

# Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

## Spider Boy

by

### Ralph Fletcher

### Book Information

Ralph Fletcher, Spider Boy  
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Interest Level: MG

When Bobby is paired with a girl for a school project, his life starts looking up and he sees his chance for revenge on the bully who calls him "Spider Boy."

**Topics:** Behavior, Brutality; Behavior, Bullying; Community Life, School; READNOW - Demco Media Turtleback Books, Demco Media - Read Now Grades 1-3; Recommended Reading, California Recommended Lit., English, 6-8

### Main Characters

Bobby Ballenger the principal character of the story; a seventh-grade boy who has moved with his family to a new city

Breezy Ballenger Bobby's older sister, a junior in high school; she is dating the older brother of the boy that is bullying Bobby at school

Butch Fostick a classmate of Bobby's and captain of the chess team at school

Chick Hall a first-class swimmer and bully who seeks revenge because he thinks Bobby named him as the class cheater

Dad a production manager of a container plant who moved the family to New York to accept a better paying position; the family's cook and a devoted father

Lucky Prescott a seventh-grade girl, new to the school, who befriends Bobby

Mike Bobby's best friend in Naperville, Illinois, where Bobby lived before moving to New York

Miss Davenport the school guidance counselor who becomes involved in Bobby's school problems

Miss Terbaldi Bobby's homeroom and English teacher at school

Mom Bobby's loving and concerned mother, a registered nurse, who has a new found interest in running and refuses to do any cooking

Monk an African baboon spider, a gift for Bobby's birthday; he is killed by Chick

Mr. Niezgocki Bobby's science teacher, who recognizes Bobby's keen interest in spiders and science and offers him a job in his lab

Roland Prescott Lucky's father, a TV news anchorman; he shares his interest in astronomy with Lucky and Bobby and helps Bobby discover his needs

Thelma Bobby's pet Chilean rose tarantula

### Vocabulary

**Aborigines** the earliest known inhabitants of a region or country

**dawdle** to waste time; idle

**lethal** deadly, fatal

**oral** uttered by the mouth; spoken

**solitary** living habitually alone, without companions

### Synopsis

Bobby Ballenger has just moved with his family from Naperville, Illinois to New Paltz, New York, after his father accepted a new job. We find Bobby at the beginning of the story homesick for Illinois and worrying about Thelma, his pet tarantula, who has not eaten for weeks. Bobby has a keen interest in spiders and keeps a spider journal about what he has read along with some personal thoughts. His mother is concerned that he has not made any friends as yet at his new school.

At school, Bobby is taunted by Chick Hall, who calls Bobby "Spider Boy from Illinois." Mr. Niezgocki, Bobby's science teacher, recognizes Bobby's interest in spiders and offers him a job caring for the animals in his laboratory, also allowing Bobby to bring Thelma to the lab. Bobby spins a web of lies about his father's occupation until the counselor calls his parents to school. Bobby then resolves to stop making up stories.

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Bobby is paired with Lucky, a new girl from Atlanta, to work on a science presentation. Lucky later invites Bobby to her house and their relationship fluctuates between friendship and romance throughout the book. He also is befriended by Bruce Fostick, the chess team captain.

Meanwhile, at school, a new honor system has been started. When Bobby indicates that he saw someone cheating on a science test, Mr. Niezgocki gives a new test the next day. Bobby calls Chick, "Chick the Cheat," after Chick had continually taunted him about being a "spider boy." Chick thought that Bobby had pointed to him as the cheater, when in reality, Bobby had said he had just witnessed cheating but did not tell who did it. Chick threatens Bobby by saying, "you're dead" on the soccer field one day, tackles Bobby, and punches him in the eye. Since the fight is broken up by Lucky, Chick warns Bobby that it is not over, and instead, kills Monk, a tarantula Bobby's dad gave him for his birthday. Bobby and Chick's families are called in by the counselor, and the whole situation comes to light for the parents. Bobby refuses to accept Chick's apology, and feels the money offered to compensate for Monk is blood money.

It is not until Thelma molts and becomes rejuvenated that Bobby is able to let go of his hate for Chick and get on with life. He decides to join the football team at school because he realizes he needs something more in his life. The story ends with Lucky and Butch helping Bobby unpack his belongings and set up his room. Bobby feels for the first time that it is home.

### Open-Ended Questions

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

#### Initial Understanding

How does Bobby's view of Miss Davenport change during the course of the story?

*Bobby first judges Miss Davenport by appearance and thinks she will be flaky because her looks are so perfect. He tells her an outlandish tale of his father hiring a dolphin trainer to herd shrimp and expects her to "buy" it. When she doesn't and calls in his parents, and later when she arbitrates the meeting between the Mr. Hall and the Ballengers, he develops a respect for her. He trusts her enough to let her read his spider journal.*

#### Literary Analysis

Where is the climax of *Spider Boy*? Why is it the climax?

*The climax occurs when Bobby discovers that Thelma has molted. It is the time that both Bobby and Thelma have "come out of their shell" so to speak. Bobby is now able to accept his new home.*

#### Inferential Comprehension

Luke and Chick Hall are brothers that we never see interact during the story. Compare and contrast them.

*They are the same in that they are both good swimmers, seem to be able to impress girls and are somewhat impressed with themselves. They are different in that from what we see of Luke, he appears kind and mannerly and has an understanding side to him, as shown by laughing off the eyeballs in the olive bowl. He does not seem to hold a grudge. In contrast, Chick is vengeful and physically aggressive. His sense of humor consists of taunting others.*

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#### Constructing Meaning

Think of a new student in your class or school. What can you do to make the student feel a little more at home?

*Lunchtime might be a good opportunity to meet the student. Ask if you could eat with them, tell them a little about yourself and ask about them. See if you share any interests or just invite them along when you do something that interests you. It might be nice to tell them about things of interest in the area. If other students are "testing" the new student, don't go along with it. Realize that adjusting to a new school is a process and doesn't happen instantly.*

#### Teachable Skills

**Understanding the Author's Craft** The author shows us that he has spent time researching spiders as demonstrated in the spider journal entries. Students can be asked to research how webs are constructed. How are spiders able to move on them without getting caught? Have the students create a spider web by pounding nails into a board and weaving one with yarn, using silver paint on black construction paper, or a technique of their choice. Spider webs are species specific. To what species does their web belong?

**Identifying Reading Strategies** Mr. Niezgocki pushed for the honor system to be instituted at the Regina White Middle School. He believed it would be good for the students. Have the students choose a position on this issue. Have them research the topic, suggest appropriate penalties, and compile statistics of compliance if they can. Then hold a class debate on the pros and cons of instituting an honor system at their school.

**Understanding Characterization** Bobby compares himself at times to spiders through his reflections in his journal. Have the students go through the journal entries and list the various comparisons throughout the book. Explain if the tone of the comparisons reflects the changes Bobby goes through during the book. Can the

student conclude the entries foreshadowed Bobby's next experience or did they summarize and reinforce what already had taken place?

**Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors** Every family situation is unique, and even though roles are not rigid, there often are tasks for which a certain person has the primary responsibility. In Bobby's family, the mom has recently given up cooking after taking up running. Have the students list the members of their family and the tasks that they usually do. What would happen if the family members switched tasks? Would things run as smoothly? Have them predict and write the results. It might be fun to actually try the role reversals for a week if the family is willing. Were their predictions correct?