



# James Cromwell, Actor Rebel With a Cause

## Lesson Introduction

**Interview Log:** Interviewed on July 28, 2023 by David Bender

- Access *The Thread* episode of James Cromwell on our [YouTube channel](#) or at [LifeStories.org](#) and download the transcript [here](#)
- Access his long-form interview on [LifeStories.org](#)

## Learning Objectives

### Social Studies Focus

- Explore the role of art and entertainment in promoting social awareness
- Examine the formative historical events James Cromwell discussed such as the Hollywood Blacklist, the Civil Rights Movement, and the Vietnam War
- Analyze the interplay of family history and activism throughout James Cromwell's life and career
- Evaluate the role of art and entertainment in reflecting and shaping social values

### English Language Arts Focus

- Examine perspective taking from the point of view of one actor and activist
- Analyze the structure and purpose of a narrative, identify key themes in the episode, and synthesize information from a spoken text
- Discuss different perspectives on the title "Rebel With a Cause"
- Explore the idea of purposeful work and a meaningful life
- Use James Cromwell's episode to express the theme of rebellion through creative expression

## Episode Overview

One of film and television's most respected character actors, Emmy-winner James Cromwell is perhaps now best known for his most recent role as the iconoclastic "radical sheep" in a family of cut-throat conservative capitalists on *Succession*. James Cromwell speaks candidly about his motivation, not as an actor, but as an activist. In this episode of *The Thread*, you will meet a man who has walked the talk as a fighter for animal rights (earning him multiple arrests for civil disobedience), who has directly confronted government officials about taking stronger action to protect the environment, and who is a passionate patriot committed to civil rights and social justice.



## Biography

James Cromwell is a celebrated actor and activist. Born in Los Angeles and raised on the East Coast, he comes from a showbiz family—his father, John Cromwell, was a renowned actor/director and his mother, Kay Johnson, was an actress. Cromwell's career started in theater before his TV and film debuts in 1974 and 1976. His breakout role came with *Babe* (1995), earning him an Oscar nomination. He's also known for notable roles in *The Green Mile*, *L.A. Confidential*, and as Prince Philip in *The Queen*. Cromwell earned an Emmy for *American Horror Story* and received nominations for *ER*, *Six Feet Under*, and *Succession*. A lifelong advocate, Cromwell's activism began in the '60s with civil rights and anti-Vietnam protests. After *Babe*, he went vegan and became passionate about animal rights and environmentalism, even facing multiple arrests for civil disobedience. In 2022, the father of three was honored by PETA with the James Cromwell Empathy Center, where he continues to serve as Honorary Director.



## Teaching Tip: First Take

A **First Take** is a warm-up writing or conversation exercise created uniquely for *The Thread* that strengthens media literacy skills. Like an opening song in a musical, the first stanza of a poem, or even the first impression one person makes on another, the First Take asks students to reflect and share their initial thoughts and feelings about the episode's opening.

### Suggested Steps

▣ **Watch and then read aloud** the opening of James Cromwell's episode with students:

"It's hard to play to an audience with the kind of sophistication that is in *Succession*. People either loved the show because it was brilliant or they loathed the show because they didn't want to spend that time, any amount of time with those people. They were all negative, they were all dark, they were all lying, they were all abused. That's the *crème de la crème* that rises to the top, only it's not cream, it's scum."



- ▣ **Ask and Discuss:** What do you learn about James Cromwell as an actor from the opening of his episode? What insights can you infer?
- ▣ **Next,** as a class, discuss the role of "the opening" in any form of storytelling – an interview, film, play, or song. What is their point of view on why the filmmakers chose this as the opening for the episode? What ideas, topics, or themes may the filmmakers be foreshadowing?
- ▣ **Last,** have students do a one-minute quick write reflecting on how the opening connects with the episode's title. Have students get into pairs and share their thoughts and feelings.



**Photos:** Photos: James Cromwell speaks onstage during The Humane Society Of The United States LA Benefit Gala at the Beverly Wilshire Hotel May 16, 2015. (Jason Kempin) top; James Cromwell with *Babe* in a scene from the film *Babe* Jan 1, 1995. (Universal Pictures Moviepix) lower left; Al Freeman Jr., James Cromwell, Richard Masur, Conchata Ferrell. Promotional photo for the ABC TV series *Hot L Baltimore*, Jan. 1, 1975. (Walt Disney Television Photo Archives Disney General Entertainment Content) lower right



## Teaching Tip:

# *The Thread Up Close*

**Step One:** Watch James Cromwell’s episode “Rebel With a Cause” [here](#).

Next, have students discuss and debrief the episode using these suggested questions:

- ▣ How did James Cromwell’s upbringing shape his political activism and point of view?
- ▣ What key events and experiences fueled his ongoing political activism?
- ▣ Did Cromwell’s political beliefs influence his career choices?
- ▣ What did you learn from James Cromwell about the sacrifices, challenges, and rewards of being both an actor and a political activist?

**Step Two:** After discussing the questions in Step One, have students return to *The Thread* episode and engage in a close read and analysis of his interview using the transcript and video as a reference. Depending on the lesson, question, or theme you are aligning *The Thread* with, have students annotate the transcript, select passages that reflect the assignment, and explain their reasoning in class.

Here is an example of a *Thread* lesson connection: James Cromwell offers one point of view on the theme “Rebel With A Cause.” Use this passage as a springboard for exploring this theme in more depth:

“In other words, we see ourselves in the stories that we tell. Used to be the theater, now it’s film and television. By seeing ourselves and by empathizing, we can learn the lessons. We can see where the character makes a wrong turn. You have to see the darker side to learn what it is that an audience is getting from the work that you’re doing.”

### Connections: *The Thread Up Close*

- ▣ How do you think art and entertainment help us understand and address current social, political, or economic issues of injustice?
- ▣ Has art ever influenced your thinking and behaviors? How?
- ▣ What recent films or TV shows have influenced your beliefs or perspectives or helped you see a topic from another point of view? Please explain.
- ▣ The freedom to create art expressing a point of view on social or political issues is not universal. Should it be? Why? What protections would need to be secured?
- ▣ How do you understand the title after watching this episode? What new or surprising aspects of being a rebel are you now aware of as a result of James Cromwell’s career and point of view?
- ▣ What new insight did you learn about (yourself, your community, your world) from his stories?



## Activity: Rebel With a Cause Exhibition

**Step One:** Discuss with class:

- ▣ Can art lead to or inspire action?
- ▣ What can art do that other forms of communication are unable to do?

**Step Two:** Have students think about a social issue that they feel strongly then direct them to a short writing exercise using these prompts:

- ▣ What makes this issue important to you?
- ▣ What are some ways you might express your feelings about this issue through art?

**Step Three:** Explain to students they have the opportunity to choose one of two options:

- ▣ *Option 1:* Create a new piece of art on an issue of personal importance. They have complete freedom to use any materials or online tools to express themselves. Once completed, have students write a short artist statement.
- ▣ *Option 2:* Research the topic of art and activism and identify a person who created art to express their point of view on a social issue. Have students choose one example from the artist and create a brief explainer, or a one-page overview on the individual and the art they chose to highlight.

**Step Four:** Curate a “Rebel With a Cause” exhibition within your class, for the school, or for the community. Consider hosting a celebratory opening night where students are able to exhibit and share what they created or who they researched.



### Additional Resources

- ▣ Explore [James Cromwell - official website](#)
- ▣ Read about the issues James Cromwell has decided his time and talent to;
  - ▣ “Soy Cromwell! Babe actor’s Starbucks plant milk protest shows why he’s movies’ top revolutionary,” [The Guardian](#), May 11, 2022.
  - ▣ “James Cromwell Happy to Be ‘Offensive’ and ‘Unpopular’ On PETA’s Behalf,” [Newsweek](#), December 28, 2022.
  - ▣ ‘Resist, Goddamn It. Resist’: James Cromwell’s Message on Climate Change,” [Rolling Stone](#), April 15, 2020.

