

Leonardo's Horse
written by Jean Fritz
illustrated by Hudson Talbott
2001, G.P. Putnam's Sons, NY

“You can’t judge a book by its cover” isn’t true at all with this book written by Jean Fritz and beautifully illustrated by Hudson Talbott. Although I’d never had anyone recommend this book to me, the beautiful artwork on the cover and the dome-shape of the top of the book immediately caught my eye in the bookstore. There are certain books that are so beautiful I’m tempted to add them to my collection, even when the quality of the writing isn’t consistent with the cover. However, with this book, there was a perfect match of quality inside and out!

This biography of Leonardo da Vinci presents the life of this Renaissance man from a unique perspective. Rather than the all too familiar pace of a birth-to-death biography, this writer’s story revolves around just one of the many masterpieces of di Vinci’s life—his dream and design of the great horse. Mona Lisa takes a back seat in this biography as Fritz explores this artist’s near obsession with the art and physics of a mammoth project. Sad but interesting is the fact that da Vinci was never able to complete his long pursued dream. In fact, his predecessor also died before his completion of the masterpiece. You’ll have to read this great biography to find out just how the work came to be completed and displayed.

Note: If you’re from the state of Michigan, you may be interested to make the connection with this Italian masterpiece as its only replica is displayed in Grand Rapids!

Here are some curricular connections for all grades that you might want to think about with *Leonardo's Horse*:

Guided Reading Block

Some of the skills that lend themselves well to this text are...

Cause and Effect – The events of this story provide an almost never-ending chain of cause and effect relationships. You might wish to use a graphic organizer for students to map the numerous occurrences of these text relationships.

Genre: Biography – Use this book to explore the characteristics of the genre of biography, especially to show that this genre can be written with pizzazz! Show students how narrowing the focus and thoroughly researching one aspect of a person can be much more interesting than the birth-to-death pattern that rarely shows adequate development of any one aspect.

Sequence of Events – The chronological organization of this book is similar to other biographies but different in its focus on one major contribution of its subject.

Character Development – Explore with your students the techniques the author uses to develop Leonardo as a character. What traits do his actions reveal about him, especially given his persistence with the design of the horse?

Research – This book could provide a wonderful springboard into a study of the further works and contributions of Leonardo da Vinci. In the back of the book, there are several websites listed and research shared that will stir the curiosity of readers. This may turn into a useful unit of leading students step-by-step through reading, gathering notes, compiling notes, and writing this research.

Timelines – This book provides an interesting study of chronological development of a biography. You might want to have students draw a map of the progression of events. You could have them draw a timeline for Leonardo's life and/or for the development of the horse itself from conception to completion.

Further reading – Your class might take an interest in reading more about Leonardo's life to form an opinion about whether they feel that this writer gave more or less emphasis to the important events of this famous man's life and his many contributions to the world.

Self-Selected Reading Block

This book would make a wonderful read-aloud with marvelous pictures to share and also an appealing addition to the books available for students!

Writing Block

Explore the interesting writing style of Fritz. What other lives of famous historical figures can be developed in this same way?

Analyze the transitions utilized by this writer to condense years of history into this compact 32 page book. Look with your students at each of the links provided as the author moves years forward in history with smooth transitions.

Art Connection

This book provides an excellent springboard into the study of Renaissance art as well as the principles of physics and anatomy present in art.

History Connection

You'll want to include this book in your study of the Renaissance. How did the culture of this period contribute to the various works of art produced?

Hope you'll enjoy this book as much as I have!