

# Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for Arthur, for the Very First Time by Patricia MacLachlan

## Book Information

Patricia MacLachlan, Arthur, for the Very First Time

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Book Level: 4.2

Interest Level: MG

Arthur spends a summer with his unconventional aunt and uncle and begins to look at life, his family, and himself differently.

**Award:** ALA Notable/Best Books; Golden Kite Award/Honor Book

**Topics:** Family Life, Aunts; Family Life, Uncles; Humor/Funny, Funny; Places, Farms; READNOW - Perma-Bound, Perma-Bound - Read Now Grades 4-6; Recommended Reading, California Recommended Lit., English, 3-5

## Main Characters

Arthur Rasby (Mouse, Arthy) a sensitive ten-year-old boy who keeps a journal and dreads having a baby brother or sister

Aunt Elda Rasby Arthur's nature-loving great-aunt, who tries to help Arthur understand his own feelings

Aunt Mag the woman who married Aunt Elda's father four years after his first wife's death; she became an important and loving member of the family

Bernadette Uncle Wrisby's pregnant sow, that loves to hear people sing

Caleb Aunt Elda's father, who married a mail-order bride to relieve his older children of their burdens

Moira MacAvin Moreover's abandoned granddaughter, who wants proof that her grandfather loves her

Moreover MacAvin Moira's veterinarian grandfather, who expresses his love for Moira in actions, not words; he is afraid of caring too much

Mr. Rasby Arthur's father, who argues with his pregnant wife; he thinks that Arthur is lonely

Mrs. Rasby Arthur's pregnant mother, who wants everything to be neat and orderly

Pauline Uncle Wrisby and Aunt Elda's well-trained pet chicken, that understands French

Uncle Wrisby Rasby Arthur's philosophical and eccentric great-uncle, who loves animals and his garden of roses and onions

Yoyo Pratt a traveling vendor who sells his goods from a cart and loves to bargain

## Vocabulary

**absurd** ridiculous, silly

**captive** a prisoner

**chores** the regular daily jobs to be done in a household or on a farm

**content** satisfied

**peaked** sickly

**sow** an adult female pig

## Synopsis

Ten-year-old Arthur Rasby is having a "problem summer": his parents argue frequently, his friends are away, and Arthur suspects his mother is sick because she is pregnant. Arthur resents his parents for not telling him about the baby and says he hates babies. His only consolation is his journal, in which he records his observations.

Arthur's parents take him to spend the summer at the farm home of his Great-Uncle Wrisby Rasby and Great-Aunt Elda Rasby. Arthur is baffled by his aunt and uncle's eccentricities. For example, his uncle looks through the wide end of binoculars to make things appear farther away, sings to his pregnant sow Bernadette, and plants a garden of roses and onions. Also, Aunt Elda cuts a lock of her hair for a mockingbird's nest and climbs a tree to leave the lock. Furthermore, both Elda and Wrisby speak French to Pauline the chicken.

Arthur meets Moira, a free-spirited neighbor girl who lives with her veterinarian grandfather, Moreover MacAvin. Moira invites Arthur to accompany her and her grandfather to their home for dinner. In Moreover's car, Arthur discovers an abandoned

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mouse that Moreover adopted; by the time they reach Moreover's house, the mouse has adopted Arthur and hidden in his pocket.

Inside the house, Moira asks Arthur what he likes to do. When she learns that, unlike her, he likes to write about real things, she suggests that reality may be a matter of perception. Moira's suggestion reminds Arthur of the mockingbird poem Aunt Elda recited to him, which seems to suggest the same idea. Moira nicknames Arthur "Mouse" and irritates him when she refuses to call him Arthur. As Arthur observes the MacAvin household, he cannot help but contrast his parents' orderly housekeeping with Moreover and Moira's unconventional lifestyle.

One day after church, Arthur and Moira decide to share strawberry sandwiches at Moira's house. After Moira reveals how her parents abandoned her, Arthur decides to share something important in his life with Moira. He announces that his mother is going to have a baby. When Arthur complains that he knows and hates babies, Moira contends that his "knowledge" is based on observations rather than participation. She complains that Arthur spends so much time asking questions and writing that he does not understand what is really happening around him; she compares him to the social worker who asks "meaningful questions" about her but does nothing. Moira starts to cry and reveals that she believes her grandfather cares less for her than for the animals he helps. When Arthur recounts this to Uncle Wrisby, his uncle replies that Moreover shows his love in actions, not words.

Arthur receives many letters from his parents but refuses to read them; although the Rasbys are curious, they do not pry. Meanwhile, concerned that Bernadette needs more than love and songs to help her give birth, Arthur asks permission to build a birthing pen for the sow.

Yoyo Pratt, a traveling salesman, arrives at the farm to peddle his wares. He resents Pauline's constant pecking and threatens to use the chicken in a casserole. Arthur buys a recorder from Yoyo and hurries to show his musical instrument to Moira.

When Pauline follows, Arthur shoos the chicken away. Early the next morning, Arthur realizes that Pauline has not returned and alerts his aunt and uncle. Uncle Wrisby searches unsuccessfully for Pauline. Feeling guilty that his fascination with his purchase made him forget Pauline, Arthur considers throwing the recorder into the wood stove. Aunt Elda helps him to understand that he will accomplish more if he searches for Pauline instead.

When Arthur suddenly remembers Yoyo's threat, he and Moira race to the peddler's house, where they find that Yoyo is gone and a fowl is cooking in a pot on the stove. Assuming that the fowl is Pauline, Arthur clears the table and enlists Moira's help to carry the pot to the farm, where they can give Pauline a proper funeral. When the children arrive at the farm, they discover that Pauline is safe and that the fowl in Yoyo's pot is a goose. When they find that Bernadette has discovered the goose and upended the pot on the lawn, Aunt Elda hurriedly cooks a chicken to replace the goose. Uncle Wrisby returns the pot without raising Yoyo's suspicions.

After Arthur finishes his pen for Bernadette, he is confused when Bernadette refuses to enter the pen. To help Arthur understand why he really built the pen, Aunt Elda tells him the story of her stepmother, Aunt Mag. Aunt Mag married Elda's father after the death of Elda's mother. Aunt Mag used a prism to explain to Elda that Elda's birth mother continued to influence Elda's life even though Elda could not remember her, much as the light from Aunt Mag's prism reflected onto many surfaces. After hearing this story, Arthur understands that he actually built the pen for himself, as a way to get involved in life rather than merely observing. Elda agrees and gives Aunt Mag's prism to Arthur.

The next day Uncle Wrisby worries about Pauline, because he thinks she looks pale and peaked. Arthur volunteers to remain with the chicken while his uncle and aunt go to town. He and Moira give Pauline some of Uncle Wrisby's tonic, which they sample first. Both children and chicken grow to like the tonic and take several doses before they walk to Moira's house. The children act silly and stumble,

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belatedly realizing that Moira's new social worker is waiting with Moreover. When Moreover discovers that the children are drunk, he spansks Moira; Moira is delighted because she feels that the spanking proves that her grandfather loves her. The next day, Arthur receives a note from Moira saying that, since the social worker is allowing her to stay with her grandfather, she feels like a baby starting a new life. Inspired by Moira's note, Arthur writes to his parents.

During a storm the next day, Arthur stays home to read his parents' letters. Moira, who has joined him, notices that the barn door is open. The children investigate and discover that Bernadette has delivered one piglet outside, amidst the rain and lightning. Acting on Arthur's instructions, Moira constructs a makeshift "tent" over the laboring sow, and Arthur continues to resuscitate the firstborn piglet as other piglets are born. Bernadette attempts to move after birthing the piglets, so the children sing to still her so she won't crush her babies. When Uncle Wrisby, Aunt Elda, and Moreover arrive, Moira announces that "Arthur really did it all!" Arthur grins at Moira, who has called him "Arthur for the very first time."

## Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

### Initial Understanding

When Arthur wishes that he had known Aunt Mag, Aunt Elda says, "She touched me.... I touch you." What does Aunt Elda mean?

*According to Aunt Elda, Aunt Mag believed that people influenced other people's lives, just as a prism casts its lights or colors in many directions. When Aunt Mag explained this concept to young Elda, her explanation was meant to reassure Elda that Elda's birth mother is present in Elda's life, most likely through personality and physical traits Elda may have inherited and through stories Elda's family tells. The adult Elda realizes how Aunt Mag's life also influenced her life. When Arthur wishes he had known Aunt Mag, Aunt Elda explains that he does know Aunt Mag through his association with Aunt Elda. In this way, Aunt Elda encourages Arthur to consider how his life touches others, like his parents and sibling-to-be.*

### Literary Analysis

How does Yoyo Pratt conduct his business?

*Yoyo enjoys bargaining with others and trying to get the best deal. He apparently believes that everyone should be doing this and, therefore, he does not resent when his customers dicker with him. Yoyo sells a wide range of goods and believes that he will be able to sell everything on his cart to a customer. He also obtains his wares relatively cheaply by buying used items from his customers. He helps his rural community by bringing his goods to his customers so that they do not have to go into town to purchase things they want or need.*

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## Inferential Comprehension

What is the most likely reason Arthur is so interested in taking care of Bernadette?

*Moira encourages Arthur several times to get involved, to do instead of write. She challenges his statement that he knows all about babies and says that while he has seen babies, he does not really know them. After Arthur cares for an abandoned field mouse and cradles a sick dog's head in his lap, he begins to understand that true knowledge comes from active participation rather than just observation. Uncle Wrisby and Aunt Elda model experiential learning, in sharp contrast to Arthur's parents, who seem to be more concerned with order and neatness. When Moira lends him a book on pig care, Arthur seizes the opportunity to show that he can take part in life, instead of standing on the sidelines. Although Bernadette rejects the pen, the pen is a symbol that Arthur has gotten involved in life.*

## Constructing Meaning

Do you think Moira should live with her grandfather or in a foster home? Use details from the book to support your answer.

*Answers will vary. Some students will feel that children should be allowed to stay with those they love. The students may recognize that Moira is afraid of being abandoned but feels secure with Moreover once she knows he loves her. Moira also has a fairly stable home with Moreover where most of her basic needs are being met. Some students may even think that Moira's life with Moreover is fun because she usually gets to do what she wants, she does not have to clean her room, and she always has plenty of pets. Other students, however, may believe that Moreover is not taking good care of Moira. She is left unsupervised for extended periods of time, she makes her own meals, and the house she lives in is neglected and messy. Some may also feel uncomfortable with the spanking that Moreover gives Moira when he is angry with her.*

**Describing Actions or Events** When Arthur writes to his parents, he sends them only a short note that does not mention what he has been doing. Have the students write a letter from Arthur's perspective that describes one of the events in this book.

**Recognizing Details** Reread the chapter entitled "Secrets" with the students. Arthur imagines Aunt Elda doing battle with Ears, the devil, using the mammoth iron stove that Arthur imagines is Ears's home. Ask students to imagine a familiar object or place that they might think would be home to an unseen creature. Students should write a short story about their creature and its home.

**Comparing and Contrasting** Arthur is often surprised by the differences between the lifestyle of his aunt and uncle and the lifestyle of his parents. Have the students use the clues Arthur gives to make a list of the major differences between the two homes. Then have the students explain why Arthur feels more confident in his aunt and uncle's home than he does in his own home.

**Deriving Word or Phrase Meaning** Arthur is confused at first when Aunt Elda recites the poem about the mockingbird by Randall Jarrell, but he later finds himself quoting it when he is trying to understand something. Have the students reread the poem and discuss what they think the poem means. Then have students write why they think the poem was helpful to Arthur.

## Teachable Skills