

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for The Family Under the Bridge by Natalie Savage Carlson

Book Information

Natalie Savage Carlson, The Family Under the Bridge
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Interest Level: MG

An old tramp, adopted by three fatherless children when their mother hides them under a bridge on the Seine, finds a home for mother and children and a job for himself.

Award: ALA Notable/Best Books; Newbery Honor

Topics: Community Life, Homeless;
Countries/Regions, France; Family Life,
Misc./Other; People, Gypsies; Power
Lessons AR, Grade 4

Main Characters

Armand Pouly a hobo who likes his homeless lifestyle; although he acts grouchy and claims to hate children, he is actually kind

Camille Armand's kind friend who plays Father Christmas

Evelyne Calcet Madame Calcet's younger daughter

Jojo the Calcet children's dog

Madame Calcet a proud homeless woman who is determined to keep her family together

Mireli the generous gypsy woman who welcomes the Calcets and Armand to the gypsy camp

Monsieur Brunot the man who gives Armand a job as a caretaker

Monsieur Latour the haughty floorwalker at the Louvre store, who gives Armand information about a job

Paul Calcet Madame Calcet's son, who longs to be big enough to get a home for his family

Suzy Calcet Madame Calcet's older daughter, who acts as the leader of the children

Tinka the friendly gypsy girl who teaches Suzy about gypsy life

two wealthy women two women who think they are doing good works by forcing homeless people to accept their help

Uncle Nikki Tinka's uncle, who cuts down a tree in the park to use as a Christmas tree; his automobile tows Tinka's family home

Vocabulary

alms money or goods given in charity

brazier a metal container that holds burning coal or charcoal

mezzanine a low-ceilinged story that forms a balcony between two main stories of a building

quay a stretch of paved bank used for loading and unloading ships

starlings birds, generally black with long sharp bills, that are often considered pests; they damage fruit and grain crops

vendor a person who sells something

Synopsis

Armand is a Parisian hobo who does not like responsibility. One winter day as he is moving to his favorite spot under a bridge, Mireli the gypsy invites him to stay at the gypsy camp. Armand refuses because he claims to hate children. He is therefore dismayed to discover that three children, Suzy, Paul, and Evelyne Calcet, are camping under his bridge. When he tries to get them to move, Suzy offers to share the spot by drawing a space on the concrete for Armand. The children explain that they are waiting for their mother, who has difficulty providing for her family but would rather be homeless than separated from her children. Armand begrudgingly shares his food with them and their dog, Jojo. When their mother arrives, she argues with Armand but cannot get him to leave.

After their mother leaves for work at the laundry the next day, the children beg Armand to take them with him on his errands. Armand is reluctant to take the children with him until he remembers his friend Camille, who works as Father Christmas in an upscale store. Armand takes the children to see Father Christmas, but they are disappointed when

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Father Christmas says he cannot bring them a house for Christmas. Camille tries to help by telling Armand about a job, but Armand does not want it. After leaving the store, the children are hungry, so Armand tells them to sing while he collects money from their audience to buy food. When the children later offer their mother some of the treats they earned, she is enraged to find out that the children have been "begging." She and Armand argue, and Armand goes elsewhere to spend the night.

It snows in the night, so the following morning a worried Armand checks on the children. The children tell him that two wealthy women discovered them and plan to "rescue" them, probably by alerting the authorities. Armand whisks the children away to the gypsy camp and later returns for Madame Calcet. She is grateful for his help until she realizes that her new home is a gypsy camp. Armand forces the proud woman to acknowledge that she has no other options. For the children, the camp is a fun place where they have friends, shelter, and food. Suzy becomes friends with Tinka, a little gypsy girl. Suzy is particularly enamored with Tinka's house on wheels and requests Armand to ask Father Christmas to bring her family a house like Tinka's.

On Christmas Eve, Armand takes the Calcets to a party given for the hoboes under a bridge. He tells Suzy that Father Christmas is building her a house so she will not be disappointed when there is no house on wheels for her the next day. After the party the children return to the gypsy camp and find that Tinka's Uncle Nikki cut down a tree from the park to use as a Christmas tree. The gypsies give gifts to the Calcets, and Madame Calcet gives Armand a bar of soap.

Some time after Christmas, a policeman comes to the gypsy camp looking for Nikki. The gypsies, fearing that Nikki will be arrested for stealing the Christmas tree, lie to the policeman so he will leave. When Nikki returns, the gypsies break camp and flee. Nikki is particularly upset because he has just lost his wallet containing a week's pay. Paul wants to leave with the gypsies, but Armand dissuades him. Armand also has to admit to the children that

there is no house being built for them.

After the gypsies leave, Armand realizes Paul is missing. Armand thinks Paul has left with the gypsies, until the downcast boy reappears and tells a sad story about being mocked when he tried to get a job. Their conversation is interrupted by the policeman, who reveals that he is trying to return Nikki's missing wallet. When the policeman leaves, Armand surprises himself by saying he will get a job so the family can have a home.

After Armand persuades Madame Calcet to accept his help, the family helps Armand groom himself for job-hunting. Armand returns to Camille's store to get information about the night watchman job. When Armand applies for the job with Monsieur Brunot, he learns that the job is actually a caretaker position that provides living accommodations. Armand assures Monsieur Brunot that he would like the job since he is a family man who is already "tied down."

Open-Ended Questions

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

Initial Understanding

Why is the gypsy camp better for the children than the place under the bridge?

One reason that the gypsy camp is preferable to the Calcet family's spot under the bridge is that it provides better shelter. Not only does the camp provide enclosed, warm surroundings, it also frees the children from the imminent threat of discovery that exists in the bridge location. The children clearly understand that, if they are discovered, it is likely that they will be taken from their mother and placed in a charity home. The generous gypsies are also more than willing to share their food and other comforts. Beyond the physical requirements for well-being, the Calcets are treated to the generous, happy spirit of the gypsies, whose enjoyment of life and welcoming nature allow the children to be carefree and playful once again.

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Literary Analysis

How do the gypsies get the things they need?

The gypsies have many ways of acquiring necessities. They mend pots, pans, and shoes to earn money. Some things they are probably able to get at no cost, like the pigeons they use to make stew. Gypsies know whom to contact to find a place to camp, and they use a system of symbols to mark the homes of people who are likely to be kind and generous. When a location no longer meets their needs, they simply move on. Occasionally, the gypsies may take things; for example, Nikki took the rare tree so that the children in the camp could have a Christmas tree.

Inferential Comprehension

How does Madame Calcet's pride cause problems for her and her family?

Initially, Madame Calcet's pride keeps her from putting her children in a home where they would not have to suffer from cold and hunger. She also treats Armand disrespectfully even though he has fed her children. Her pride keeps her from appreciating her children's efforts to earn money by singing and causes her to alienate Armand. Offending Armand could have resulted in her children being taken away when the two women found the children under the bridge without an adult. Pride also keeps Madame Calcet from appreciating the help the gypsies are offering. She insists on working at the Christmas Eve party because she does not want to be thought of as a tramp. When Armand offers to get a job so her family can have a home, her pride causes her to insist that her family is her responsibility. Although she feels it would not be fair to force Armand to get a job, she relents when Armand argues that Madame Calcet is hurting his pride by making him beg for grandchildren.

Constructing Meaning

Does this story change your opinion of homeless people? Why or why not?

Although answers will depend on the student's opinions regarding homeless people, the story does help to bring dignity to a population that many people actively try to ignore. While the story could support stereotyped conceptions, such as Armand's uncleanness and laziness, the story also shows a more in-depth view of homelessness both as a lifestyle choice and as a situation that cannot be avoided. Armand likes a life with little responsibility and does not mind being homeless. On the other hand, Madame Calcet, a widowed mother of three, works long hard hours, but her income is not sufficient to provide adequate housing. The only public "assistance" she is offered is the effort to place her children in a charity home. The book strives to show the central characters as complex people who have a wide range of emotions, rather than people who are simply social outcasts.

Teachable Skills

Recognizing Setting Set in Paris, this book refers to various streets, buildings, and physical landmarks in the city. Among them are the Louvre (department store), Place Maubert, Notre Dame cathedral, the Seine River, the Hôtel de Ville, Rue de Rivoli, the Halles, the Jardin des Plantes, and the Théâtre-Français. Ask each student to research and report on one of these sites.

Differentiating Fact and Opinion Madame Calcet has very fixed ideas about gypsies. Have the students review her reaction to the gypsies and determine whether her ideas are facts or opinions. Have the students support their conclusions with details from the book.

Recognizing Feelings Armand tells Mireli that he does not like children, but he frequently responds to the needs of the three Calcet children. Have the students create a chart that shows the wide range of emotions that Armand experiences because of the children in this book. Have them include Armand's explanations for his feelings.

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Making Predictions Armand and the Calcet family are on the verge of major life changes when this story ends. Ask students to consider how life will soon change for all of these characters. Then ask students to write a story predicting how Armand and the family will celebrate their next Christmas together.