

## My Pet Rattlesnake

written by Joe Hayes

illustrated by Antonio Castro L.

### About the Book

**Genre:** Fiction (Folktales)

**Format:** Paperback, pages 32

**ISBN:** 9781935955610

**Reading Level:** Grade 2-3

**Interest Level:** K-43

**Guided Reading Level:** M

**Accelerated Reader® Level/Points:**  
3.7/0.5

**Lexile™ Measure:** AD620L

\*Reading level based on the ATOS Readability Formula

**Themes:** Animals (Snakes), Pets, Childhood Experiences and Memories, Fiction, Folklore (Tall Tales), Deserts, United States (Southwest - Arizona)

**Resources on the web:**

[leeandlow.com/books/my-pet-rattlesnake](http://leeandlow.com/books/my-pet-rattlesnake)

## SYNOPSIS

Storyteller Joe Hayes is back with another unbelievable, astounding, and totally true tall tale, straight from his own childhood in the Arizona desert.

One day little Joe sees a rattlesnake in trouble and saves the snake's life. Things start to get weird when the rattler follows Joe home. It's only a rattlesnake, nothing new for a desert boy like Joe, so he keeps him as a pet. His dad is annoyed and the neighbors are terrified, but soon the friendly snake slithers his way into their hearts. The snake cuddles at the foot of Joe's bed, plays in the yard, and even scares away a burglar and alarms the police--what a charmer!

Is there really such a thing as cold-blooded love?

All guided reading level placements may vary and are subject to revision. Teachers may adjust the assigned levels in accordance with their own evaluations.

## BACKGROUND

### Rattlesnakes

There are more than 24 species of rattlesnakes, and all of them have the signature rattle at the tip of their tails. They use the rattle as a warning signal for possible threats or to confuse prey. The rattling sound comes from muscle contractions that hollow bony plates that clacking together. Each time a rattlesnake molts, more scales are added to its rattle.

Rattlesnakes are carnivores. They do not have ears. They use the tips of their tongue to “taste” the air, ground, and water to help them find prey. They sense movement by feeling vibrations in the ground. They also have a hollow spot between their eyes and nostrils called a “pit.” This sensory organ helps them detect other animals’ body heat.

Rattlesnakes can be found across the Western Hemisphere in desert, mountainous, and grassy habitats. They can also swim when needed. Since they are cold-blooded, they cannot stay active in cold weather. They group together in dens in tangled up in balls to avoid freezing.

Whether or not it is legal to keep a rattlesnake as a pet depends on the state in which you live. Sometimes people also eat rattlesnake meat.

For more information, see <https://www.nwf.org/Educational-Resources/Wildlife-Guide/Reptiles/Rattlesnakes>. For information about humane treatment of snakes, keeping snakes as pets, and problems with the exotic pet trade, start at <https://www.humanesociety.org/animals/snakes>

## BEFORE READING

### Prereading Focus Questions

(Reading Standards, Craft & Structure, Strand 5 and Integration of Knowledge & Ideas, Strand 7)  
(Speaking & Listening Standards, Comprehension & Collaboration, Strands 1 and 2)

Before introducing this book to students, you may wish to develop background knowledge and promote anticipation by posing questions such as the following:

- Have you ever found an animal in nature that was hurt? What did you do? What might someone do if they find an animal in trouble?
- What do you know about rattlesnakes?
- What makes a good pet?
- What do you know about tall tales? What makes a story a tall tale?

You may want to have students journal their responses to these questions or pose the final question as a KWL discussion and chart so that you can refer back to it throughout and after the reading of the book to further their thinking on the topic(s).

## Exploring the Book

(Reading Standards, Key Ideas & Details, Strand 1; Craft & Structure, Strand 5; and Integration of Knowledge & Ideas, Strand 7)

(Speaking & Listening Standards, Comprehension & Collaboration, Strands 1 and 2)

- **Book Title Exploration:** Talk about the title of the book, *My Pet Rattlesnake*. Ask students what they think this book will most likely be about and whom the book might be about. What do they think might happen? Do they think this will be a story or an informational book? What makes them think that?
- **Book Walk:** Take students on a book walk and draw attention to the following parts of the book: front and back covers, title page, and illustrations. Display the book and analyze the cover. What do students notice in the illustration?
- **Read Author's and Illustrator's Biographies:** Read the author's and illustrator's biographies on the inside cover and the illustrator information at the end. What do you think the process is like to write a book for young readers? Why do you think these creators made this book for young readers?
- If appropriate, encourage students to stop and jot in their reading notebooks during the reading when they: learn new information, have an emotional reaction or an idea, have a question, or see new words.
- Have students write feeling(s) in their notebook during reading. After reading, ask students why they wrote that feeling down and have them write a journal entry about it. Have students complete one journal entry per each reading session.

## Setting a Purpose for Reading

(Reading Standards, Key Ideas & Details, Strands 1–3)

Have students read to find out:

- Why does this story have such an interesting title, "*My Pet Rattlesnake*?"
- What parts of this story are realistic?
- What parts of this story make it a tall tale?

Encourage students to consider why the author, Joe Hayes, would want to share this story with young people.

## VOCABULARY

(Reading Standards, Craft & Structure, Strand 4)

(Language Standards, Vocabulary Acquisition & Use, Strands 4–6)

(Speaking & Listening Standards, Comprehension & Collaboration, Strands 1 and 2)

The book contains several content-specific and academic words and phrases that may be unfamiliar to students. Based on students' prior knowledge, review some or all of the vocabulary below.

Encourage a variety of developmentally-appropriate strategies to support students' vocabulary acquisition: Look at a photo or picture that represents the word, draw a picture of the meaning of the word, explain the meaning of a word to a partner, act out the meaning of a word, explain how the meaning of one word is the similar and different to another word.

## Content Specific

desert, creosote bushes, mesquite trees, rattlesnake, arroyo, fangs, plane, burglar

## Academic Specific

desert, wandering, rattling, discovered, pinned, kind-hearted, appreciated, dodge, "tag along," playfully, poison, soak, swell, coiled, shortcut, advice, habit

# AFTER READING

## Discussion Questions

After students have read the book, use these or similar questions to generate discussion, enhance comprehension, and develop appreciation for the content. Encourage students to refer to passages and/or illustrations in the book to support their responses. To build skills in close reading of a text, students should cite textual evidence with their answers.

## Literal Comprehension

(Reading Standards, Key Ideas & Details, Strands 1–3)

(Speaking & Listening Standards, Comprehension & Collaboration, Strands 1–3 and Presentation of Knowledge & Ideas, Strand 4)

1. Where did the narrator grow up? What details does the book share about the setting and how the boy feels about living there?
2. What happened when the boy took a walk in the desert?
3. What happens when the rattlesnake follows the boy home? How does the boy respond? How does his dad respond?
4. What is it like having the rattlesnake as a pet? What's fun and what's challenging? Explain the part about the screen door.
5. How does the family try to get rid of the rattlesnake? How does the rattlesnake respond each time?
6. What does the narrator mean when he says, "And my dad's decision turned out to be a very good one" to keep the rattlesnake? What happens?
7. What happens to the rattlesnake at the end?

## Extension/Higher Level Thinking

(Reading Standards, Key Ideas & Details, Strands 2 and 3 and Craft & Structure, Strands 4 and 6)

(Speaking & Listening Standards, Comprehension & Collaboration, Strands 1–3 and Presentation of Knowledge & Ideas, Strand 4)

1. What might the boy have been thinking when he found the rattlesnake pinned under the rock?
2. What parts of the story do you think are realistic? Which are not?
3. What do the boy's actions tell you about him as a character? What do the dad's actions tell you about him?
4. Why do you think the neighbors are terrified of little Joe's rattlesnake?

5. How does little Joe make this rattlesnake a part of his family?
6. Does the boy and his family treat this snake well? Is he a good pet-owner? Why or why not?
7. What does the last page mean? How does this page change the story for readers? If you were the author, would you have included the last page? Why or why not?
8. Why do you think the author, Joe Hayes, wanted to share this story with young people?
9. How does the snake reciprocate after little Joe saves its life?
10. What advice do you have for someone who finds an injured animal, such as a snake, in the wild?
11. Do you think a rattlesnake makes a good pet? Why or why not?
12. How do you find out the story is not true?

## Reader's Response

(Writing Standards, Text Types & Purposes, Strands 1–3 and Production & Distribution of Writing, Strands 4–6)

Use the following questions and writing activities to help students practice active reading and personalize their responses to the book. Suggest that students respond in independent or collaborative writing, artwork, or oral discussion. You may also want to set aside time for students to share and discuss their written work.

1. How is this story a tall tale? Think about what you know about the characteristics of tall tales. Make a list of reasons this book could be considered a tall tale.
2. Why do you think the author chose to write this story? What do you think the author's message to the reader is?
3. Have students make a text-to-self connection. What kind of connections did you make from this book to your own life? How is the narrator similar or different to you and your role in your own family?
4. Have students make a text-to-text connection. Did you think of any other books while you read *My Pet Rattlesnake*? Why did you make those connections?
5. Have students make a text-to-world connection. What kind of connections did you make from this book to what you have seen in the world or on the news? Why did *My Pet Rattlesnake* make you think of that?
6. What is one big thought that you have after reading this book? Think about different character changes, the setting, and the relationships. What did you learn from reading *My Pet Rattlesnake*?
7. How do the author and illustrator help readers imagine the setting (place) of this story? Make a list of details about the story's setting.
8. What different type of conflicts are presented in *My Pet Rattlesnake*? Discuss the boy's conflicts within himself, with his family, his neighbors, and conflicts in the world. Compare and contrast the different conflicts within the text.

9. What are the pros and cons of taking home a wild animal to be a pet? Make a two column list, or write your ideas in paragraph form

## Multilingual Teaching Activities

(Speaking & Listening Standards, Comprehension & Collaboration, Strands 1–3 and Presentation of Knowledge & Ideas, Strands 4–6)  
(Language Standards, Vocabulary Acquisition & Use, Strands 4–6)

These strategies might be helpful to use with students who are English Learners and multilingual learners. The book language used may differ from children's oral language. Comparing any differences will help children read and understand the story. Words can hold different meanings in other types of Spanish around the world.

1. Assign Multilingual Learners to partner-read the story with strong English readers/speakers. Students can alternate reading between pages, repeat passages after one another, or listen to the more fluent reader.
2. Have each student write three questions about the story. Then let students pair up and discuss the answers to the questions.
3. Depending on students' level of English proficiency, after the first reading:
  - Review the illustrations in order and have students summarize what is happening on each page, first orally, then in writing.
  - Have students work in pairs to retell either the plot of the story or key details. Then ask students to write a short summary, synopsis, or opinion about what they have read.
4. Have students give a short talk about their favorite story from the book and why they liked it.
5. The book contains several content-specific and academic words that may be unfamiliar to students. Based on students' prior knowledge, review some or all of the vocabulary. Expose Multilingual Learners to multiple vocabulary strategies. Have students make predictions about word meanings, look up and record word definitions from a dictionary, write the meaning of the word or phrase in their own words, draw a picture of the meaning of the word, list synonyms and antonyms, create an action for each word, and write a meaningful sentence that demonstrates the definition of the word.
6. Have students identify true cognates throughout the book. Students can begin with one to two pages and gradually increase to a chapter(s) where students highlight true cognates and determine the meaning to the word if they do not already know it. This can also be a great opportunity to also discuss false cognates with students. If time allows, have students reflect on the cognates that they found. Did they know the word in English? Did they know the word in Spanish? If it was an unknown word in English, did the identification of the Spanish cognate help them define the word? Consult ¡Colorin Colorado! for more ideas on how to use cognates in the classroom with ELs: <https://www.colorincolorado.org/using-cognates-ells>.
7. Additional resources to support multilingual students is: <https://www.multilingualllearning-toolkit.org/>.
8. Have students act out some of the key scenes in the story to support comprehension. (E.g., the rattlesnake following the boy home, the conversations between the dad and the boy, the

family trying to get rid of the rattlesnake and it returning again and again, the scene with the burglar, etc.)

## Social and Emotional Learning

(Reading Standards, Key Ideas & Details, Strands 1-3 and Craft & Structure, Strands 4-6)

(Speaking & Listening Standards, Comprehension & Collaboration, Strands 1-3 and Presentation of Knowledge & Ideas, Strand 4)

(Writing Standards, Text Types & Purposes, Strands 1-2 and Production & Distribution of Writing, Strands 4-6)

(Language Standards, Vocabulary Acquisition & Use, Strands 6)

Social and emotional learning involves being aware of and regulating emotions for healthy development. In addition to understanding one's own feelings, strong socio-emotional development allows individuals to develop empathy for others and to establish and maintain relationships.

Use the following prompts to help students study the socio-emotional aspects of this book.

1. What Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) skills does the boy exhibit over the course of the book? Some examples of SEL skills include problem-solving, grit and perseverance, self-regulation, and perspective taking. How does little Joe demonstrate these skills?
2. Have students go on a Social and Emotional Learning scavenger hunt in the text, looking for evidence in the details from the book. Assign students to relevant Social and Emotional Learning themes, such as: empathy, problem-solving, perspective taking, perseverance, and recognizing and managing emotions. Using the illustrations to recognize and label emotions, or talking about different characters' perspectives on having a pet rattlesnake would be especially appropriate for this book.
3. Choose an emotion that interests you: happiness, sadness, fear, anxiety, loneliness, frustration, hope, perseverance and so on. Illustrate or act out what that emotion looks like in *My Pet Rattlesnake*.
4. Do you think the author wants the boy to be a role model for young people or an example of caution? Why or why not?
5. Host a classroom debate: Should you bring home a hurt wild animal? Why or why not?

## INTERDISCIPLINARY ACTIVITIES

(Introduction to the Standards, page 7: Students who are college and career ready must be able to build strong content knowledge, value evidence, and use technology and digital media strategically and capably)

Use some of the following activities to help students integrate their reading experiences with other curriculum areas. These can also be used for extension activities, for advanced readers, and for building a home-school connection.

### English Language Arts

(Reading Standards, Key Ideas and Details, Strands 1–3; Craft and Structure, Strands 4–6; Integration of Knowledge & Ideas, Strands 7–9; Range of Reading of Text Complexity, Strand 10)

(Writing Standards, Text Types & Purposes, Strands 1–3; Production & Distribution of Writing, Strands 4 and 6; Research to Build & Present Knowledge, Strands 7–9; Range of Writing, Strand 10)

(Speaking and Listening Standards, Comprehension and Collaboration, Strands 1–3; Presentation of Knowledge and Ideas, Strands 4–6)

- **Talk about what students can learn from this book about narrative writing.** Highlight or make a list of craft moves and favorite phrases to use as examples of effective storytelling. Help students notice the use of “show, don’t tell” and dialogue to bring the story to life.
- **Read other tall tales by Joe Hayes, such as *The Gum Chewing Rattler* (<https://www.leeandlow.com/books/the-gum-chewing-rattler>), *Grandpa’s Hal-La-Loo-Ya Hambone!* (<https://www.leeandlow.com/books/grandpa-s-hal-la-loo-ya-hambone>), and *The Lovesick Skunk* (<https://www.leeandlow.com/books/the-lovesick-skunk>).** Make connections between texts. Talk about how the stories are tall tales, and what common elements of a tall tale they are missing (such as a larger-than-life character).
- **Analyze the story structure with students as a way to help them plan their own tall tales.** For instance, create a chart or graphic organizer that lists key elements, such as “Narrator meets an animal,” “Narrator has a problem related to that animal,” “Unbelievable events happen that resolve the problem.” Have students plan and write their own tall tales inspired by this story structure. It might also help to read Joe Hayes’s response about “fun writing topics” in this Q & A (<https://www.joehayesstoryteller.com/adult-q-a>), in which he refers to a tall tale as a “what if?” story.
- **Talk about the power of oral storytelling.** Show students Joe Hayes’s oral version of this story (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s9rCRmSDRPk>). Compare the book format to the oral version; how does each help readers/listeners appreciate the story in different ways?
- **In small groups, have students read the Q & A with the author found on his website** (<https://www.joehayesstoryteller.com/kids-q-a>). Have each group prepare a short presentation to explain what the author’s answer to one of the questions in their own words, and make connections between the answer and the book.
- **Have students read the story *CriCTOR* by Tomi Ungerer (1983).** Encourage students to make a Venn diagram comparing the storylines. How are the snakes treated in both stories? How do the snakes make good pets? How do the snakes become a part of their communities/families? How do the authors and illustrators demonstrate each story is silly, humorous, reposterous?



## Social Studies

(Reading Standards, Key Ideas & Details, Strands 1-3 and Craft & Structure, Strands 4-6)

(Speaking & Listening Standards, Comprehension & Collaboration, Strands 1-3 and Presentation of Knowledge & Ideas, Strand 4)

- **Find Arizona on a map.** Learn about the climate of the Southwest US and look at real photos of typical Arizona landscapes. Make connections to the book illustrations. Brainstorm how this story may have been different (e.g., a different walk location and different animal) if it was set in a different region.

## Science/STEM

(Reading Standards, Key Ideas & Details, Strands 1-3 and Craft & Structure, Strands 4-6)

(Speaking & Listening Standards, Comprehension & Collaboration, Strands 1-3 and Presentation of Knowledge & Ideas, Strand 4)

(Writing Standards, Text Types & Purposes, Strands 1-2 and Production & Distribution of Writing, Strands 4-6)

- **Have students make a two-column list of facts and non-facts about rattlesnakes portrayed in the story.** Then have them research rattlesnakes and add more true facts to their list.
- **Have students research what it's actually like to have a snake for pet.** Have them create an advice brochure for snake owners.

## Art

(Reading Standards, Integration of Knowledge and Ideas, Strands 7 and 9) (Writing Standards, Text Types & Purposes, Strands 1-3, Production & Distribution of Writing, Strand 4, and Research to Build & Present Knowledge, Strands 7-9, Range of Writing, Strand 10) (Speaking and Listening Standards, Comprehension and Collaboration, Strands 1-3, Presentation of Knowledge and Ideas, Strands 4-6)

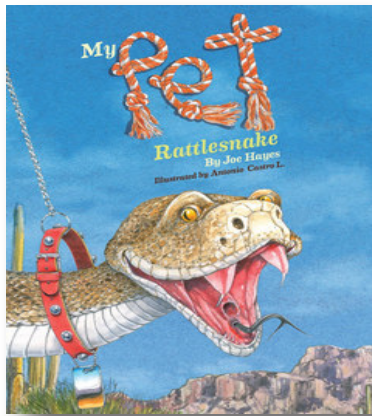
- **The illustrator used photos of people to inspire his illustrations.** Have students work with partners to stage photos depicting different emotions or reactions to events. Then print the photos and have students use them as inspiration for drawings, paintings, or illustrations for their own narrative or tall tale writing.

## Home-School Connection

(Speaking & Listening Standards, Comprehension & Collaboration, Strands 1-3 and Presentation of Knowledge & Ideas, Strand 4)

(Writing Standards, Text Types & Purposes, Strands 1-2 and Production & Distribution of Writing, Strands 4-6)

- **Work together to develop a set of interview questions for students to ask an adult at home about their experiences growing up.** For instance: Where did you grow up? Did you have a memorable experience with a pet or other animal? What happened? Share and compare responses at school.
- **Have students collaborate with an adult at home to come up with a pet-related tall tale.** Share common characteristics of a tall tale and examples. Ask families to draw a picture of their fictitious pet and write about what happens with the pet.



## Ordering Information

### General Order Information:

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### Secure Online Ordering:

[leeandlow.com/books/my-pet-rattlesnake](https://leeandlow.com/books/my-pet-rattlesnake)

**By Phone:** 212-779-4400 ext. 25

**By Fax:** 212-683-1894

### By Mail:

Lee & Low Books, 95 Madison Avenue,  
New York, NY 10016

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Joe Hayes** is one of America's premier storytellers. He grew up in a small town in southern Arizona where he started learning Spanish from his classmates. As Joe got older, he began reading the work of folklorists and anthropologists and gathering the old stories from the Southwest region. His books have received the Arizona Young Readers Award, two Land of Enchantment Children's Book Awards, the Texas Bluebonnet award, and the National Storytelling Network Talking Leaves Award. He lives in New Mexico. Learn more about him at [joehayesstoryteller.com](https://joehayesstoryteller.com)

## ABOUT THE ILLUSTRATOR

**Antonio Castro Lopez (L.)** was born in Zacatecas, Mexico and has lived in the Juarez-El Paso area for most of his life. He has illustrated dozens of children's books including *Barry, the Bravest Saint Bernard* (Random House), *Pajaro Verde*, *The Treasure on Gold Street*, *The Day It Snowed Tortillas* and *The Gum-Chewing Rattler* (Cinco Puntos Press). His artwork for *My Tata's Remedies/Los remedios de mi tata* won a Pura Belpré Honor for illustration

## Reviews

"The creators of *The Gum Chewing Rattler* (2006) concoct another outlandish episode with a twist in its tale. A shaggy snake story certain to elicit hoots and hollers aplenty from young audiences." – *Kirkus Reviews*

"Comic relief and gallows humor combine effortlessly. *My Pet Rattlesnake* ends with a bang or a rattle, and like all tall tales, grows taller with the telling." – *Midwest Book Review*

## ABOUT LEE & LOW BOOKS

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