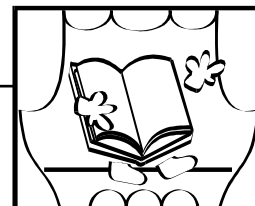


Readers' Theater

Elijah of Buxton by Christopher Paul Curtis



(Arranged for Readers' Theater by CYRM Committee Members, for classroom use only.)

Characters: Narrator Elijah Cooter Preacher

Narrator: It was Sunday after church. Elijah had finished his chores and was sitting on the stoop. It was the time of day when the birds were getting ready to be quiet and the toady-frogs were starting to get louder with that chirpity sound they make. Just then Elijah caught sight of Cooter walking up the road.

Cooter: Evening, Eli.

Elijah: Evening, Cooter.

Cooter: What you doing, Eli?

Elijah: I was thinking 'bout getting Old Flapjack and going fishing. You wanna come?

Cooter: Uh-uh. I got something that's more interesting than watching you fish. I got a mystery.

Elijah: What's the mystery?

Cooter: I was cutting through M'deah's truck patch and seen some tracks that I ain't never see afore.

Elijah: What kind of tracks? Were they big?

Cooter: Uh-uh, they's long and wiggly. I followed 'em but they disappeared in the grass.

Elijah: Let's go.

Narrator: The boys went to Cooter's home, opened the gate, and went around back to his mother's truck patch. Cooter was right about the strange tracks. There among the rows of his ma's beets and corn were some of the strangest markings they'd ever seen. They were long and skinny and in six wriggling lines. Two of 'em were a good bit thicker than the rest. Elijah got down on his hands and knees and had a really good look.

Elijah: You got me. I ain't never seen such tracks nowhere. Let's ask my pa when he comes out the field.

Cooter: Here comes Preacher. Let's ask him.

Narrator: Even though he didn't have a church like a common preacher, the Right Reverend Doctor Zephariah Connerly the Third would tell anyone who would listen that he was the most educated and smartest man anywhere around. The boys just called him Preacher.

Preacher: Evening, boys.

Elijah and
Cooter: Evening, sir.

Preacher: Hot one today, why aren't you two off swimming?

Cooter: We trying to solve us a mystery, sir.

Preacher: Really? And what would that be?

Elijah: It's some kind of animal tracks we ain't never seen afore, sir.

Preacher: Where are they?

Narrator: The Preacher opened the gate and peered at the tracks. He took a jackknife out of his pocket and dug a little scoop of dirt out of one of the tracks. He looked at it so close that his eyes started to go crossed.

Preacher: (*shouting*) Lord, have mercy! No! NO! I knew this was going to happen, I just prayed it wouldn't be this soon.

Elijah and
Cooter: What? What was gonna happen?

Preacher: I warned them they had to check out those new-free folks better, and now somebody's accidentally toted some of those horrible creatures up here.

Elijah: What somebody tote up here sir?

Preacher: (*whispering*) Hoop snakes!

Cooter: What? What's a hoop snake, sir?

Preacher: I suppose I have to tell you, but I don't want this to get any further than the three of us.

Elijah: Please, sir, tell us what you mean!

Preacher: (*in a low voice*) Down home there's a vile breed of snake called a hoop snake. Not only can it outrun a racehorse, it's been known to kill a fully grown bear with one bite! (*looking all around before continuing*)

Preacher: They look like near any other snake, except for one thing.

Elijah and

Cooter: What?

Preacher: They have the habit of sticking their tails in their mouths then biting themselves.

Elijah: That don't make no sense. How're they gonna bite you if they're clamping down on their own tails, sir?

Preacher: Good question, Elijah. But they don't hold their tails when they're ready to bite, they hold them when they're ready to chase after you!

Cooter: But...

Preacher: Listen! And, my young brothers, you better listen good! This may save your lives. Once they've bitten their tails, they form the shape of a circle then stand up like a wheel or a barrel hoop and commence rolling after whatever they've decided to kill! After they catch you and bite you. . . (*snapping his hand shut*). . . the true horror begins. You're doomed.

Cooter: How come?

Preacher: Because, Cooter, their poison gets into your blood too quick. Within hours you commence swelling till your skin looks soft and rotten as a ripe peach left in the noonday sun!

Cooter: What? You swells up?

Preacher: You swell so much that after exactly seven and a half days the pressure in your body becomes too great and you explode like an overheated steam boiler! In seconds your stomach and your lungs and your other entrails are flung around you for miles and miles!

Narrator: Elijah couldn't believe that folks who got free would do this to us. Even if it was an accident. But Preacher wasn't finished.

Preacher: Worse, the swelling affects everything but your head, so you're forced to watch the whole tragedy unwinding right in front of your eyes.

Cooter: Well, sir, at least you dies quick, sir.

Preacher: No such luck, Cooter. Two weeks! It's fourteen endless days after your explosion before you pass on. And it's no pleasant death either, you finally die from starvation.

Cooter: Starvation? How come you don't eat nothing, sir?

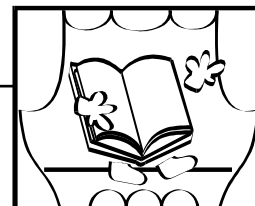
Preacher: Because, Cooter, no matter how much food you swallow, it simply falls through the hole where your internal organs used to be and drops to the ground right in front of you! (*glancing around*)

Preacher: Those tracks were fresh, looks like a momma and poppa and a slew of babies! Which, God bless us all, means we're too late, they've already started breeding! And from the way those tracks were going, I'd say they're hungry and have started up a hoop snake hunting party. (*whispering*) Boys, I need you to solemnly promise me something. I want you both to swear on your mothers' lives that if I'm ever bitten by one of these beasts, you'll take this pistol and put a bullet in my brain! I'd rather be shot dead than face such a horrible, prolonged death! Raise your hands, I need each of you to promise that you'll blow my head right off my shoulders!

Narrator: The boys almost jumped to the moon when they heard a loud bang behind them. Elijah looked for Cooter but he had already run into his house and slammed and locked the door. Elijah took off running for home screaming.



Readers' Theater



Cracker! The Best Dog in Vietnam

by Cynthia Kadohata

(Arranged for Readers' Theater by CYRM Committee Members, for classroom use only.)

Characters:	Willie Man	Narrator Rick	Willie's father Cody	Willie's mother Sergeant
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Narrator: Willie takes Cracker's face in his hands.

Willie: Bye, Cracker. You're going to be the best dog in Vietnam.

Narrator: Cracker felt the same sadness and slight sense of abandonment she always felt when Willie left. She yelped at him. Instead of turning around, he started to run. Cracker yelped even more. Willie's mother petted her and left. When Willie's parents came home, Cracker heard a strange man talking with them. She didn't like the way the man smelled. She started to snarl.

Man: She'll do well in Vietnam.

Willie's mother: Thanks for packing her up for us. We couldn't bear to do it ourselves.

Willie's father: She's smart as the dickens. Stubborn, though. She and Willie flunked out of obedience school twice—she needs a good handler to really teach her right. She's strong too. Feel her muscles.

Man: I'll take your word for it. Don't worry. The army will take good care of her.

Narrator: Willie came home from school early. He looked up at the third-floor window where he always saw Cracker. She had ESP, so she always knew when he was coming home. Willie called to the closed window.

Willie: (*yelling*) Cracker! Cra-a-a-acker!

Narrator: Willie sees a man holding the leash that was attached to Cracker. Willie looked at the man. He walked up to the man.

Willie: *(demanding)* Give me that leash.

Narrator: Cracker came to life and growled at the man.

Willie's father: Willie. Please. You're making it harder on the dog.

Willie's mother: Sweetheart, Cracker will be a war hero! Remember when we watched the news that night? The war dogs of Vietnam! You said it was neat!

Willie: Mom, please!

Willie's father: Willie, you have to think about Cracker for a minute. Look how upset you're making her.

Willie: *(whispering)* Bye, Cracker.

Narrator: The last thing Willie saw was a glimpse of her frightened brown eyes, and then the door closed. Willie ran to the window and stared as Cracker and the man left the building. Cracker looked up at him before the man tore off the leather contraption and loaded her into a crate in the back of a van.

(Later at Fort Benning, Georgia)

Narrator: Rick Hanski walked across the fields toward the kennels. It was a humid day and a lot of the guys were complaining. Rick stopped in front of a cage reading CRACKER. She was big, but she looked docile enough, lying on the concrete with her front paws delicately crossed. Rick didn't feel a lick of fear. He didn't open the cage just yet.

Rick: Cracker!

Narrator: Cracker listened to him but didn't move her head. He started to open the gate. He cracked the gate open a touch, and she lunged. He slammed the gate shut as her body hit the wire. Rick had never seen a dog move so fast. He reached into his pocket and took out his secret weapon: a wiener.

Rick: Wiener?

Narrator: Cracker knew wiener. Willie had used that word. She lunged at the pieces of wiener that Rick had put on the ground. Rick held out his open palms toward Cracker. She sniffed at his hands. She sat. Sitting was the universal language for, "I'll take another wiener." Cracker stiffened as Rick moved his fingers under her chin. Then he moved up and scratched behind her ear.

Rick: Good girl.

Narrator: Cracker watched as the man patted his own head.

Rick: Rick.

Narrator: Rick leaned in toward Cracker.

Rick: Remember. Rick.

Narrator: The next day a few of the guys were working with their dogs. One of the guys named Cody worked with his dog, Bruno. Cracker decided to tug her leash in the opposite direction.

Rick: No.

Cody: Bruno, heel.

Narrator: Rick called heel, but Cracker sat down instead. Rick handed the leash to Cody. Cracker responded to commands without a mistake.

Cody: She's already trained. And very well.

Rick: *(looking at Cracker)* Okay, no more games.

Narrator: The men lined up with their dogs and faced the sergeant.

Sergeant: Are—you—listening—soldier?

Rick: Yes sir.

Sergeant: I work for a living. Don't ever call me sir again.

Rick: Yes, sergeant.

Sergeant: You are the boss, men! Do not take anything from your dog. You are in control. Your dog is eager to please you, for that is the dog's mission in life. Your dog works for love of man, not love of food.

Narrator: Rick and Cracker looked at each other. Rick realized that Cracker was a lot like him. Cracker realized that she liked training with this man. She liked riding in the chopper and she liked training with Rick.

(Later, in Vietnam)

Narrator: After arriving in Vietnam, Cracker and Rick worked very hard and many times it was very dangerous. One day, after an especially difficult day, Rick and Cracker returned to camp to clean up. Once again, Rick saw another letter written by Willie. Wow, he thought. This kid is stubborn. Rick opened the letter.

Willie: Dear Soldier.
Hi, I am Cracker's owner, or former owner. Since I'm only twelve, I guess my parents were the official owners, but she was really my dog. She was my best friend. Cracker likes wieners, walks, petting, and lying around. She also likes the beach and boats. I know I keep telling you a lot of the same stuff, but since I haven't heard from you, I know you're not getting my letters.

I took Cracker on a boat once. The only thing about her is that you can't keep feeding her even if she begs you because she will never stop eating if you let her. Will you write me back and send a picture? I am sure Cracker is doing really well because she is really smart. I taught her ninety words. Okay, some times she forgot a word, but she remembered most of them. She didn't always listen real well, so I hope you taught her to listen so she doesn't get hurt. Maybe someday Cracker will be my dog again. What do you think?
Meanwhile, you take care of her.

Yours truly,
Willie Stetson

P.S. Cracker likes to watch baseball games with me. I am a Cubs fan.

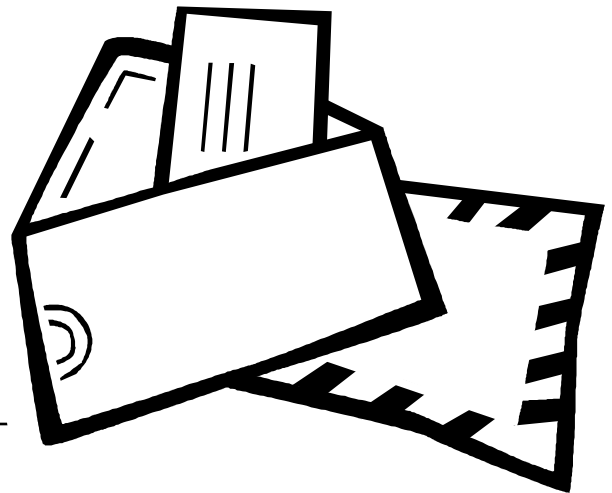
Narrator: Rick glanced at Willie's letter. He got some Army stationery and put pen to paper.

Rick: Dear Willie,

Sorry I didn't write you sooner. I'm not much of a writer. Cracker is doing great. I think she is the best dog in Vietnam. She's never missed a booby trap. We went on one mission when someone put in a special request for our team because of her reputation.

I feel like I know her better than I have ever known anyone in my life. You raised a good dog. You did good. She's saved a lot of lives.

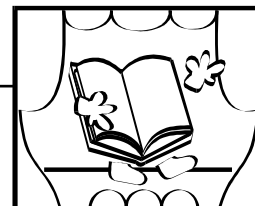
Just curious—Do you know any senators or important people who might put in a good word for her? Just asking, everything's fine. Good luck with the Cubs. I am a football fan myself.



Readers' Theater

Skulduggery Pleasant: Scepter of the Ancients, Book 1

by Derek Landy



(Arranged for Readers' Theater by CYRM Committee Members, for classroom use only.)

Characters:	Narrator 1	Narrator 2	Stephanie
	Skulduggery Pleasant	Mother	Man

Narrator 1: Gordon Edgley had recently died. He was a writer and owned a large house, a villa, and was quite wealthy. During the reading of the will, twelve year old Stephanie found out that she was to acquire the house, the royalties from the books, and other assets when she turned eighteen.

Narrator 2: Soon after the reading of the will, Stephanie and her mother drove up to the house. After the funeral, Stephanie and her family had gone to the house where Stephanie saw her Uncle Fergus stealing several pieces of silver. Stephanie also noticed a strange person standing in the corner of her uncle's study. She learned that his name was Skulduggery Pleasant.

Narrator 1: As Stephanie and her mother approached the house, Stephanie thought how ridiculous it was to leave a house to a twelve year old. Nevertheless, she and her mother went inside. Stephanie had always enjoyed the secret door that looked like a bookcase and led to another room in the house.

Narrator 2: Stephanie and her mother spent the entire afternoon exploring the house. When it was time to leave, the car would not start. Stephanie thought to her self to learn about engines before she turned eighteen. Her mother took out her mobile phone and called the tow truck. Unfortunately, there was not enough room for Stephanie.

Mother: You can sit on my knee.

Stephanie: Mum!

Mother: Or I can sit on your knee; whatever works.

Stephanie: Can I stay here?

Mother: Alone?

Stephanie: Please? You just said it won't take long, and I'd like to take another look around.

Mother: I don't know, Steph...

Stephanie: Please? I've stayed on my own before. I won't break anything, I swear.

Mother: (*laughing*) Okay, fine. I shouldn't be any more than an hour, all right? An hour and a half at the most. Call me if you need anything.

Narrator 1: After Stephanie's mother left, Stephanie decided to explore some more of the house. She ended up in Uncle Gordon's study where she found a manuscript entitled, *And the Darkness Rained Upon Them*.

Narrator 2: Stephanie loved her uncle's stories even though other people thought them too scary and bloody. His stories usually had people doing wonderful and astonishing things. The characters all ended up in bizarre and horrible deaths but the situations made the books a favorite with Stephanie. As she was reading the manuscript, her phone rang.

Mother: Hi, sweetie, everything okay?

Stephanie: Yes, just reading.

Mother: You're not reading one of Gordon's books, are you? Steph, he writes about horrible monsters and scary stuff and bad people doing worse things. It'll give you nightmares.

Stephanie: No, Mum, I'm ... I'm reading the dictionary.

Mother: The dictionary? Really?

Stephanie: Yeah. Did you know that *popple* is a word?

Mother: You are stranger than your father, you know that?

Stephanie: I suspected . . . So is the car fixed yet?

Mother: No, and that's why I'm calling. They can't get it going, and the road up to you is flooded. I'm going to get a taxi up as far as it'll go, and then I'll see if I can find some way around on foot. It's going to be another two hours, at least.

Stephanie: Mum, it's fine, you don't have to. I'm okay here.

Mother: There's no way I'm leaving you in a strange house by yourself.

Stephanie: It's not a strange house; it's Gordon's, and it's fine. There's no point in you trying to get here tonight; it's lashing rain.

Mother: Sweetie, it won't take me long.

Stephanie: It will take you ages. Where's it flooded?

Mother: At the bridge.

Stephanie: The bridge? And you want to walk from the bridge to here?

Mother: If I speed walk—

Stephanie: Mum, don't be silly. Get Dad to pick you up.

Mother: Sweetheart, are you sure?

Stephanie: I like it here, really. Okay?

Mother: Well, okay. I'll be over first thing in the morning to pick you up, all right? And I saw some food in the cupboards, so if you're hungry, you can make yourself something.

Stephanie: Okay. I'll see you tomorrow, then.

Mother: Call if you need anything, or if you just want some company.

Stephanie: I will. 'Night, Mum.

Mother: I love you.

Stephanie: I know.

Narrator 1: Later that evening, Stephanie was reading in the study. She glanced at the clock and saw that it was almost midnight. Suddenly the phone rang. Stephanie wondered who it was. Anyone who knew Gordon had died wouldn't be calling. Figuring that as the new owner of the house it was her responsibility to answer her own phone, Stephanie picked it up.

Stephanie: Hello?

Man: Who is this?

Stephanie: I'm sorry, who are you looking for?

Man: (*angry*) Who is this?

Stephanie: If you're looking for Gordon Edgley, I'm afraid that he's—

Man: I know Edgley's dead. Who are you? Your name?

Stephanie: (*hesitating*) Why do you want to know?

Man: What are you doing in that house? Why are you in his house?

Stephanie: If you want to call back tomorrow—

Man: I *don't* want to, all right? Listen to me, girlie: If you mess up my master's plans, he will be *very* displeased, and he is *not* a man you want to displease—you got that? Now tell me who you are!

Stephanie: (*angrily*) My name is none of your business. If you want to talk to someone, call back tomorrow at a reasonable hour.

Man: (*hissing*) You don't talk to me like that.

Stephanie: Good night.

Man: You do not talk to me like—

Narrator 2: But Stephanie had already hung up. She was thinking that maybe spending the entire night here was a bad idea. She thought about calling her parents, then scolded herself for being so childish. No need to worry them about something so—suddenly, someone pounded on the front door.

Man: Open up! Open the damn door!

Stephanie: (*shouting*) Leave me alone!

Man: Open the door!

Stephanie: (*still shouting*) No! I'm calling the police! I'm calling the police right now!

Man: (*in a teasing voice*) Are you alone in there?

Stephanie: (*in a loud voice*) Go away!

Man: What are you going to do with that poker?

Stephanie: I'll break your head open with it!

Man: (*laughing*) I just want to come in. Open the door for me, girlie. Let me come in.

Stephanie: The police are on their way.

Man: You're a liar. The road's closed, girlie. You call them, I'll break down that door and kill you hours before they get here.

Stephanie: What do you want? Why do you want to come in?

Man: It's got nothing to do with me, girlie. I've just been sent to pick something up. Let me in; I'll look around, get what I came for, and leave. I won't harm a pretty little hair on your pretty little head, I promise. Now you just open that door right this second.

Narrator 1: Stephanie gripped the poker in both hands and shook her head. She screamed as a fist smashed through the window, showering the carpet with glass. Stephanie tried to run but strong hands grabbed her from behind. She screamed again as she was lifted off her feet. She kicked out and was free for just a moment. She swung the poker, but he caught it and pulled it from her grasp. He shoved her into an armchair and leaned in on her.

Man: Now then, why don't you just give me the key, little girlie?

Narrator 2: And that's when the front door was flung off its hinges and Skulduggery Pleasant burst into the house. After a brief struggle the man jumped back.

Man: You think you can stop me? Do you know who I am?

Skulduggery: Haven't the foggiest.

Man: Well, I know about you. My master told me all about you, Detective, and you're going to have to do a lot more to stop me.

Narrator 1: The scuffle continued with Skulduggery conjuring up a ball of fire in his hand and threw it at the man. The man laughed until Skulduggery pulled out a gun and shot him. The man ran out into the night.

Skulduggery: Well, that's something you don't see every day.

Narrator 2: But Stephanie was speechless. When his hat had come off, his hair had come off too. She thought she would see an albino, maybe. But no. With his sunglasses gone and his scarf hanging down, there was no denying the fact that he had no flesh, he had no skin, he had no eyes, and he had no face. All he had was a skull for a head.

