Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for
My Father's Dragon
by
Ruth Stiles Gannett

Book Information
Ruth Stiles Gannett, My Father's Dragon
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87 Pages
Book Level: 5.6
Interest Level: LG

A young boy determines to rescue a poor baby
dragon who is being used by a group of lazy wild
animals to ferry them across the river on Wild
Island.

Award: Book Sense Book of the Year
Award/Honorees; Newbery Honor

Topics: Adventure, Rescue/Save; Common Core
State Standards Appendix B Titles, CCSS
Grade Band 2-3; Fantasy/Imagination,
Dragons; Recommended Reading, Book
Sense 76 - Top Ten; Recommended
Reading, NY Public Library 100 Best Titles;
Recommended Reading, Oprah's Book
Club - Kids Reading List

Main Characters
Elmer Elevator    the narrator's father as a young
boy; he is the main character of the story, who
travels to Wild Island to save a baby dragon
mother    Elmer's mother; she hates cats and does
not let Elmer keep the old alley cat
the animals of Wild Island    the various animals that
Elmer encounters; they are distracted from killing
Elmer by the gifts he gives them
the baby dragon    an injured baby dragon held
captive on Wild Island; the animals use him to
transport heavy loads across the river to the other
side of the island
the old alley cat    a stray cat Elmer meets on his
street; he tells Elmer about Wild Island and the
baby dragon
unidentified narrator    the person whose father is
the main character of the story

Vocabulary
dignified    appearing sophisticated or of a high
position
hold    the area in a ship that contains cargo
invasion    an attack in order to conquer
trespassing    entering the territory of another
unlawfully

Synopsis
An unnamed narrator relates an adventure his
father, Elmer Elevator, had as a young boy. One
cold rainy day, Elmer meets an old alley cat that tells
him about a mistreated baby dragon on Wild Island.
The cat suggests that if Elmer rescues the dragon,
the dragon may let Elmer fly with him. Elmer has
always wanted to fly and is excited about the cat's
proposal. The cat has visited the dangerous island
and knows what Elmer can expect. Together, they
plan Elmer's trip to the island, and the cat suggests
all the necessary items for Elmer to pack. The cat is
too old to make the trip, but he helps Elmer to stow
away in the hold of a ship. Early the next morning,
the ship heads to the port of Cranberry on the island
of Tangerina.

After hiding in the hold of the ship for six days and
nights, Elmer conceals himself in an empty grain
bag. He is removed from the ship by unsuspecting
sailors in Cranberry. He soon meets a fisherman
who is nearly too frightened of Wild Island to speak
about it. He warns Elmer that no one has ever
returned alive from the island. Undaunted, Elmer
finds the rocks that lead to Wild Island. He crosses
the rocks at night so the wild animals will not see
him coming and arrives on the island while it is still
dark. Beyond the beach is a thick, dark, scary
jungle. Elmer knows he has to find the river because
the cat told him the dragon is tied along its bank.
The wild animals use the dragon as a slave to carry
heavy loads and passengers across the river that
divides the island.

Elmer sleeps all day and starts his trek through the
jungle in the late afternoon. He easily evades the
boars and outsmarts the other animals he
encounters with the supplies that the cat
recommended. When he meets seven hungry tigers,
he gives them his special chewing gum, claiming that if they chew it long enough, it will turn green and can be planted to grow more gum. The tigers are so busy checking each other's mouths that they forget to eat Elmer. When a rhinoceros is ready to drown Elmer in his weeping pool, Elmer gives him his toothbrush and toothpaste to shine his yellowed tusk. The rhinoceros forgets about Elmer. A hungry lion is easily distracted when the boy gives him a comb and brush to groom his mane. A fierce gorilla loses interest in twisting Elmer's arms when the boy gives each of six monkeys a magnifying glass to find the fleas bothering the gorilla.

Reaching the river, Elmer uses lollipops attached to the tails of seventeen crocodiles to lure them into forming a bridge for him to cross where the baby dragon is waiting. When Elmer arrives on the other side, he uses his jackknife to cut the thick rope around the dragon's neck just as all of the angry animals are crossing the crocodile bridge to kill him. The first crocodile finishes his lollipop, however, and swims away, leading the remaining crocodiles to the middle of the river, where the animals are trapped and at the mercy of the crocodiles. As Elmer and the grateful dragon fly away, they know that nothing will ever persuade them to go back to Wild Island.

Open-Ended Questions

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

Initial Understanding

How does Elmer happen to have the perfect items in his knapsack?

_The old alley cat has already been to the island and knows what the animals are like. The cat helps Elmer determine what he should take so that he can thwart the animals._

Literary Analysis

What is the effect of writing this story in first person?

_The reader never learns the identity of the narrator, other than that the main character is the father of the narrator. This point of view contributes to the mystery of the fantasy. It also gives the story more intimacy because the narrator's relationship to the main character helps the reader to take a personal interest in the main character's safety._

Inferential Comprehension

How is Elmer able to avoid being injured or killed by the animals on Wild Island?

_Many of the animals on Wild Island are more interested in themselves than in what is happening in their environment. When the fierce animals first encounter Elmer, they want to eat him or kill him. But when Elmer gives them gifts, they do not even notice Elmer walking away because they are so interested in the items that he has given them._

Constructing Meaning

Pretend you are Elmer Elevator. What alternate plan could you create to cross the river if your lollipop trick did not work?

_Students may suggest imaginative solutions using rafts, chopping down trees, relying on the help of a previously unmentioned animal such as an elephant, etc._

Teachable Skills

Recognizing Setting

Elmer travels from the familiar territory of a city to a jungle island in the ocean. Review and discuss characteristics (climate, vegetation, precipitation, etc.) of a jungle with the class. Ask each student to research one plant or animal that is native to this biome. Students should share their research with the class. Discuss how these plants and animals have adapted to their environment. Then assign each student to sketch and name a fictitious plant or animal that could thrive in this biome. Have students present their sketches and oral
Making Predictions  The story ends with Elmer and the dragon fleeing the island and vowing never to return. Have each student write an epilogue predicting how the island animals behave after their departure and describing the voyage Elmer and the dragon take over the next few days.

Recognizing Detail  Many trees are identified in the story. Elmer frequently uses these trees to hide from the animals on the island. Have each student select one of the trees mentioned in the story (palm, mahogany, tangerine, banyan) to research and write a report on its characteristics. Then have each student depict the tree in a drawing or three dimensional model that can be displayed in the classroom.

Responding to Literature  Elmer leaves home and makes a dangerous, difficult trip to a fearful island to save an innocent baby dragon. Ask the students to choose a cause or situation for which they would be willing to make sacrifices. For example, a student may be willing to give up free time to help clean at a local humane society where mistreated animals are kept, or collect canned goods for a local food pantry to help hungry families. Conduct a class discussion focusing on injustices or inequities and how one person can make a difference.