the first minute, "Looks like Charles."

During the third and fourth weeks there



seemed to be a reformation in Charles; Laurie reported grimly at lunch on Thursday of the third week, "Charles was so good today the teacher gave him an apple."

"What?" I said, and my husband added warily, "You mean Charles?"

"Charles," Laurie said. "He gave the crayons around and he picked up the books afterward and the teacher said he was her helper."

"What happened?" I asked incredulously.

"He was her helper, that's all," Laurie said, and shrugged.

"Can this be true, about Charles?" I asked my husband that night. "Can something like this happen?"

"Wait and see," my husband said cynically. "When you've got a Charles to deal with, this may mean he's only plotting."

He seemed to be wrong. For over a week Charles was the teacher's helper; each day he handed things out and he picked things up; no one had to stay after school.

WORDS TO OWN

warily (wer'ə-lē) *adv.*: cautiously.

incredulously (in-krej'oo-ləs-lē) *adv.*: unbelievably.

"The PTA meeting's next week again," I told my husband one evening. "I'm going to find Charles's mother there."

"Ask her what happened to Charles," my husband said. "I'd like to know."

"I'd like to know myself," I said.

On Friday of that week things were back to normal. "You know what Charles did today?" Laurie demanded at the lunch table, in a voice slightly awed. "He told a little girl to say a word and she said it and the teacher washed her mouth out with soap and Charles laughed."



"What word?" his father asked unwisely, and Laurie said, "I'll have to whisper it to you, it's so bad." He got down off his chair and went around to his father. His father bent his head down and Laurie whispered joyfully. His father's eyes widened.

"Did Charles tell the little girl to say *that*?" he asked respectfully.

"She said it *twice*," Laurie said. "Charles told her to say it *twice*."

"What happened to Charles?" my husband asked.

"Nothing," Laurie said. "He was passing out the crayons."

Monday morning Charles abandoned the

little girl and said the evil word himself three or four times, getting his mouth washed out with soap each time. He also threw chalk.

My husband came to the door with me that evening as I set out for the PTA meeting. "Invite her over for a cup of tea after the meeting," he said. "I want to get a look at her."

"If only she's there," I said prayerfully.

"She'll be there," my husband said. "I don't see how they could hold a PTA meeting without Charles's mother."

At the meeting I sat restlessly, scanning each comfortable matronly face, trying to determine which one hid the secret of Charles. None of them looked to me haggard enough. No one stood up in the meeting and apologized for the way her son had been acting. No one mentioned Charles.

After the meeting I identified and sought out Laurie's kindergarten teacher. She had a plate with a cup of tea and a piece of chocolate cake; I had a plate with a cup of tea and a piece of marshmallow cake. We maneuvered up to one another cautiously and smiled.

"I've been so anxious to meet you," I said. "I'm Laurie's mother."

"We're all so interested in Laurie," she said.

"Well, he certainly likes kindergarten," I said. "He talks about it all the time."

"We had a little trouble adjusting, the first week or so," she said primly, "but now he's a fine little helper. With lapses, of course."

"Laurie usually adjusts very quickly," I said. "I suppose this time it's Charles's influence."

"Charles?"

"Yes," I said, laughing, "you must have your hands full in that kindergarten, with Charles."

"Charles?" she said. "We don't have any Charles in the kindergarten."

WORDS TO OWN

haggard (hag'ərd) *adj.*: looking worn-out and exhausted.

MAKING MEANINGS

First Thoughts

1. What is the **plot twist** at the end of the story? Did it surprise you? Explain.

Shaping Interpretations

2. What clues does Jackson give to Charles's identity?
3. In your opinion, why does Laurie invent Charles?
4. Do you think Laurie's parents should have realized the truth about Charles sooner? Explain.
5. Reread Julius Lester's comments on page 472. Do you think Laurie qualifies as a trickster? Why or why not?



Connecting with the Text

6. How would you have felt about Laurie if he had been in your kindergarten class? Would you have wanted to be friends with him? Explain your response.

Reading Check

- a. Describe how Laurie's behavior at home changes after he begins school.
- b. According to Laurie, what is Charles like?
- c. How does Laurie's mother learn the truth about Charles?

CHOICES: Building Your Portfolio

Writer's Notebook

1. Collecting Ideas for Observational Writing

Have you ever known a class clown, trickster, or troublemaker?

Describe how this person looks and acts and what you think of him or her. (Either expand on your Quickwrite or choose a new subject.)



Creative Writing

2. First Day of School

What do you remember about *your* first days (or weeks) of school? Write about your own experiences beginning elementary school or starting over at a new school. Try writing five or six sentences beginning *I remember . . .*; then, choose one to write about further.

Writing a Response

3. Dear Laurie

Shirley Jackson based the character of Laurie on her own son (see page 477). Write a letter to her now-grown son Laurie, telling him how you responded to "Charles." Did you think it was funny? silly? true to life? How does knowing that the story is about Laurie affect what you will say to him?

Language
Handbook
HELP

See Agreement of Pronoun and Antecedent, page 751.

Pronoun Reference

When you use pronouns in your writing, make sure their **antecedents** (the words they refer to) are clear.

UNCLEAR Shirley Jackson and her daughter Jannie went to the store to buy her new shoes. [Who needed shoes, Shirley or her daughter?]

CLEAR Shirley Jackson took her daughter Jannie to the store to buy Jannie new shoes.

UNCLEAR Jannie wanted a pair of high-heeled black sandals, but it didn't please her mother at all. [What does *it* refer to?]

CLEAR Jannie wanted a pair of high-heeled black sandals, but they didn't meet with her mother's approval.

Jannie wanted a pair of high-heeled black sandals, but this choice didn't please her mother at all.

Try It Out

Number each line of a piece of writing you've been working on, and exchange papers with a classmate. On a separate sheet of paper, list by line number every pronoun your partner used, and identify its antecedent. If you can't tell, put a question mark on your list next to the pronoun. Switch papers again, and revise any sentences with unclear pronoun references.

VOCABULARY

HOW TO OWN A WORD

WORD BANK

renounced
insolently
warily
incredulously
haggard

Synonyms and Antonyms

Complete each of the sentences below by choosing the word that fits best from the Word Bank. (Use each word only once.) Then, write S next to the word if it is a **synonym** (word with a similar meaning) or A if it is an **antonym** (word with the opposite meaning) of the underlined word.

1. "There is no Charles in the class!" Laurie's father said _____, looking at his wife unbelievingly.
2. "Maybe the teacher forgot," he continued _____. "Don't jump to conclusions; it's best to approach these matters cautiously."
3. "Well," she replied, "it's hard to believe that my son, who used to behave so politely at home, behaves _____ at school."
4. "Anyway, I'm sure I'll hear at the next PTA meeting that he has _____ any bad habits he's adopted in kindergarten."
5. "I'm exhausted," her husband said, looking _____. "Now I know how Charles's parents must feel."