

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for Fantastic Mr. Fox by Roald Dahl

Book Information

Roald Dahl, Fantastic Mr. Fox
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Mr. Fox saves his family and his animal friends when he outsmarts three farmers who are hunting him.

Award: Bilby Award

Topics: Animals, Foxes; READNOW - Demco Media Turtleback Books, Demco Media - Read Now Grades 6-8; Recommended Reading, California Recommended Lit., English, 3-5

Main Characters

Badger a kind-hearted forest creature who helps Mr. Fox tunnel in order to save his family and others from starvation

Farmer Bean a turkey-and-apple farmer who masterminds the plan to catch Mr. Fox

Farmer Boggis an enormously fat chicken farmer

Farmer Bunce a short, stocky duck-and-geese farmer with a bad temper

Mabel the Bean family's household helper

Mole, Weasel, Rabbit, and their families digging creatures of the forest

Mr. Fox a clever animal who outwits the farmers who are pursuing him and his family

Mrs. Fox Mr. Fox's loving and encouraging spouse

Rat the unfriendly rodent living in Bean's cider cellar

Vocabulary

dumplings small pieces of boiled or steamed dough

famished hungry

impudent rude and bold

obstinate stubborn

poaching taking something unlawfully, usually in reference to hunting and fishing

toast an expression of honor given to a person or event before drinking

Synopsis

In a valley live three rich but despicable farmers. Boggis is an overweight chicken farmer who eats three chickens at every meal. Bunce is a dwarf-like, pot-bellied duck-and-geese farmer who has a terrible temper caused by stomachaches from eating donuts stuffed with mashed goose livers. Bean is a tall farmer who raises turkeys and apples, drinks gallons of potent apple cider, and never takes a bath.

The three men have been spending their nights trying to catch Mr. Fox, a clever animal who has been stealing their fowl for some time. They finally work together one night by hiding with their shotguns outside the entrance to Mr. Fox's den. Mr. Fox has grown overconfident because he has outsmarted the farmers for so long. Although Mr. Fox carefully sniffs for danger as he leaves the den, he does not immediately sense the farmers' presence. Mr. Fox loses his tail to a shotgun blast before getting back into his hole.

The farmers decide to dig for Mr. Fox instead of waiting for him to reappear. Mr. Fox, Mrs. Fox, and their four Small Foxes frantically escape by digging a deep tunnel. The farmers then bring earthmoving machines to dig faster. A race begins, with the foxes barely outpacing the huge jaws of the shovels. The farmers are unable to catch the foxes, so they wait outside the tunnel until the foxes are forced out by starvation.

On his family's third day without food and water, Mr. Fox forms a plan and begins to dig with his four children. Mrs. Fox stays behind because she is too weak to help. The foxes first dig sideways and then up, bringing them under the floorboards of Boggis's Chicken House Number One. Mr. Fox sends one of his children home with three chickens and a message for Mrs. Fox to prepare a feast. He begins

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digging in a new direction with the remaining children.

The foxes encounter Badger and Badger's son along the way. Badger informs Mr. Fox that all of the digging animals are starving because of the farmers' vigil. Mr. Fox invites all of the hungry animals to join the Fox family's feast. Badger's son leaves to deliver the message to the animals, while Badger stays with Fox to help with the tunneling. They soon arrive at their second destination, Bunce's storehouse, where they help themselves to more delicious food. Two of Mr. Fox's children take carts laden with food back to their mother with the message to expect many guests.

Badger, Fox, and the remaining fox child tunnel once more, this time to Bean's cellar, where his cider is kept. Rat, who lives in the cellar, is angry at the intrusion, but Mr. Fox and the others enter anyway. Bean's household helper nearly spots the intruders but they avoid detection and bring three jugs of cider back with them to the feast.

The animals eat ravenously and toast Mr. Fox with cider. Mr. Fox then suggests that the animals dig an underground village and live together. They all agree to this idea, since they never need to go into the open again. They can obtain all of their food without ever having to leave the tunnels!

Meanwhile, the three farmers continue their vigil in the rain, certain that the fox cannot last much longer. As far as the narrator knows, they are still waiting.

Open-Ended Questions

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

Initial Understanding

What new information does the reader learn from Mr. Fox and Badger's arrival at Bean's cellar?

The reader learns that Bean has a rat in his house and that the cider contains alcohol. They also learn that Bean is married and has a household helper. In addition, if Mabel can be trusted, it appears that Bean has a drinking problem.

Literary Analysis

How is the farmers' despicable behavior revealed in their interactions with each other?

Even though the farmers are working for a common cause, they are rude even to each other. They exchange insults and call each other names. For example, Bean calls Bunce "a miserable midget," and Bean's ideas are called "stupid." They further insult each other when their plans go awry. For instance, Bean threatens to stuff Bunce down the fox hole.

Inferential Comprehension

If Mr. Fox had chosen to be selfish about his good fortune in finding food, how might this story have been different?

If he had chosen to keep the food for himself and his family, only his family would have considered him "fantastic." The other animals would have starved to death since they could not leave the hole without getting shot. The reader can imagine the fox family being very lonely, for there would have been no other digging animals with whom to share fun and laughter. In addition, there would have been no need for the village that Mr. Fox proposed in the story, since the other animals would not have been around.

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Constructing Meaning

Fox must have wanted to give up and die, but he kept trying. All of us probably have felt like giving up on something at some point in our lives. Was there a time in your life that you wanted to quit something but still persevered? What did you learn about yourself?

Students should describe an incident in which they persevered despite overwhelming obstacles. Whatever the outcome of the situation, the students perhaps felt good that they tried and did not quit just because something was hard. They may have learned that their character was stronger than they thought, that they can endure a defeat or disappointment, and that life has both joys and sorrows. They may also have realized that, in most cases, better times follow.

Teachable Skills

Recognizing Plot The main conflict in the story took place between the farmers and a wild animal. Farmers and ranchers do, in reality, have problems protecting their livestock and crops from wild animals. Sometimes environmentalists defend the animal's cause; then the conflict is solved in court. Have the students find a recent example of such a conflict and give a short oral report to the class about it. The reports should include the arguments of both property owners and environmentalists as well as the resolution, if one has been reached.

Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors The farmers in the story raise various kinds of fowl. Assign the students to investigate various aspects of raising one kind of poultry, such as its feeding, the type of housing it needs, the special equipment necessary to care for it, and its life cycle. Or, as a math project, students could be assigned to research the cost of purchasing chicks, ducklings, or goslings, the cost of feeding them, and the current selling price. They could then calculate the profit in raising poultry. The students could work individually or in groups to prepare a poster illustrating what they learned.

Understanding Characterization The characters in *Fantastic Mr. Fox* display a wide range of personalities. To make these characters come to life, put on a class skit of *Fantastic Mr. Fox*. Costumes and props can be kept very simple; the emphasis should be on studying character development through acting. All students could take part, either by acting a role, helping with costumes, making props, or directing. Perhaps other classes could view the skit and a discussion could follow about the various characters' personalities and motivations.

Recognizing Details From the details given in the story, have the students draw a large map of the areas described during the course of the narrative. Maps should include Boggis's farm and his chicken houses, Bunce's house and store house, and Bean's orchard and cider cellar. Also, the hill where Mr. Fox lives should be marked, and the tunnel system connecting Mr. Fox's hole to the farms should be drawn. Ask the students to explain their maps to the class. Students can note the differences between their maps and see how perceptions differ even when working from the same details. The maps can be displayed around the classroom for further comparison.