

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for The Original Adventures of Hank the Cowdog by John R. Erickson

Book Information

John R. Erickson, The Original Adventures of Hank the Cowdog

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Hank the Cowdog, Head of Ranch Security, is accused of the murder of a chicken and becomes an outlaw with the coyotes. Book #1.

Topics: Animals, Dogs; Humor/Funny, Funny; Places, Ranches; READNOW - Demco Media Turtleback Books, Demco Media - Read Now Grades 4-6; Series, Hank the Cowdog

Main Characters

Bruno a belligerent boxer who is furious when he cannot break his chain to fight Hank and Drover

Drover Hank's ranch assistant, who often runs from fights

Girl-Who-Drink-Blood (Missy Coyote) a pretty coyote who falls in love with Hank after he removes a can from her head

Hank the Cowdog the Head of Ranch Security, who strives to find a chicken murderer; he yearns to be respected and loved by his owners

High Loper the rancher, who expects Hank to keep the ranch safe

Many-Rabbit-Gut-Eat-In-Full-Moon (Chief Gut, Gut) the leader of the coyotes, who encourages Hank to become a coyote warrior

Sally May Loper High Loper's wife, who seems to have little sympathy for Hank

Scraunch Hank's coyote enemy, who is unhappy when Hank is accepted into the coyote tribe

Slim Loper's ranch worker who shows Hank some affection

Snort and Rip two fun-loving coyotes who befriend Hank

Wallace and Junior two greedy buzzards who struggle to find food

Vocabulary

bluff to pretend something in order to show confidence or knowledge

brackish slightly salty

echelon a level of command

evidence something that proves or gives clues to an event

fluent able to understand and speak smoothly

indolence laziness

mutton meat from an adult sheep

silage chopped cow feed that is stored in a silo to ferment

squabble a noisy argument, usually over something unimportant

villain an evil person

Synopsis

As Head of Ranch Security on High Loper's ranch, Hank the Cowdog feels responsible for finding the murderer of a chicken on the ranch. Assisted by his fellow cowdog Drover, Hank begins his investigation by following some tracks he believes belong to a raccoon. Hank approaches the suspect and pounces to apprehend it. He is in mid-air before he realizes the animal is actually a porcupine and not the chicken murderer. The porcupine attacks Hank before fleeing. Hank realizes that Drover, as Hank feared, disappeared as the fight began. Hank waits in agony until Loper finally notices him and removes the porcupine quills.

Later in the day Loper's wife, Sally May, discovers the dead chicken, and Loper scolds Hank for failing his duty to protect the chickens. Determined to catch the murderer, Hank and Drover stake out the chickenhouse that night. Although Hank wants to fire Drover for playing when he should be working, he changes his mind after Drover begs for one more chance. Suddenly Drover alerts him to a giant horned monster near the chickenhouse. While Hank charges, Drover runs away. The battle is going badly for Hank when Loper fires a warning shot from the porch. Hank is chagrined when he discovers that the monster is actually a cow.

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The next day Drover persuades Hank to jump into the back of the truck that Slim and Loper are driving to town. In town Loper becomes angry when he realizes the dogs are in the truck. He tells the dogs to stay in the truck while the men eat lunch. Drover amuses himself by antagonizing a boxer named Bruno, who is chained to the bed of the truck next to them. Hank joins Drover's fun after Bruno insults cowdogs, and both Hank and Drover enjoy the scolding that Bruno receives for barking.

That night as Hank and Drover stake out the chickenhouse again, they fall asleep. Drover awakens Hank when another chicken is murdered. While Hank examines the crime scene, he is overwhelmed by an urge to eat the chicken. He dismisses Drover and consumes the chicken in the horse pasture before dozing off. When he wakes, Sally May is horrified because she thinks Hank killed the chicken. Loper punishes Hank by tying the chicken's head around his neck. Insulted, Hank decides to leave the ranch and live as an outlaw in the canyons near the ranch. Hank consoles himself by imagining how his owners will mourn his disappearance.

In the canyons Hank meets two hungry but inept buzzards who bargain with him for the chicken head. Hank quickly makes a deal since he has been unable to rid himself of the smelly punishment.

The following afternoon Hank encounters a coyote with her head stuck in a can. Although he dislikes coyotes, Hank removes the can and discovers that the female coyote is beautiful. He falls in love even though she is the sister of his enemy, Scraunch. He learns her name is Girl-Who-Drink-Blood, but he prefers to call her Missy. Her family quickly spots and surrounds Hank and Missy, and her father, Chief Gut, mocks Hank for his romantic foolishness. When Scraunch taunts Hank, Hank disguises his fear by saying that Scraunch has walked into Hank's trap. Hank's bluff is so successful that Chief Gut ends the altercation. Gut insists that Hank join the coyotes and consider marrying his daughter.

In the coyote camp Hank enjoys the lazy life. He befriends Rip and Snort, who take him to eat fermented silage. Later the inebriated Hank returns to the ranch and invites Drover to join his new life. Drover is appalled and calls Hank a traitor. Drover vows that he will be brave since he knows that he has to take Hank's place. Annoyed, Hank returns to the coyote camp but finds he is not enjoying himself as much as before. Hank spanks one of Scraunch's children for biting him, and he goes off alone to get away from the noise of the coyote camp. Missy tries to cheer Hank with a special feast of moldy mutton, a coyote delicacy. Hank becomes ill from the rotten mutton. He is still recovering when he learns that he is expected to participate in Scraunch's upcoming raid on the ranch.

After dark Scraunch reveals his plan for the raid and suggests that the coyotes kill Drover. Hank is dismayed when Scraunch orders him to be the first to attack Drover. The coyotes surround the ranch and surprise Drover, but Drover does not run to hide. Rather than attacking Drover, Hank assaults Snort instead. Hank and Drover fight bravely, but Scraunch has Hank by the throat when Loper finally fires a gun from the porch. The coyotes escape and Loper congratulates Hank. When Sally May notices Drover lying motionless on the ground, Hank worries that his little friend is dead. Loper determines that Drover is alive and appears to be unconscious from minor wounds. Hank sees Drover open his eye as Loper carries him to the house. Hank suspects Drover is feigning injury.

Later Hank tells Drover that his life with the coyotes was an undercover operation to find the chicken murderer. As they talk, the dogs examine the tracks of an animal that lead to the garden. Hank is in mid-leap when he realizes the animal is a skunk. Blinded by the skunk's spray, Hank accidentally stumbles into Sally May's laundry room. When Sally May calls him a "stinking dog" and uses her broom to shoo him away, Hank bemoans once again his owners' lack of appreciation for their Head of Ranch Security.

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Open-Ended Questions

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

Initial Understanding

How does Drover feel about his job as a cowdog?

Drover takes great pride in being a cowdog and believes it is a very noble profession. He is dedicated to being a cowdog even if he is not able to fulfill many of his duties. For instance, he seems afraid to do many of the things that are part of the cowdog's responsibility, particularly fighting dangerous creatures. Also, he often seems bored when he is on patrol and is easily distracted from his job. Despite this, he is unwilling to leave his life as a dog even for a life of fun with the coyotes.

Literary Analysis

How does Hank try to prove he is more intelligent than most creatures?

*Hank tries to use big words like *vigilant* (vigilant) and *Modus of Operationus* (*modus operandi*). He also frequently explains things to the readers, implying that his knowledge is greater than the reader's. He mocks Drover's observations so the reader knows he is superior, particularly when Drover argues that the first chicken was probably killed by a coyote. Finally, Hank comments on the stupidity of other animals. He calls Bruno dumb, says chickens are dumb, and implies that coyote language is inferior to dog language.*

Inferential Comprehension

What aspects of Hank's personality make it difficult for him to attack Drover?

Hank respects the strict standards of behavior his mother outlined for her puppies. Hank understands that joining coyotes in their attack on a cowdog would have disappointed his mother. In addition, these standards lead Hank to realize that he will never fit into the coyote way of life. Hank is proud of the cowdog tradition; he is ashamed when Drover, whom he calls "son," calls him a traitor. His pride is also hurt when Drover, a dog who has always idolized him, chastises him for choosing to live with the coyotes. Also, since Hank values bravery, he gains new respect for Drover when Drover does not run away from the coyote attack.

Constructing Meaning

Is Hank's treatment of Drover fair? Explain using details from the book.

Answers will vary. Some students may feel that Hank is very critical of Drover, particularly since Hank seems to make many mistakes as well. Readers may also feel that Hank does not show enough understanding of Drover's fears. For example, Hank demeans Drover by calling him worthless, and he threatens to fire him. Hank seems to spend more time yelling at Drover than he does helping him become a better cowdog. Other students may feel that Hank's anger toward Drover is justified; Drover's inability to fight forces Hank to fight several battles by himself. Hank is also the one who bears the brunt of the responsibility when mistakes are made on the ranch, and he does not appreciate bearing the burden of both his errors and Drover's.

Teachable Skills

Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors Hank describes the coyote lifestyle from the perspective of a dog and passes judgment on them from this perspective. Have the students research coyotes and then write a report describing how coyotes really live. Students

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should attempt to provide explanation for coyote behavior that Hank attributes to stupidity, laziness, lack of taste, etc. (e.g., howling, eating silage, eating rotting meat, puppies behaving mischievously, communities being noisy).

Recognizing Cause and Effect Hank makes several errors that hinder his investigation. For instance, he mistakes the porcupine for a raccoon and spends a considerable amount of time trying to have the quills extracted from his nose rather than finding the chicken murderer. Have the students list Hank's mistakes and what happens because of each of these errors. Then have them suggest what Hank probably should have done in each situation.

Comparing and Contrasting Hank wonders if his owners will cry over his disappearance just as people who watched the television adventures of Lassie and Rin Tin Tin used to cry when those dogs were in peril. Show the students an episode from one or both of these television series. Have students create comparison/contrast charts to compare Hank to the television dogs using the following criteria: the dogs' dangerous situations, the dogs' reactions to the danger, the responses of characters to the dogs' dilemmas, and student responses to the dogs' predicaments. If students react differently to Lassie or Rin Tin Tin's predicaments than they do to Hank's, ask students to speculate on the reasons for the difference.

Identifying Reading Strategies Although Hank says he enjoys living with the coyotes, the reader has several clues that Hank will not be able to maintain a coyote lifestyle indefinitely. Have the students identify these clues and write an explanation of why life with the coyotes would probably have become unbearable for Hank.