

Anne Schraff



Tazmin

Age: 9

Best Part of Crow's Crossing: lots of things to do outdoors—for free

Favorite Snack: saltine crackers with honey

Future Goal: college!

Best Quality: accepts others for who they are

CHARACTERS



MR. RIDLEY

Age: 30½

Worst Habit: loses his temper a lot

Favorite Book: *The Wind in the Willows*

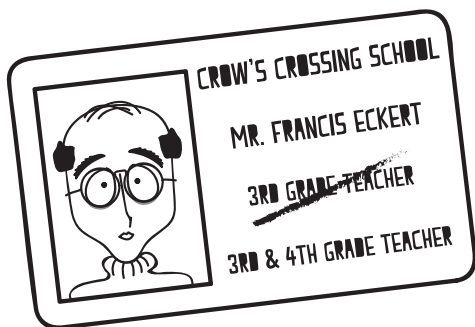
Little-Known Fact: wears size 6 EEE shoes for his very short and wide feet

Best Quality: knows how to inspire people

1

NEW TEACHER

There was no fourth grade teacher at Crow's Crossing School. The fourth graders had to join the third graders. The teacher, Mr. Eckert, was not doing a good job of teaching third grade. Or fourth grade.



Then Mr. Ridley moved to town. He was hired to teach fourth grade.



Mr. Ridley was a tall young man. About thirty. Thick dark hair. Strange silvery eyes. He looked sad sometimes. And sometimes he looked gray. Like he was scared. Like he had seen a ghost.



Some of the kids were afraid of him. But nine-year-old Tazmin Jones liked him from the start.

Crow's Crossing was a small town. Most



of the people there had come from bad parts of the city. They were poor. They wanted to get their children out. Because of crime. Because of gangs. And houses were cheap in Crow's Crossing.



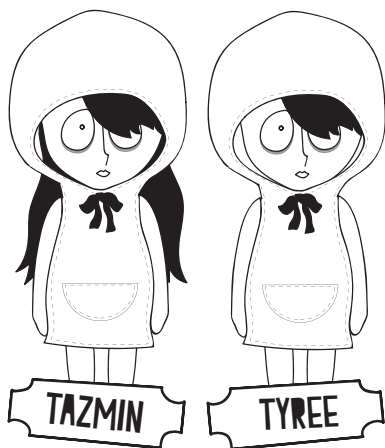
“We don’t have much here,” Mom said. “But we got green hills. We got little streams. Our house is not big. But we got flowers and trees. A great garden.”

“I like Crow’s Crossing,” Tazmin said. “I have friends in school. Mister Ridley is

a great teacher. He's the best fourth grade teacher. Maybe ever."

Tazmin's twin brother, Tyree, did not like Mr. Ridley. "He's mean. Crazy. He yells," Tyree said.

TWINS, BUT OPPOSITES.



"I'm learning," Tazmin said. "I didn't learn from Mister Eckert."

"Well, I'm glad you're learning," Mom said. She quit school. She had to help her

mother clean houses. Dad quit school too. Now he did odd jobs in Crow's Crossing.

CLEAN OTHER PEOPLE'S CLOTHES? NO THANK YOU!



"I'm getting good at math," Tazmin said proudly. "Mister Ridley helps everybody."

"He gets crazy mad if you don't mind him," Tyree said.

"Not at me," Tazmin said. "*I* mind him."

"We never finished school, your dad and me," Mom said. "That's why we have nothing. But you kids are going to do better. At least we got a clean house. Food on the table."

“And we got the best teacher ever,” Tazmin said. She pulled out her paper. There was a gold star on it. Tazmin was so proud.



Word had gotten around town. Mr. Ridley was a very good teacher. But everybody wondered why he was here. The pay was low. Nothing was close-by.

Some did not trust him. They thought he was hiding. From someone. Or something.



2

HOMEWORK

The Garners were neighbors. Viv Garner's younger son was Blake. He never got a good grade before. He could barely read. But now he was starting to read simple books. And it was because of Mr. Ridley. Still, Viv wasn't so sure about the new teacher.

BLAKE GARNER'S REPORT CARD		
MATH	F
READING	F
SCIENCE	F



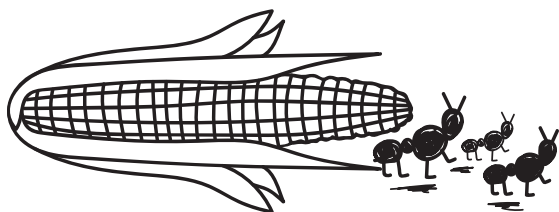
“Eve,” Viv said to Tazmin’s mom. “Why *is* he here? He is so talented. Why Crow’s Crossing?”

Eve Jones shook her head. “Maybe he’s a good man. Maybe he’s a hero. Someone who really cares about kids.”



Viv laughed. “I have lived too long to believe that. I’m glad he’s teaching my boy to read. But something’s wrong with Mister Ridley. He’s too good to be true.”

“He’s teaching Tazmin math. And he’s teaching Tyree to read,” Eve said. “I’m just thanking the Lord for him. I’ve had too much bad luck in my life, Viv. I don’t look for bugs in every ear of corn.”



It was the next morning. Tazmin and Tyree walked to school. “You do your homework, Tyree?” Tazmin asked her brother

“No,” Tyree said. “It was about some stupid story. Mister Ridley wanted a whole page. I can’t do that.”

Tazmin laughed. “I did all my homework. A whole page of math.”

“You make me sick,” Tyree said. “You want to be teacher’s pet.”

Tyree grabbed Tazmin’s paper. He wanted to rip it. But Tazmin snatched it back. “You watch yourself, Tyree. Behave. Or I’ll tell on you.”

The twins caught up to Blake Garner. He was smiling. “I finished my reading homework,” he said. “Mister Ridley is good. But why’s he here? Maybe he’s hiding out from the cops. Maybe he’s a criminal. Or worse. My mom doesn’t trust him.”



Homework was turned in first thing. It was Mr. Ridley's rule. He had a tray on his desk for it. Tazmin marched up. Some kids followed her. She put her work in the tray.

"Okay," Mr. Ridley said. "No homework. No recess. Spend that time studying. You know who you are." Mr. Ridley's silvery eyes looked on fire.

Tazmin really liked him. But he looked scary. His wild black hair seemed to stand straight up.

Crow's Crossing School was poor. There were no computers. Teachers still wrote on chalkboards. They felt lucky to have desks. Some in the county wished the poor people in Crow's Crossing would move. Then they could close the old school.

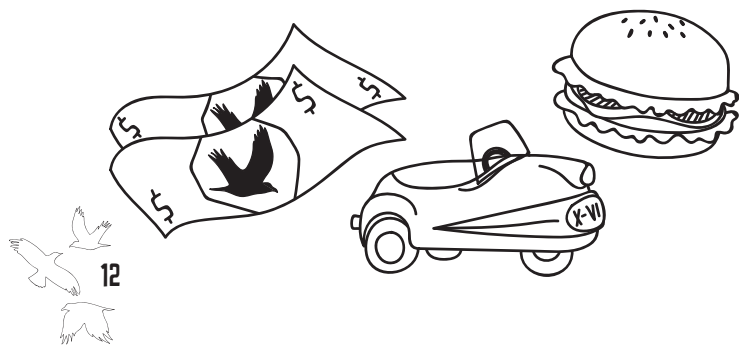
But the little school meant hope. Maybe the only hope for a poor kid. It was

important to the Joneses. And the Garners. And many others in town. They wanted their kids to succeed.

Mr. Ridley came to Tyree's desk. "Tyree Jones," he shouted. "Tell me why you hate yourself so much."

Tyree glared at the teacher. "I don't hate myself. I hate you!" he yelled back.

There was a gasp. The students were shocked. But not Mr. Ridley. "Know what, Tyree?" he said. "*You* want to end up in the gutter. *I* want you to get a good job. A nice car. *You* want to be homeless. And hungry. *I* want you to live in a nice place. Eat good food. Have a good life. So who really hates Tyree Jones? You or me?"



“I can’t read that stupid book. No way,” Tyree said. “I’m stupid. Okay?”

“Never say that. Ever. Nobody says stupid in this room!” Mr. Ridley looked mad. “No recess, Tyree. You and I will be inside. Working on your reading. You will find out you’re not stupid,” Mr. Ridley said. “Nobody in this school is stupid.”

THE HERO OF CROW'S CROSSING

Our new teacher is my hero. Nobody ever believed in us before. But does he have a secret?



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