

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

Owls in the Family

by
Farley Mowat

Book Information

Farley Mowat, Owls in the Family

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Book Level: 5.0

Interest Level: LG

Two owls, Wol and Weeps, join Billy and his dog Mutt to shake up the whole neighborhood.

Award: ALA Best Book for Young Adults

Topics: Animals, Owls; Canadian Content, Canadian Content (All); Countries/Regions, Canada; Family Life, Pets; Humor/Funny, Funny

Main Characters

Billy Mowat the boy who narrates this story; he loves wild animals and keeps many as pets

Bruce Billy's impetuous friend who shares Billy's love of animals and takes care of Wol and Weeps after Billy has to move to Toronto

Fifi Billy's high-strung French teacher

Georgie Barnes and the big kid two boys who torment an owlet until Billy exchanges his knife for the bird

Joe and the other big tough kid two bullies who try to force Billy and Bruce to reveal the location of their secret cave

Mr. Miller Billy and Bruce's teacher who is very interested in taking pictures of prairie wildlife

Mr. Mowat Billy's good-natured father, who is sometimes frustrated with Billy's large collection of animals even though he helps Billy with them

Mrs. Mowat Billy's patient mother, who tolerates Billy's pets

Murray Billy's other friend who shares his love of animals

Mutt Billy's old absent-minded dog, who protects Weeps and is teased by Wol

Ophelia (Offy) the Mowats' maid, who quits after Wol frightens her in the house

Weeps Billy's nervous pet owl who is afraid to fly or be far from someone who will protect him

Wol Billy's adventurous pet owl who apparently thinks he is human

Vocabulary

absent-minded forgetful and easily-distracted

ideal perfect

mob to crowd around someone or something

ruckus a noisy disturbance or commotion

skylarking playing

wingspread the distance between a bird's outstretched wings, from the outermost tip of one wing to the outermost tip of the other wing

Synopsis

Billy and his friend Bruce are determined to have some pet owls, so they search the bluffs on the prairie surrounding their hometown of Saskatoon for owl nests. They finally find one, but because the parent owl seems dangerous they bring Mr. Miller, a teacher, to climb the tree. After the owl attacks and chases Mr. Miller out of the tree, he tries to observe the owl by making a blind in a nearby tree, but the owl angrily attacks him again. The boys are stymied for days by how to get the owlets until a severe storm occurs. When Billy, Bruce, and their friend Murray return to the tree, they discover that the nest has been destroyed. Billy finds one owlet alive, and the boys bury the rest. Billy places the owl in a large cage with his pet gophers and name it "Wol."

The next day Wol is traumatized when one of the gophers bites him, so Billy sneaks him into his room. Unfortunately, Wol escapes and frightens Offy, the maid. She quits, and Dad warns Billy not to bring Wol into the house again. He helps Billy build a cage for Wol in the back yard, but Wol is lonely there. A few weeks later the problem is solved when Billy rescues another owlet from two boys who are tormenting it in an oil drum. Billy trades his knife for the owlet, which he names Weeps.

Weeps remains fearful from his bad experience, but Wol turns out to be a very high-spirited owl. Wol

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destroys a ball while the boys are playing a game, acts outraged when the family laughs at him for falling out of a tree while he is learning to fly, and kills a cat that tries to attack him. In contrast, Weeps just cries when Billy tries to teach him to fly and usually stays close to Billy's dog Mutt for protection.

When school ends, Murray, Bruce, and Billy learn that a local store is offering prizes for the best entries in a pet parade. They diligently build a circus exhibit on two wagons. On the day of the parade, Bruce arrives with a secret pet hidden in a shoebox. Throughout the parade, Billy becomes increasingly confident that they will win. All goes well with the judges until Bruce reveals that the secret pet is a rattlesnake. The parade disintegrates as people run. Bruce is upset that the borrowed rattlesnake might have been lost, but Billy regrets that they did not win first prize.

As the summer progresses, Wol takes pleasure in antagonizing Mutt. The bird steals Mutt's bones and tricks him into leaving his dinner so that he can steal it. Wol also routinely sneaks up while Mutt is sleeping and squeezes his tail. Although Wol teases Mutt, he rarely harms other animals with the exception of skunks. One night while the family is dining, a malodorous Wol flies into the house carrying a dead skunk. The second time Wol does this, Billy's father removes the terrible smell by bathing Wol in tomato juice. Wol learns his lesson and never brings a skunk home again.

Throughout the summer Billy and his friends spend a great deal of time near their secret cave on the river. Wol loves these trips but because the crows love to harass him, he stays close to Billy. One day the boys are hiking near their cave when they find a prairie chicken nest. The hatching chicks mistake a bewildered Wol for their mother and the boys laugh at the sight. Later that day Wol comes to the rescue when two bullies threaten to harm Billy and Bruce if they do not reveal the location of the cave. The four boys are standing under a tree rumored to be haunted, and the bullies do not know that Wol is sitting in its branches. Suddenly Wol screams and frightens everyone. The bullies run away, and Bruce

scolds the bird even though Wol's scream saved them.

Wol does many amusing things while he lives with Billy. He startles the visiting minister when he lands on his shoulder. He wallops the postman with his wings after the postman inadvertently kicks him. One day he even follows Billy to school and flies into Billy's classroom. After this, Billy's mother distracts the owls by feeding them bacon rinds when Billy has to leave for school.

During the second summer with the owls, Billy's father takes the family and Bruce on a camping trip. Billy's father, Billy, Bruce, Mutt, and both owls squeeze into the canoe to go out on a lake. Unfortunately, Wol attracts the attention of a number of crows, who taunt Wol as he travels in the overloaded canoe. The boat capsizes in the commotion, and the entire group is disgusted with the crows by the time they manage to extract themselves from the mucky lake. The next morning Billy's father goes crow hunting, but the crows stay out of range until Wol lures them closer. Billy's father shoots a number of crows with Wol's help.

The next summer, Billy's father gets a job in Toronto. Since his family cannot take the owls with them, Billy takes the owls to Bruce, who is now living on a fox farm many miles away. Billy helps Bruce build a cage for them and sadly gives his farewell, hoping that someday he will be able to return.

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

Why does Billy think that his friends and he will win first prize in the pet parade?

In the first place, Billy has some very unique pets: rats, gophers, and two owls. Second, Billy and his friends devise a clever theme for their entry and invest a great deal of time in their preparations. They make two circus wagons, put the owls and dogs in costume, and enlist the dogs to pull the wagons. The boys also catch some special gophers to be part of their exhibit. Third, Billy looks over the parade as a whole and is confident that none of the other entries compares with his exhibit. Finally, Billy is unaware of the mystery pet's identity, so he is unable to foresee the riot that ruins their chances for first prize.

Literary Analysis

What characteristics make Wol seem human?

Wol has a well-defined sense of self. His strong sense of pride is easily injured when the family laughs at him for falling out of the tree and when the postman kicks him. He expects to have the same rights as people, so he insists on being allowed to roam freely, enter buildings, and follow Billy. He also likes to play games, prefers walking to flying, and seems to be very expressive of his feelings.

Inferential Comprehension

What is the most likely reason that Billy has more stories about Wol than Weeps?

Weeps is usually mentioned briefly in these stories, such as when he scuttles under the seat of the canoe or cries when Billy tries to teach him to fly. He is rarely the main character of the anecdotes, however, because he is not very daring. Billy seems to be fonder of Wol than Weeps, possibly because Billy is more adventurous, like Wol. Both Billy and Wol have a good sense of humor. They each tend to ignore the boundaries that others try to set for them: Billy continues to bring home pets despite the objections of his father, and Wol keeps entering the house despite the attempts of the family to restrain him. Because Billy and Wol seem to have a close affinity, Billy probably remembers Wol's actions more clearly than Weeps's.

Constructing Meaning

What are your feelings about Billy's father shooting the crows? Why do you feel this way?

There will probably be a wide range of responses to this question. The author intends for the reader to feel that the crows deserve to be shot because they tease Wol and create the circumstances that cause the canoe to capsize. Many students may feel amused because the crows cannot ignore Wol's taunts even though they have to come within shooting range in order to answer Wol's insults. However, some students are probably disturbed and upset by the way Billy's father shoots large numbers of birds just because he is annoyed with them. These students may feel that this is cruel, unjustified treatment of the crows despite the author's tone throughout this section of the story.

Teachable Skills

Identifying Persuasive Language Although Billy is successful, many people are uncomfortable with the idea of turning wild animals into pets. Have the students research the arguments for and against having wild animals as pets; then have the students separate into opposing sides

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and debate whether people should be permitted to keep wild animals as pets. Have them use details from the book as well as information from their research to support their arguments.

Comparing and Contrasting Billy comments several times that Wol and Weeps are not like other owls. Have the students read about the behavior of great horned owls in the wild. Then have them create two charts, one showing the life of a wild owl and one showing the life of Wol and Weeps. Have them note on their charts the similarities and differences between the wild owls and Billy's pet owls.

Understanding the Author's Craft Many of the chapters in this book are structured as sets of anecdotes that are only loosely connected to one another. Have the students review chapters 7, 8, and 9 and analyze how many anecdotes are in each chapter and the points at which each anecdote begins and ends within these chapters. Have the students write an explanation for the reasoning the author might have used to group the anecdotes as he did.

Recognizing Details Billy and Bruce spend a lot of time exploring and observing the natural areas around them. Take the students on a field trip to a local nature preserve or park. Give them a checklist of local animals and plants to look for and have them jot notes about the wildlife they observe. If possible, have them speak to a ranger or tour guide about local wildlife.