

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

Blue Heron

by
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Book Information

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While spending the month of August on the Massachusetts shore with her father, stepmother, and their new baby, almost thirteen-year-old Maggie finds beauty in and draws strength from a great blue heron, even as the family around her unravels.

Topics: Animals, Birds; Family Life, Misc./Other; Family Life, Stepfamilies; Read Now with Power Up Recommended Lists, Respect All Voices: Respect; READNOW - Demco Media Turtleback Books, Demco Media - Read Now Grades 6-8; U.S. States/Regions, Massachusetts

Main Characters

Alan Lavchek Maggie's fifty-year-old father, who refuses to accept his heart condition

Joanna Maggie's twenty-eight-year-old step mother, who is more like Maggie's sister

Maggie Lavchek a twelve-year-old girl who flies to Massachusetts to spend time with her father and his wife

Tucker St. Claire a fifth-grade boy who tries to kill the blue heron

Vocabulary

cacophony jarring or unpleasant sound

eddy a current that runs contrary to the main current

impeccably perfectly

kaleidoscope a constantly changing set of colors

palpitation irregular, rapid beating of the heart

petulant unreasonably irritable

raucous boisterous; disorderly

Synopsis

On Maggie Lavchek's way to visit her father in Massachusetts, she hopes that her father has not changed. Her father has remarried and he and his wife, Joanna, have a new four-month-old baby girl, Linda. Maggie is not sure about her feelings for Linda.

Things get off to an unsettling start when her father needed to stay late at the office and Joanna picks Maggie up at the airport late. On their way to the cottage, Joanna tells Maggie her father is on medication for a heart condition. Later, when walking with her father near the cottage, Maggie spies an enormous blue heron and is fascinated by it. On her second day, she wakes early in the morning to walk down to the marsh. When she sees the blue heron again, Maggie realizes she has never experienced such a sense of real magic. She chooses not to share her feelings about the blue heron with her father, who is often preoccupied with phone calls.

Later in the morning during a canoe trip with her father, Maggie asks if he believes in omens. He tells her the blue heron is thought to be an omen for both life and death. She decides the blue heron will be her model. She will study it, learn from it, and "be" it. Later in the week she notices the blue heron likes to fish near one of the marsh's small islands. However, the bird seems nervous when it gets near the island. Maggie decides to investigate and discovers someone has made a path on the island. Eventually, she finds a box with several items inside. She is concerned to see a bow and arrows and wonders if someone is trying to kill the blue heron. She pays a visit to the house across the lake and meets Tucker, a fifth grader, who admits he is trying to harm the bird. She asks him to not kill the blue heron because she loves it.

Shortly after returning to the cottage, Maggie discovers her father is not taking his medication. She tells Joanna, who asks Maggie to talk to him about it. When she and her father go out to dinner and a movie, Maggie attempts to question him about

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his medication. Her father becomes very angry and they leave the restaurant. He is so upset that he speeds down the road and is stopped by the police. He admits he lost his job three months earlier and that marrying Joanna and having Linda has been a mistake. Maggie tells him she loves him, but he becomes even more enraged and makes her leave the car. She walks to the cottage and tells Joanna what happened. Hours later, they receive a phone call telling them he has been in a car accident. Joanna goes to the hospital.

Alone and filled with anxiety, Maggie remembers the blue heron. She believes if something happens to the bird, her father will die. She goes to the island and Tucker shows up. Once again, she asks him to not kill the heron because she loves it so much.

Maggie goes to visit her father in the hospital before she is to return to Washington. He tells her to forget about the magic because it does not work. The day of her departure, she goes to see the blue heron, but it is not there. She panics because she does not know if Tucker has listened to her request, or if he has followed through on his plan to kill the bird. Then she spies Tucker's bow and arrows. He has cut the strings and broken the arrows. The blue heron appears, Maggie feels the magic once again and she says her goodbye. She leaves her crystal for Tucker, who finds it and decides to take up where Maggie left off. He sits on her rock and talks to the blue heron, telling it he is Maggie's friend.

Open-Ended Questions

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

Initial Understanding

In chapter five, Maggie takes her first morning walk and sees the blue heron for the second time. What are her feelings as she watches the bird in the morning light and at other times? Recall a time when you have been moved by something as Maggie was by the blue heron. What was it and how did you feel?

Maggie is enchanted by the blue heron. She watches the bird in awe and is struck by its beauty. She looks to the bird as a model. She wants to study it and learn from it. Students should relate a person, place, thing, or event that has created unusual emotional impact and describe the feelings it aroused in them.

Literary Analysis

Maggie's fifty-year-old father has a serious heart condition. He has trouble talking about it and is not taking his medication. When Maggie pursues the topic with him, he becomes enraged. What inner conflict is Maggie's father having? Have you ever had to face a problem that was unbearable? What did you do?

Maggie's father is finding it hard to accept he might die. He has lost his job. He is only fifty years old and feels his life has been a waste and that "nothing matters." It is apparent he feels that if he dies life might be better for his family, as there might be insurance money. Encourage students to share in a journal entry problems they have faced.

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Inferential Comprehension

How do Maggie's and Tucker's view of the blue heron differ? How does this affect their relationship? Have you ever had a different view or opinion about something that has affected your relationship with another? How did you feel? What was the final result?

Maggie regards the blue heron as magical, while Tucker wants to kill it. The bird has an inspiring impact on Maggie, while Tucker seems to have no feelings about the bird. Maggie cannot believe Tucker wants to harm the blue heron and, thus, has a hard time liking him. Tucker thinks Maggie is "nuts" concerning her love for the bird. Students should summarize a time when a difference of opinion has affected a relationship. Encourage them to detail how they felt and how the problem was solved.

Constructing Meaning

The book is filled with vivid imagery. In chapter five, there is a beautiful description of what Maggie sees as she steps out onto the deck of the cottage. She compares the mist to the spun glass people put around Christmas trees. What other images do you remember from the story? Choose a memory from your life and describe it using as much descriptive imagery as possible.

In chapter three, Maggie describes the sea and its magical ways and compares tree branches to her mother's detailed knitting. Chapter fifteen holds an account of Tucker on his raft and how Maggie is reminded of a ghostly ferryman in a Greek myth. Students' imagery descriptions will vary.

Teachable Skills

Recognizing Setting Maggie is visiting her father in Massachusetts. They are staying in a cottage on Sawdy Pond. Near their cottage is a marsh, in which Maggie discovers the beautiful blue heron. Have students research the Atlantic coast line and determine what other animals or plants are indigenous to this area. Students should give a brief description and present a display using a variety of media.

Making Predictions Maggie has a love for magic and fantasy. It is also apparent she easily finds beauty in her environment and appreciates the role animals hold in nature. Based upon what students learn about Maggie from the book, have them predict what she will choose as a career. Students should submit their choice in the form of a news article about Maggie as an adult. For example, Maggie might become a best-selling author of fantasy books for children; a review of her latest book would be an appropriate article for this career choice.

Identifying Reasons Maggie discovers her father is not taking his medication and shares this information with Joanna. Joanna asks Maggie to question her father about why he is not taking his medicine. When she does, he becomes very angry. Later, Joanna apologizes to Maggie and tells her that she never should have asked her to talk with her father. There is concern that Maggie is too young to handle this responsibility. Have students prepare a list of what they would consider appropriate responsibilities for children Maggie's age. The list should include everything from the simplest of household chores to much more important responsibilities. Next, students should prepare a list of responsibilities they would deem inappropriate for children Maggie's age. Ask students to identify reasons for their choices.

Deriving Word or Phrase Meaning The author uses vivid imagery throughout the book. Have students find specific examples to read aloud. In small groups, have them brainstorm and list the most descriptive words in the samples they found. Once a list has been completed, students should then use the words from the list to write their own description of an object.