

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

Gentle Ben

by

Walt Morey

Book Information

Walt Morey, Gentle Ben
Quiz Number: 222
Avon Books, 1965
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191 Pages
Book Level: 4.8
Interest Level: MG

Danger and excitement as young Mark Andersen struggles to save his friend, Ben, the big brown bear.

Award: NCTE Notable Children's Books in the Language Arts; State Award

Topics: Adventure, Rescue/Save; Animals, Bears; Interpersonal Relationships, Friendship; READNOW - Demco Media Turtleback Books, Demco Media - Read Now Grades 6-8

Main Characters

Ben the brown bear who was Mark's friend

Clearwater an old fisherman who worked with Karl Andersen and was a close family friend

Ellen Andersen Mark's mother

Fog Benson the man who owned Ben

Karl Andersen Mark's father

Mark Andersen the principal character in the story, a thirteen-year-old boy

Mike Kelly the cannery manager with a reputation for being unfriendly who later becomes the Andersens' close friend

Peter King the wealthy trophy hunter who hoped to bag Ben, but instead becomes his friend

Vocabulary

berth docking space for a ship

deftly skillfully

pilings heavy beams driven into the ground as a support for a structure

seine a large fishing net

spawning producing offspring

Synopsis

Mark Andersen is a thirteen-year-old boy who befriends a brown bear named Ben. When he was a cub, Ben's mother had been killed by a fish pirate named Fog Benson. Benson keeps Ben chained up in an old shed and is cruel to him, often not feeding him for days. Mark secretly visits Ben and brings him food. Mark learns that Benson wants to sell Ben, and Mark lets his father know that he would like to have him.

At first Karl Andersen is strongly against buying Ben, but Mark's mother Ellen tries to convince him that it would be good for Mark's health. The doctor told her that Mark could be vulnerable to tuberculosis, the same disease that Mark's brother had died from less than a year before. After seeing Mark and Ben together and witnessing the bond they shared, Karl decides to make a deal with Mark. Mark could have Ben if he works as a hand aboard their fishing boat to earn the money to care for Ben.

Soon the salmon run begins, and Mark and his father, along with their old friend Clearwater, head out on the "Far North" to fish. They have a good season, and Mark even learns to swim. Mark meets Mike Kelly, the unfriendly man who runs the cannery. Mark needs a place to store the food he has collected for Ben, and Mr. Kelly owns the only big freezer around. After talking to Mark and learning of his health problems, Mr. Kelly agrees to let Mark use the freezer in exchange for sweeping the cannery on Saturdays. Mr. Kelly soon becomes a close friend of the family, and they learn the reason for his unfriendliness. He had lost his wife and son in a boating accident and was still grieving.

Toward the end of the season, Fog Benson decides to show off for his friends and goes to the shed where Mark keeps Ben. While trying to force Ben to drink a bottle of beer, Benson cuts Ben's ear with a scythe. Ben becomes angry and lashes out at Benson whose face is severely scratched. The people in the town become fearful and demand that Ben be killed or moved somewhere away from the town. Mike Kelly finds a boat that can take Ben to an

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island where other brown bears are living. The owner of the boat plans to sell Ben to a zoo, but Ben's cage goes overboard in some rough waters, and he swims to the shore of an island. Ben is truly free at last and enjoys his new life.

Karl Andersen decides to take a temporary job delivering mail with his boat. While out on a mail run, he and Clearwater encounter a terrible storm. The "Far North" goes down along with Clearwater and is lost. Karl cannot afford to buy another boat, so he takes a job as a watchman on a fish trap on Windy Point. He and his family move to a small cabin near the trap for the fishing season. Windy Point is on the same island where Ben is living. One night, Fog Benson tries to steal the fish from the trap, but he is scared away by Ben. Mark recognizes Ben, and they are reunited.

Peter King, a wealthy hunter, comes to the island to bag a trophy, and Mark fears for Ben's life. While hunting alone, Mr. King is trapped under a large rock. Mark discovers him and, with Ben's help, removes the rock. Mr. King, Mark and Ben become friends, and Mr. King works out a deal with a local guide to ensure Ben's protection. Ben now has the best of both worlds; he is free, but can still be friends with Mark.

Open-Ended Questions

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

Initial Understanding

When Clearwater goes with Mark and his mother to cut hay, Mark's mother tells him that Ben won't be any trouble. He answers, "Course not. He's just a five-year-old brownie! As gentle as a day-old kitten." What was his attitude when he said this? Why did he say it?

Clearwater was being sarcastic. He didn't trust Ben because of the knowledge he had of other brown bears.

Literary Analysis

At the beginning of the story, how does the author create suspense when Mark is going into the shed to see Ben?

He doesn't tell the reader what is in the shed at first. The reader knows that Mark is fearful. He uses descriptive language like "the yawning black mouth of the doorway" and "the paper bag was almost ripped from his hand."

Inferential Comprehension

Explain how Mark has changed from the beginning to the end of the story.

Mark is stronger and healthier. He has gained weight. He has matured and has learned to handle responsibility. He has made several new friends.

Constructing Meaning

Have you ever kept a wild creature as a pet? Did you let it go free? How did you feel?

Students may share about a time they captured fireflies or other wild animals. They may have felt sad to let it go, but happy that it was free.

Teachable Skills

Recognizing Setting *Gentle Ben* takes place in Alaska before statehood. Students could do research on Alaska and report their findings to the rest of the class. They may want to find out more about Alaska during the time period covered in the story, or they may want to know more about modern Alaska. How have things changed? Is salmon fishing still a big business? A report on Alaska's climate and geography might also be interesting.

Understanding Literary Features Students who enjoyed reading *Gentle Ben* might also enjoy reading other books about wild animals who were pets. Some noteworthy books are *The Yearling* by Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings, *Rascal* by Sterling North and *Call of the Wild* by Jack London. Students could compare and contrast the stories to *Gentle Ben*.

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Comparing and Contrasting On page 150, the author describes an event from Ben's viewpoint; and then on page 154, he describes the same event from a man's viewpoint. Reread the second paragraph on page 150 and the sixth paragraph on page 154. Discuss their similarities and differences.

Deriving Word or Phrase Meaning This story contains many examples of figurative language, particularly similes. Using examples from the story, discuss the definition of a simile with students. Students may enjoy writing their own descriptions using similes.