

# Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for The Best School Year Ever

by  
Barbara Robinson

---

## Book Information

Barbara Robinson, The Best School Year Ever

Quiz Number: 10212

HarperCollins Publishers, Inc, 1994

ISBN 0-06-023039-8; LCCN

117 Pages

Book Level: 5.4

Interest Level: MG

The terrible kids at Woodrow Wilson Elementary School return with more wild behavior and outrageous lies.

**Award:** Parent's Choice Award/Honor Book; State Award

**Topics:** Behavior, Disobedience; Behavior, Lying; Community Life, School; Humor/Funny, Funny; Recommended Reading, IRA/CBC Choice

## Main Characters

Alice Wendleken a classmate of Imogene and Beth who likes being important

Beth Bradley the sixth-grade student who narrates the story

Eugene Preston an unpopular boy victimized by Gladys Herdman, who cracks walnuts on his head for the PTA Talent Show

Gladys Herdman a Herdman who cuts Eugene Preston's hair in the shape of a dog

Howard McCluskey Louella's baby brother who was kidnapped by the Herdmans and displayed as a novelty item

Imogene Herdman a classmate of the narrator who seems to have some positive qualities

Leroy Herdman a Herdman who causes a stir in school with a dead snake

Louella McCluskey a friend of the narrator who encountered the Herdmans when they stole her baby brother, Howard

Miss Kemp a sixth-grade teacher at Woodrow Wilson Elementary School

Ollie Herdman a Herdman who tried to turn in his brother for a reward at the post office

## Vocabulary

**civilized** polite or refined

**compliment** an expression of admiration or praise

**enterprising** showing imagination or eagerness to try difficult projects

**notorious** widely known in an unfavorable way

**optimism** the tendency to expect the best or emphasize the positive

**resourceful** able to think of ways to deal with all situations

## Synopsis

As the story opens, it is the beginning of another school year at Woodrow Wilson Elementary School. In Miss Kemp's class, the new assignment for the year will be "Compliments for Classmates." All year long, students must think of positive attributes to describe each of their classmates. The narrator of the story, Beth Bradley, has only one problem -- Imogene Herdman.

Imogene is one of the notorious Herdmans, a family that has one student in each grade at Woodrow Wilson. They terrorize teachers, smoke cigars, hit little kids, and generally run amuck at school and around town. Beth recalls several past incidents that show the Herdmans are not like any other family. They stole Louella McCluskey's baby brother, Howard, drew pictures on his head, and charged admission to see him. They were banned from the town hall for putting frogs in the drinking fountain. At the post office, Ollie Herdman even tried to collect reward money for turning in his brother as a wanted criminal.

There was also a time when a snake died, apparently as a result of biting Leroy Herdman. Leroy strung it up a light cord just in time for the kindergarten teacher to see it. The kindergarten teacher was stunned and knocked down some red paint. The flying red paint resembled blood and created a panic in the hall.

This year's talent show at Woodrow Wilson

# Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for The Best School Year Ever

by  
Barbara Robinson

---

promises to be fairly unexciting, but when everyone finds out there will be refreshments, the Herdmans immediately come to mind -- their greatest talent is stealing. Several days later, Gladys Herdman cuts Eugene Preston's hair in the shape of a dog. He becomes so nervous and upset as a result that he begins banging his head. Gladys then persuades him to use this skill to crack walnuts on his head in the talent show. Then, after the adults run to check on Eugene, the refreshments disappear.

Sometimes, the Herdmans seem to be able to work things out to their advantage even when they are being mean and sneaky, like the time Imogene tells everyone scary things are going on in the teachers' room. When some adults get locked in the room, she is the only one brave enough to get near the room to let them out. She becomes a hero. Beth decides that, if nothing else, Imogene has "imagination."

But there seems to be another side of Imogene. When baby Howard comes to spend time in the sixth grade, Boomer steals his blanket to make him turn purple, but Imogene gives it back. Although some kids think she does this because she wants to make a pet of Howard, they later find that she has replaced his lost blanket with her own. Beth then decides that Imogene is "sympathetic."

Finally, the Herdmans ruin the school's Fire Prevention Day. When all the Herdmans sign up for the Fire Safety Team, everyone else either drops out or comes down with chicken pox. The Herdmans grab the glory and the Fire Safety Team T-shirts.

By the last day of school, Beth is prepared with some good words to describe Imogene Herdman, including brave, resourceful, shrewd, enterprising ... and inventive. Imogene tells her she likes the word "resourceful" the best and has Beth write it in magic marker on her arm.

## Open-Ended Questions

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

### Initial Understanding

In this book, the author often makes reference to incidents that happened with the Herdmans at some time prior to the time frame of the story. Which are the events that took place in some earlier time as described by Beth, the narrator. How do you know these events take place earlier in time?

*Among the incidents described from the past are the Herdmans' kidnapping of Howard McCluskey, Ollie's attempt to turn in his brother at the post office, the cat-washing at the Laundromat and the Herdmans' quest to ride Bus Six. The author gives the reader clues that these incidents happened in the past by using phrases like "There was the time that...." Often the incidents are introduced by referring directly to the past. For example, "A snake once bit Leroy Herdman...."*

### Literary Analysis

The Herdmans seem to have the knack of causing all kinds of trouble without ever really getting into trouble themselves. Often, they even profit by their misdeeds. Describe one such incident from the book.

*Early in the book, the narrator describes how the Herdmans stole baby Howard McCluskey from his stroller, drew pictures on his head, and charged admission to see him. Though his sister managed to get him back, she had to pay the Herdmans a quarter to see him. Mrs. McCluskey figured that, knowing the Herdmans, she was lucky to get her son back in one piece. By the time Howard returned home, the Herdmans had suffered no consequences for their actions. Furthermore, they had earned \$6.50 from displaying the "tattooed baby."*

# Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for The Best School Year Ever

by  
Barbara Robinson

---

## Inferential Comprehension

By the end of the story, Beth has decided that the resourceful Imogene might become President or might go to jail, depending on whether she gets "civilized." Do you think Imogene will ever get civilized?

*Responses will vary. Of all the Herdmans, Imogene is the only one who has shown some positive, non-selfish qualities during the course of the story. More importantly, she seems to be genuinely flattered by Beth's description of her as "resourceful." It seems possible that, as she grows older, Imogene may try to live up to the person that Beth described during "Compliments for Classmates."*

## Constructing Meaning

The narrator, Beth Bradley, often shares remarks made by her father about various Herdman incidents. When he hears the Herdmans are on the Fire Safety Team, he says it is "like inviting a lot of bank robbers to demonstrate how to rob the bank." What does he mean?

*Mr. Bradley's comment is similar to the familiar idea of the fox guarding the chicken coop -- the fox is obviously the last one that should be given that responsibility. Knowing the Herdmans' reputation well, Beth's father uses his analogy to make the point that the Herdmans should be the last ones to give other people advice about fire safety.*

## Teachable Skills

**Understanding Literary Features** The author often uses newspaper headlines to demonstrate how certain incidents involving the Herdmans appear to the outside world. Often, appearances are far from the reality of the situation. As an exercise in understanding the author's style, ask students to write some newspaper headlines for the Herdman incident involving Bus Six.

**Understanding Characterization** Miss Kemp assigns her students to think of positive attributes for each other as their assignment for the year. As an exercise in characterization and the use of

descriptive words for personalities, do "Compliments for Classmates" in your own classroom. Pick names at random and assign one "admirer" for each student.

**Understanding the Author's Craft** After reading this book, students will have a good idea of some of the tricks and techniques the Herdmans use to get what they want. As a class writing assignment, ask students to write their own "Herdman incident" in which they create a hypothetical scenario and relate how the Herdmans might manipulate people and events to their advantage. For example, imagine Beth and Alice each have a huge ice cream cone. Imogene and Gladys want ice cream but have no money. Remind students to include typical Herdman dialogue.

**Responding to Literature** By the end of the book, Beth Bradley is surprised to learn that Imogene Herdman actually has some very admirable qualities. Ask students to consider their friends, classmates, and relatives and think of one person who showed themselves to be different than they first appeared. Ask students to write one or two paragraphs about that person and how he or she surprised them.