

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

Mr. Popper's Penguins

by

Richard Atwater

Book Information

Richard Atwater, Mr. Popper's Penguins
Quiz Number: 58
Dell, 1986
ISBN 0-440-45934-6; LCCN
139 Pages
Book Level: 5.6
Interest Level: MG

Mr. Popper trains his band of penguins to star in a vaudeville tour. The coauthor is Florence Atwater.

Award: NCTE Notable Children's Books in the Language Arts; Newbery Honor; Young Reader's Choice Award/Nominee

Topics: Humor/Funny, Funny; Recommended Reading, Elementary School Library Collection

Main Characters

Admiral Drake a famous explorer who receives a letter from Mr. Popper and is prompted to send a penguin as a gift

Captain Cook the first penguin Mr. Popper receives

Greta Captain Cook's mate

Mr. Greenbaum a theater owner who gives Mr. Popper and his penguins their first big break

Mr. Popper the main character of the story, a painter who later receives a penguin in the mail

Mrs. Popper Mr. Popper's wife, intent on keeping a tidy house, and wishes her husband earned a bit more money

Vocabulary

bystander spectator

calcimine thin water paint used for plastering

heathen uncivilized or godless person

prostrate lying down, face on the ground

reluctantly holding back

Synopsis

Mr. Popper is a kindly man who lives in a small house on Proudfoot Avenue. He paints houses for a

living, and he has just done his last paint job until spring. He enjoys learning about Admiral Drake and his expeditions, and so writes him a letter to tell him how fascinated he is with penguins.

The Admiral responds to his letter on the radio and tells him he will soon receive a surprise in the mail. The surprise, it turns out, is a penguin direct from Antarctica. Mr. Popper takes to the penguin and names him Captain Cook. He then starts to penguin-proof his house by installing a handle inside the freezer so Captain Cook can come and go as he pleases. The whole family takes to the cute, waddling bird.

Soon though, the freezer alone is not enough and Captain Cook becomes ill. Mr. Popper finally finds a doctor who thinks his problem may be loneliness, so he sends Mr. Popper one of his penguins, Greta, who is also lonely. The two penguins get along very well, and soon there are baby penguins. The Poppers decide to install a freezing plant in the cellar in order to keep the penguins comfortable.

Meanwhile, the Poppers' funds are quickly dwindling. Mr. Popper decides to train his penguins and take them on the road. They audition for Mr. Greenbaum, a theater owner, and he offers Mr. Popper a handsome salary to sign a performing contract. Soon the Popper penguins are extremely famous, but the climate in America is not the best environment for them. Mr. Popper takes Admiral Drake up on his offer and agrees to send his penguins to the North Pole. What starts out to be a sad good-bye ends up joyous when the Admiral invites Mr. Popper to go along and look after the penguins for a few years. He says good-bye to his family and heads for the North Pole.

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

What things contributed to Captain Cook's illness?

Answer should reflect the dramatic differences in climate, as well as loneliness.

Literary Analysis

Mr. Popper is described as a dreamer. How does he fit this description?

Even while painting, he would get lost in dreams and mispaint the walls. Also, he loved far-away places. He wished he could travel and be a scientist.

Inferential Comprehension

If this story were to continue, what might be some possible additions to the story line?

The penguins entertain Admiral Drake's men up in the Arctic. Mrs. Popper runs out of money and asks Admiral Drake if she and the children can join his expedition. The children look for other pets they could train and use to entertain people as a means to earn money.

Constructing Meaning

How did Mr. Popper show his love for the penguins?

He fixed the freezer for Captain Cook. He purchased shrimps for them. He let it snow in the house. He made a swimming pool and an ice rink in his basement.

Teachable Skills

Recognizing Plot The climax of the story took place when Mr. Popper had to decide whether or not he would send his penguins to the North Pole with Admiral Drake or keep them with him. This was a difficult choice because Mr. Popper had to choose between his desire to stay with the penguins he loved, and sending them away, which was in their best interests. For a writing assignment, ask students to write about a real or imaginary situation in which they had to choose between two difficult things. Have them write about how they felt when faced with such a

choice, which choice they made, and why.

Recognizing Setting In this story, the climate is a real problem for the penguins. Mr. Popper must work very hard to keep a cool and proper environment for his penguins because they are accustomed to the climate in Antarctica. For a project, have students research different animals that are native to certain parts of the world. Examples might be lions, elephants, koalas, and the Giant Panda. Describe what their environment and lifestyle is like. Also, discuss why the animals are well-suited to their particular climates.

Understanding the Author's Craft This story is told in the third person. Although some of the penguin thoughts and feelings are explored, it is rather limited. Have the students take a favorite scene -- perhaps when the penguins disrupt the other stage acts -- and re-write it in the first person, from the penguins' points of view. Include everything the penguins might feel, think, or experience.

Understanding the Main Idea Mr. Popper is obsessed with penguins and the Antarctic. When he actually gets a penguin, his dream becomes a reality, but caring for Captain Cook, and later the babies and Greta, proves to be quite a handful. Mr. Popper's situation is rather similar to Henry Huggins's dilemma in "Gallons of Guppies," where caring for multiplying guppies proves to be more difficult than he imagined. Read "Gallons of Guppies" to the class, then ask them to discuss how Henry's and Mr. Popper's situations are similar, as well as how they are different.