

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for The Borrowers by Mary Norton

Book Information

Mary Norton, The Borrowers
Quiz Number: 10
Harcourt Brace & Company, 1998
ISBN 0-15-209987-5; LCCN
180 Pages
Book Level: 5.3
Interest Level: MG

There are not many Borrowers left, as they like to live in quiet places. This is the story of the mysterious tiny people who live in old houses everywhere.

Award: ALA Notable/Best Books; Carnegie Medal/Honors; Misc./Other

Topics: Recommended Reading, California Recommended Lit., English, 3-5; Series, Borrowers

Main Characters

Arrietty Clock the principal character in the story; a fourteen-year-old girl, who also happens to be a Borrower and lives beneath the kitchen floor of Aunt Sophy's house with her parents

Aunt Sophy great-aunt to Mrs. May and the boy; a bedridden widow who regularly talks to Pod Clock after drinking her nightly bottle of Fine Old Pale Madeira

Crampfurl the gardener who also lives in the house with Aunt Sophy and Mrs. Driver

Egglestina daughter of Uncle Hendreary and Aunt Lupy who was said to have been eaten by a cat

Kate a "wild, untidy, self-willed" little girl who gets caught up in the Borrowers' tale while sewing a quilt with Mrs. May

Mrs. Driver Aunt Sophy's cook who tries to rid the house of the Borrowers after discovering their "nest" beneath the floor

Mrs. May the woman who tells the story of the Borrowers to Kate

Pod & Homily Clock Arrietty's parents, the only remaining family of Borrowers in the old house

the Boy Mrs. May's brother, who befriends the Clocks while he is recovering from rheumatic fever in his great-aunt's old home

Uncle Hendreary & Aunt Lupy relatives of the Clocks who moved to a badger's set after Uncle Hendreary was "seen" by a maid

Vocabulary

bilingual using two languages

conceited having an excessively high opinion of oneself

destitute suffering from lack of possessions or resources

emigrate to leave one's home or country for a life elsewhere

ventilation a system or means of providing fresh air

Synopsis

The story of the Borrowers comes to life when a young boy must stay at the old country home of his great-aunt to recover from an illness. There, he meets the "little people" who live beneath the kitchen floor.

Pod, Homily and Arrietty Clock are the last of the Borrowers to live in the old house, as many families were forced to move on once Great-Aunt Sophy became bedridden. Whatever the Borrowers need, they simply "borrow" from the "human beans" who live above them in the house.

Although the Clocks live a comfortable life, Arrietty becomes bored and lonely being the only child in the house. Only Pod, her father, is allowed to venture into the house to do his borrowing. One day, Pod is "seen" by the boy. Pod and Homily decide that Arrietty should learn how to borrow and learn about the dangerous humans in case anything should happen to them. Arrietty is then also seen by the boy, but quickly makes friends with him when he offers to deliver a letter to Uncle Hendreary in the badger's set.

At first, Pod and Homily do not trust the boy and fear that they are in danger. When the boy brings them new furniture and "riches" from the doll's house, they begin to relax. But trouble does find them when

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the cook, Mrs. Driver, discovers their home and vows to rid the house of these "thieves."

The boy helps them escape from the house. The Clocks are then forced to take up a new and unknown life in the outdoors - facing new dangers but also new adventures.

Open-Ended Questions

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

Initial Understanding

What seems to be the main reason that Homily urges Pod to take Arrietty borrowing?

She does not want to emigrate and thinks it will stop Arrietty's "hankering" for adventure.

Literary Analysis

Give two examples of how the different rooms in the house affected the behavior of the families who lived there.

The Harpsichords lived in the drawing room where the humans sat for afternoon tea. They had to do their borrowing in a rush, but they also got to wear fancy clothes and talk like ladies and gentlemen. They might have been considered an upper-class family. The Rain-Pipes and the Clocks were more down-to-earth since they did not live in "formal" areas of the house. They might have been considered middle-class, or "ordinary" families.

Inferential Comprehension

Although Pod and Homily do not trust humans, what seems to cause most of their problems?

Homily becomes greedy and will not settle for "necessary" items. (examples: tea cup, blotting paper and jeweled snuff box)

Constructing Meaning

Pod explains his feelings toward the Overmantels by saying, "They lived so high." Give two meanings for this statement.

The Overmantels actually lived high up in the wall behind the mantelpiece in the morning room. The Overmantels were said to have all-night parties and get drunk often. They led a "high life" rather than a steady life.

Teachable Skills

Recognizing Setting There are several descriptions of the Clocks' home in the book. They furnish their home with ordinary household items, which they assume will not be missed by the humans. Have the students make a shadow box of the Clocks' home using "borrowed" items such as hat pins, postage stamps, thimbles, etc. The students can use their imaginations to create the home rather than rely strictly on the descriptions given in the book.

Understanding Literary Features Homily is very judgmental and critical of others. She is quick to point out flaws in character whenever she find them. Her evaluation of the other families in the house touches upon important themes of class structure and prejudice. Have the students write about examples of class structure they notice around them, or make up their own nonsensical criteria, such as, those with straight hair are better than those with curly hair. Have them go on to explain how such prejudices make them feel.

Understanding the Author's Craft Homily was very proud that Arrietty could read and write. She encouraged Arrietty to write in her diary every day. Have the students write a diary using Arrietty's point of view. They should write at least one week's worth of entries and can describe the Clocks' new life on the outside. They can be creative and invent new characters and neighbors for the Clocks, or they can expand on existing characters mentioned in the book (such as Uncle Hendreary or one of the other families). It might be fun for the students to write an entire

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mini-adventure in the diary form, complete with a plot, some type of conflict, and the resolution of that conflict.