

# Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

## The Empress of Elsewhere

by  
Theresa Nelson

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### Book Information

Theresa Nelson, The Empress of Elsewhere

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When Jim and his younger sister agree to help their wealthy, elderly neighbor care for the capuchin monkey that keeps getting away from her, Jim also helps the woman's troublesome granddaughter deal with secrets from her family's past.

**Topics:** Animals, Monkeys; Community Life, Helping Others; Interpersonal Relationships, Friendship; Interpersonal Relationships, Neighbors; READNOW - Demco Media Turtleback Books, Demco Media - Read Now Grades 9+

### Main Characters

Clarice Monroe J.D.'s mother, who is in a rehabilitation and recovery center in Houston

Dr. Goodsell a veterinarian at the Houston Zoo

Empress a capuchin monkey owned by Mrs. Monroe

James Henry Harbert, Jr. (Jim) an eleven-year-old boy who is trying to save money to visit his friend in Phoenix

Jasper Mrs. Monroe's chauffeur and personal servant

Joy Dolores Monroe (J.D.) an eleven-year-old girl known for her disagreeable personality who is staying with her grandmother

Mary Alice Harbert (Mary Al) Jim's seven-year-old sister, who loves animals

Mr. Harbert Jim and Mary Al's father, who is recently unemployed and is job hunting

Mrs. Harbert Jim and Mary Al's mother, a hair stylist

Mrs. Monroe a wealthy, elderly widow who lost her only son in a car accident three years ago; J.D.'s grandmother

### Vocabulary

**delinquent** someone whose conduct is considered unacceptable

**dilapidated** decayed, deteriorated, fallen into partial ruin

**din** loud continuous sounds

**putrid** rotten, foul, totally objectionable

**snarl** to vent anger in a surly way

### Synopsis

Today is one of the worst days in James Henry Harbert, Jr.'s life, with his dog dying and his best friend moving to Phoenix, Arizona. When the burial of his dog is interrupted by some girls, Jim finds himself helping to rescue a monkey belonging to the wealthy Mrs. Monroe from across the street. Afraid that Jim will call the SPCA, his little sister, Mary Al, begins crying, causing the monkey to comfort her. Together they take the monkey back to Mrs. Monroe's large, imposing mansion. Her servant, Jasper, a tall, intimidating man who never talks, motions the children inside, but while being thanked by Mrs. Monroe, the children hear someone pounding and yelling to be let out. Later that evening, Mrs. Monroe telephones to ask Jim and Mary Al to babysit the monkey and entertain her granddaughter. Believing some of the mansion's ghost stories, Jim hesitates to accept the position. He agrees, however, only because the offer of three dollars an hour will earn him enough money to visit his friend in Phoenix.

The next day the children meet Joy Dolores, a snarly, dirty-looking, eleven-year-old girl nicknamed J.D., who swears and wears a menacing wolf cap. While Jasper allows Mary Al to hold the monkey on a leash, J.D. tells Jim horrible stories about her grandmother as they explore the grounds. Jim decides the money is not worth having to spend time with such a rude girl. That evening, Jim's parents explain that Mrs. Monroe's disapproval of her son's marriage had caused a rift in the family and that three years ago he was killed in a car accident.

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Feeling sorry for his insensitivity to J.D., Jim changes his mind about quitting and returns the next day. The children then explore behind the mansion, and J.D. points out an island in the lake that has a child-size castle on it. She explains she had been looking in a toolshed that had been disguised as a burial crypt and had found a boat. J.D. persuades Jim to take the boat to the island. Upon arriving she frantically searches for a large magnolia tree where they discover a dilapidated treehouse called Elsewhere. As J.D. talks about the Empress, the magician, and the enchanted land called Elsewhere, Jim realizes this treehouse was built by her father, and these were stories he had told her. With J.D.'s urging, Jim enlists Mary Al's help and uses his babysitting money to fix up the treehouse. For the next few weeks the children secretly bring boards, nails, paint, and other supplies to the island until the treehouse is repaired.

Once the treehouse is repaired, the children decide to take the monkey to the island. Just prior to leaving, Jim and Mary Al find J.D. in her father's old bedroom, which has been kept exactly as it was when he was a teenager. Mrs. Monroe discovers them there and asks them to leave. J.D. storms out, secluding herself in her room until Jim reminds her about the trip they had planned with the monkey. On the island, J.D. names the monkey the Empress, and the group spends much of their time together in the treehouse.

After a few weeks with Jim and Mary Al, J.D. finally opens up about the accident that killed her father. J.D. has always blamed herself for his death. Meanwhile, a storm arises, and the children realize they must leave the island immediately. Jim loses valuable time trying to retrieve the Empress's lost leash. Halfway across the lake, a sudden clap of thunder frightens the Empress, causing her to bolt from J.D.'s arms. In the confusion, the boat capsizes. Witnessing the event from the shore, Jasper wades into the water and pulls everyone to safety.

During the two week grounding Jim's parents have given him as a punishment, he receives a letter from

his friend in Phoenix. Jim decides to buy a ticket to Phoenix until J.D. phones from the bus station asking for six dollars to take the Empress to the Houston Zoo for wildlife training. She has heard that some monkeys are being prepared to be sent back to their native habitat, and she wants the Empress to be set free. Jim buys round-trip tickets to Houston for the three children to ensure that J.D. does not travel alone. Hiding the Empress under a heavy coat, the children arrive in Houston, only to learn that J.D. first wants to find her mother. J.D. arrives at her mother's apartment, finds her missing, and a neighbor directs her to a rehabilitation center at the hospital.

After confronting her mother, J.D. abruptly leaves with Jim and Mary Al desperate to get the Empress to the zoo. After haggling with the ticket taker about the monkey, the children meet Dr. Goodsell, who explains the training program is only for endangered species of monkeys. When a security guard arrives with information about the children, J.D., Jim, and Mary Al run away only to be caught and held awaiting the arrival of their parents, Jasper, and Mrs. Monroe.

When the adults arrive, Dr. Goodsell explains that the zoo may be able to keep the Empress. But Jasper prompts Jim to explain about the island and how J.D.'s father hoped the monkey would bring the family back together. Mrs. Monroe agrees to allow the Empress to live in freedom on the island. Jim feels satisfied that, in spite of all the problems, everything has turned out well.

### Open-Ended Questions

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

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#### Initial Understanding

While Jim, Mary Al, and J.D. are waiting in the security building at the zoo, they are told, "Your parents are on their way." Why is this so terrifying to Jim?

*Jim knows he will be in big trouble when his parents arrive, but he probably feels that having to wait to get punished is worse than the punishment itself. To make matters worse, he knows he was wrong and deserves the punishment.*

#### Literary Analysis

In chapter fourteen, many books fall from the shelves. Identify these books and indicate their possible significance in this story.

*The first book is The Call of the Wild, which could relate directly to J.D.'s wild behavior and her wolf hat. The Stones of Venice may represent the barriers in the Monroe family or J.D.'s hard-heartedness. The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde reflects the changes in J.D.'s personality as she goes back and forth between the island and the mansion, and That Hideous Strength might refer to Jasper's intimidating size, or J.D.'s outbursts. Great Expectations may refer to J.D.'s idea of the treehouse she wanted to find on the island.*

#### Inferential Comprehension

J.D. says that Mrs. Monroe is good at locking things up. In what ways is the Monroe mansion a cage?

*Mrs. Monroe keeps the monkey in a real cage in the basement. J.D. is locked in her room or locked out of other places. Even though there are many rooms in the house, only a few are used, so the people are "caged" in a few rooms. Jim remarks that the windows are shut, sunlight does not come in, and Mrs. Monroe rarely leaves. Thus, the house itself is a type of cage for her. The gate out front is even more suggestive of a cage. From what the reader learns about the son, Max, he seems to have felt caged at home, too, and tried to escape through marriage.*

#### Constructing Meaning

What is the most likely reason Jasper does not tell Mrs. Monroe about the children's activities on the island?

*Jasper evidently realizes how much the children enjoy the island, which is what it was built for in the first place. He also might see the good influence that Jim and Mary Al have on J.D. and think that Mrs. Monroe will send them away if she knows they are visiting the island.*

#### Teachable Skills

**Deriving Word or Phrase Meaning** A cliché is a phrase that has become trite, or lost its power of expression, through overuse. The author uses many clichés to reflect the speech of a typical eleven year old. Have students find five examples of clichés from the story and explain what each cliché means. You may also want to challenge your students more by assigning them to rewrite the clichés to create original and more colorful expressions.

**Responding to Literature** J.D. wants to find a time machine to change the events involving her father's death. Have students take an event in their lives and write about how they would change it with a time machine.

**Extending Meaning** Jasper has created a living space for the Empress in the basement with toys and interesting objects to keep the monkey occupied. Have students research capuchin monkeys and give a report on their care and feeding. The students should also explore the pros and cons of having monkeys as pets.

**Recognizing Setting** The treehouse becomes very important to J.D., Jim, Mary Al, and even the Empress. Have students use the details mentioned in the book and their imagination to draw or paint a picture of the treehouse and the magnolia tree.