

TEACHER'S GUIDE Grades 3-7

Remembering Mrs. Rossi

by Amy Hest / illustrated by Heather Maione

A Note from Author Amy Hest

Dear Teachers,

When I talk to children about writing, I talk about how it needs to come from deep down. Our writing should be intensely personal in some way. I stress how much better, clearer, more interesting, and more satisfying their pieces will be if they write about things that really mean something to them. I love watching what happens to students when they really get it - when they see that what happens in their writing must be important to them. The lights go on. Suddenly something is different about their writing. It changes from very nice sentences to very exciting reading.

My newest book, Remembering Mrs. Rossi, began that way.

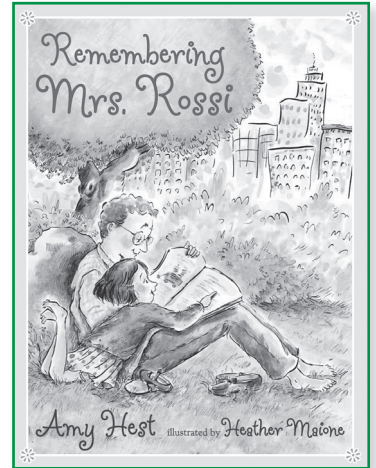
There's a picture on my desk of me (age 8) with my mother. Each day I imagined a little girl sitting beside me while I typed. She tells me her name (Annie Rossi), her age (8), and where she lives (440 Riverside Drive, Apt. 10B, New York City). In time, ever so slowly, she tells me about her mother. Mrs. Rossi was a teacher. (My mother was a teacher, too). Her mother went to the library often. (My mother went often, too). Annie's mother ate ice cream in her blue bathrobe on the couch at night. (My mother had a blue robe, too). Annie's mother died. (My mother died, too). Our stories blend.

Remembering Mrs. Rossi is about mothers and fathers and daughters. It is about a teacher who dies and the ways in which her students miss her. It's about love and people who know a lot about love.

I love to visit schools to talk with teachers and children about stories and writing and Remembering Mrs. Rossi. You can e-mail me (amy@amyhest.com) and I'll write back.

About the Author

Amy Hest is the author of more than 40 picture books and novels for children. Growing up on Long Island, she loved books and went to the library often with her mother, a teacher. When she was 16, she got a job as a page in the same library, and eventually went on to earn a degree in library science and become a librarian. While working in children's publishing, she began writing her own stories. One of her first books, *The Purple Coat*, was an ALA Notable Book, a *Reading Rainbow* book, and winner of the Christopher Award. It has been in print for more than 20 years. Her subsequent books have also earned a host of awards and dedicated readers. Amy is married and has two grown children. She lives in New York City where she writes, reads, swims



her daily laps, eats burnt onion bagels and coffee ice cream, and walks endlessly, exploring the streets and watching the comings and goings of New Yorkers. "It's my favorite kind of entertainment. You never know when something you see will wind up in a story. Everything is a possibility! No matter how many times I walk up and down these streets, I am never bored."

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About the Book

Remembering Mrs. Rossi introduces 7- to 12-year-old readers to a family that lives in New York City. Professor Rossi teaches a few blocks away from home at Columbia University, Mrs. Rossi teaches sixth graders at the nearby Louis Armstrong School, and Annie is in third grade. They live in a tall brick building on Riverside Drive and spend their summers at a cottage on the beach. When, one fall day, Mrs. Rossi dies unexpectedly, Annie and her father must grope their way forward through the first year without her.

With the help of Mrs. Rossi's students, who miss her too, readers discover that sadness and joy can coexist. For while sorrow never truly leaves, neither does love. *Remembering Mrs. Rossi* is also a story about the power of writing. Annie and her father are sustained throughout the year by a book of memories about Mrs. Rossi written by her sixth grade students. Each composition reveals another layer of their teacher, of Annie's mother, and another way in which her life made a difference.

Praise for *Remembering Mrs. Rossi*

"Death is no stranger to children's literature, and dying often makes for powerful fiction, but that's not the direction this book takes. Remembering Mrs. Rossi isn't a dramatic story of tragedy but the basic everyday-life story it looks like, with its generous-sized print and illustrations of home and classroom activity—it's just that here mundane reality has taken an unexpected path . . . This treatment allows the book to tackle the kinds of loss that sometimes escape examination: the disappearance of family memories, the inability to take family operation for granted, the vanishing of a partner in intimacy . . . the book conveys loss in terms that all kids can understand regardless of their personal experience, and youngsters with different flavors of parental loss (parents' leaving of the house can have a similar impact to parents' leaving of the world) will recognize the grieving and the undermining of normal existence.

Hest's fluid present-tense narrative is rich with character and feeling; she's tenderly perceptive in her exploration of bereavement at the third-grade level, but she's also skilled at creating a vivid, believable protagonist going through her changed days. . . . Ultimately, Annie is a credible kid who'd be fine literary company in any circumstance; readers will therefore particularly empathize with her in the face of her tough year, and she'll speak for many kids undergoing their own family upheavals."

—Deborah Stevenson,
*The Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books, R**

(Praise continued on page 4)

Vocabulary

Ask students to define the following words using context clues from the story. Then have students look up the definitions using a dictionary.

Or ask students to do Annie Rossi's homework assignment, with words from the text:

Page 68:

"Every week Miss Meadows puts fifteen new words on the board, along with the homework assignment.

Spelling Homework:

- 1. Write each word five times*
- 2. Write down an interesting sentence for each new word"*

Use the words from the text below:

unconventional (p. 12)	gravely (p. 84)
scheme (p. 14)	modesty (p. 89)
jittery (p. 21)	intention (p. 95)
solemn (p. 21)	offended (p. 101)
atrocious (p. 34)	frazzled (p. 106)
scintillating (p. 40)	havoc (p. 106)
devote (p. 72)	calculate (p. 117)
gesture (p. 81)	irritated (p. 118)
remiss (p. 82)	wistfully (p. 125)
immensely (p. 84)	scuttles (p. 128)

Open Response Questions

1. In the story *Remembering Mrs. Rossi*, Annie and her father spend a lot of time looking at her mother's students' book of memories. Annie always seems to know where the book is. Ask students to write a paragraph:

- explaining why the book is so important to Annie
- explaining why the book is so important to her father

Remind students to use details from the story to support their answers.

2. Based on the story *Remembering Mrs. Rossi*, ask students to describe four experiences that Annie shares with her father. Remind students to use important and specific information from the story to support their answers.

3. Encourage students to think about the following sentence from *Remembering Mrs. Rossi*:

" . . . trying my best to keep Mommy close, and let her go, and keep her close again."

Ask students to explain the ways in which Annie and her father try to keep her mother's memory alive, while also trying to build their life without her.

4. Annie is the main character in the story *Remembering Mrs. Rossi*. Ask students to describe three character traits of Annie, and to use details from the story to support their answers.

Pre-reading Activity

Relationships and memories are two themes in this story. Encourage students to discuss a special relationship they have with someone, or a memorable event.

Writing Activities

Traditions: Annie has several favorite traditions. She goes on “night walks” with her father. On snow days, she is the first one in the park with her red sled, and each summer her family rents the same cottage at the beach. Encourage students to write about a favorite tradition in their own family.

Storytelling: Children love to hear stories about when they were little. Annie has a story about the “tiny scar on her chin” she loves to tell; the story always starts “Once upon a time when I was little. . . .” Encourage students to tell or write “Once upon a time when I was little. . . .” stories. (link: leadershipstories.com)

Relationships: Annie and her father have a close relationship. Ask children to write about a person in their life with whom they have a special relationship. Encourage them to include details that illustrate the things that make this relationship unique.

“A beautiful gesture”: A small action can have a large and positive impact. Mr. Shaw tells the class that giving the book of memories about Mrs. Rossi to Annie and her father was “a beautiful gesture.” Ask students to write about a gesture they have made that had a positive impact on someone else. (example: including someone in a game at recess)

Friendships: “You have a friend in me.” Helen and Annie are good friends who share adventures, secrets, and disagreements. Ask students to write a character sketch about a friend. Students should be sure to include details about their adventures and misadventures.

Persuasion: Annie desperately wants a dog she will name “Miss Phoebe.” Ask students to write a five-paragraph persuasive essay about a topic on which they have strong feelings. Students should include a thesis statement, three reasons with supporting details, and a conclusion.

Letter writing: Annie writes several letters in the story. She writes letters to her father, to Miss Meadows, and to her mother’s class, the students of Room 222. Have your students write letters to authors or to a character in their favorite book. Remind students to include all the parts of a letter: heading, salutation, body, closing, and signature. Children can also choose to write a thank-you letter.

Thematic Connections

- Family
- Hope
- Giving
- Coping with loss
- Friendship
- Relationships
- The Power of teachers and of writing

CELEBRATING TEACHERS

“To teach is to touch a life forever.” Teachers have unique and powerful relationships with their students. They have a profound impact on each other. Teachers are generally creatures of habit, following their daily lesson plans with creative accuracy. Students are observant and don’t miss a thing. Beyond the academics, they observe, listen, and imitate the idiosyncrasies of the classroom. When a substitute comes in, they can recite the daily routine with precise accuracy. They notice when a teacher has a new outfit, changed earrings, or is having a “bad day.” In the story *Remembering Mrs. Rossi*, there are several student-teacher relationships: Professor Rossi and his college students, Annie and Miss Meadows, and of course Mrs. Rossi and her sixth grade class. The last chapter of the book captures the many layers of this deep relationship.

Each entry in the last chapter of *Remembering Mrs. Rossi* is a springboard for student writing. Enjoy!

Some things you should know about Mrs. Rossi: Write about your favorite teacher!

The Key and Mrs. Rossi: Describe the office of your school. Use vivid language so that a person could picture it with your words.

A letter from Leo: Write about a time you misbehaved at school.

Mrs. Rossi was a spy: Write about a field trip you went on with your class.

Mrs. Rossi and the Red Shoes: Describe one of your teacher’s outfits.

Yelena’s Cheer: Write an acrostic poem about your favorite teacher.

The Complaint Box: Write about a change you would like to initiate at your school. What is the change? What are reasons for the change? How would you make the change happen?

Fight: Describe a time when your teacher tried to get you to see the consequences of your actions.

Books in a Little Red Wagon: Write a paragraph about your favorite book.

Olivia’s Confession: Do you have a confession you would like to put into writing?

Sofia’s letter to the Mayor of New York City: Write a letter to the mayor or town government about something positive going on at your school.

Cafeteria Lady: Describe your cafeteria Lady. Design a school lunch for week.

Mrs. Rossi and Jackie Robinson and Me: Write about something you are good at.

A Scientific Experiment: Make a time capsule.

Neighbors: Write about one of your neighbors.

Memo to: Mr. Shaw (the Sub): Write about a substitute teacher.

AMY'S HINTS FOR WRITERS

Write about people you know. (I always change their names, though!)

Write about places you know. (A lot of my stories take place in New York City, because I live there.)

Write about everyday things. Ordinary things. (Nothing exciting ever happened to me when I was your age. Or so I thought. But the things I write about are about the everyday things of my childhood: wanting a purple coat, walking and singing in the rain, and being the new girl in school.)

You have to be a good spy. (I am an EXCELLENT spy. I spy on everyone, but they never know it.)

Get yourself a big garbage can. (Mine is HUGE! If I don't like what I write, I toss it right in. Mostly I spend my days throwing bad sentences in the garbage.)

Revise, revise, and then revise some more. Don't get lazy! (I COULD be lazy. I could be VERY lazy. But! I want my story to be good. No, I want it to be the VERY BEST story ... and so, I rewrite and revise! EVERYTHING! I hardly EVER like the way I write something the first time around!)

Read your sentences out loud. (I sit at my desk and type. Then I read what I typed out loud. I want it to SOUND right, as well as LOOK right on the page).

Revise, revise, and then revise some more. And don't get lazy! (Yes, I KNOW I've already said that.)

Don't get fancy. (Whenever I write a beautiful fancy sentence, I am very impressed. But just for a minute. Because deep down I know I'm going to change my sentence so it sounds like ME. A SIMPLE sentence is a beautiful thing!)

Write about something you really, truly care about. (I really, truly care about families. And people in families. And how they solve their problems. So, I mostly write about these kinds of things. I really, truly care about, and worry about, the people I write about.)

Write about yourself! (I ALWAYS write about Amy Hest, but never call a character in a story Amy Hest.)

Don't let anyone tell you that you are not a writer. Because you ARE. We all are! We ALL have a story to tell.

CONNECTION TO THE CURRICULUM

Social Studies

Remembering Mrs. Rossi takes place in New York City. Have students learn about and research Ellis Island and immigration.

Math

The streets of New York City are designed as a grid. Show students a map of New York City. Discuss parallel and perpendicular. Have students draw a map of their neighborhood using parallel and perpendicular streets.

Art

The class book in *Remembering Mrs. Rossi* is a memory scrapbook. Have students bring in pictures to create a memory page about themselves.

Praise for *Remembering Mrs. Rossi* continued from p.2

"Hest imbues her characters with warmth, humor, and realistic imperfections....Appended are the scrapbook entries created by Mrs. Rossi's students, which bring the woman to life from an entirely different perspective."

—Kay Weisman, *Booklist*,
American Library Association

◆ *"Hest handles a delicate subject with compassion and understanding, without descending into maudlin emotion. Annie's reactions are perfectly in keeping with her age, and she is never presented as an example of the proper way to mourn. . . . A tender treatment of loss and recovery."*

— Kirkus Reviews, *pointer*

Listen to a podcast

of Amy Hest as she talks about *Remembering Mrs. Rossi*:
<http://blog.firstbook.org/2006/11/15/first-podcast-with-amy-hest/>

School visits

Bring Amy Hest to your school to talk about the writing process. Contact www.visitingauthors.com.

Write to Amy Hest at

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Visit Amy's website

www.amyhest.com

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