

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for The Trumpet of the Swan by E.B. White

Book Information

E.B. White, The Trumpet of the Swan

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Interest Level: MG

Louis, the Trumpeter Swan, lacks a voice, but his father hits on a bold alternative so that Louis might win his love, Serena.

Topics: Animals, Swans; Emotions, Love; Popular Groupings, Middle Grades Popular Authors/Starred Reviews

Main Characters

Head Man in Charge of Birds the man at the Philadelphia Zoo who is in charge of the birds

Louis a Trumpeter Swan who grows from hatchling to adult during the story; he is born with no voice and learns to communicate by writing on a slate and by playing a trumpet

Mr. Beaver Sam's father

Sam Beaver an eleven-year-old boy who befriends Louis

Serena Louis's sweetheart; she eventually becomes his mate

the cob Louis's father; he steals a trumpet to enable his son to attract a mate

Vocabulary

doleful sad

downy soft and feathery

onerous burdensome

plumage feathers

replete full

resonant echoing

Synopsis

Eleven-year-old Sam Beaver and his father frequently travel from their home in Montana to a remote camp in western Canada. Near their camp, a

Trumpeter Swan and his mate have found the perfect spot to make a nest and raise their cygnets. They hatch five cygnets, but one of them, Louis, is defective because he has no voice. Sam encounters the swan family during a walk in the woods, and Louis pulls at Sam's shoelace as a way of greeting because he cannot beep. Louis's father is very disturbed by his son's handicap and is determined to find a way for his son to have a voice to attract a mate.

When fall arrives, the swan family flies south to a swan refuge in Montana at Red Rocks Lake National Wildlife Refuge, which is not far from where Sam and his family live. Louis wants to learn to read and write so he can communicate. He decides to go to school with Sam. One morning he leaves his family and flies around until he finds Sam's home. Sam takes him to school with him. When spring arrives, Louis has learned to write on a slate he wears around his neck.

Louis returns to his family and communicates with his slate, but none of the other swans can read. Louis's parents are still worried that he will have trouble attracting a mate if he has no voice. Louis's father comes up with a solution to the problem and successfully steals a trumpet from a music store for Louis. Louis learns how to play the trumpet but is troubled that it is stolen. Louis determines that he will earn money to pay the store owner for the trumpet.

Over the next three years, Louis learns to play the trumpet well and becomes a famous tourist attraction wherever he goes. In Philadelphia, he lives at Bird Lake in the Philadelphia Zoo and takes a job in a night club for five hundred dollars a week. One day, his childhood sweetheart, Serena, from Red Rocks Lake, is blown to Bird Lake in a wind storm. At first she is not attracted to Louis, but when he starts playing his trumpet for her, she falls in love with him. He wants to take her back to the wilderness in Canada, but the Head Man in Charge of Birds at the Zoo wants to clip her wings so the Zoo will have more swans. Louis sends an urgent telegram to ask Sam to come to the Zoo to help him.

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Sam quickly arrives, and a deal is made to give the Zoo one of Louis's cygnets every few years in exchange for letting Serena remain free to fly.

The next morning, Louis and Serena fly back to Red Rocks Lake. Louis's father returns the money to the storekeeper to repay him for the trumpet. Louis and Serena spend the rest of their days traveling to Canada in the spring and migrating to Montana in the fall. They raise several broods of cygnets, donating one to the Zoo every now and then. Sam finishes school and gets a job in the Philadelphia Zoo, and Sam and his father still go to Canada in the summer and listen to the swans.

Open-Ended Questions

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

Initial Understanding

When Louis flies to Sam's home, Sam discovers that Louis cannot make any sound. Why does Sam want to make sure that Louis learns to read and write?

From watching birds and other animals in nature, Sam realizes that all animals need to communicate with each other and with their young. Sam is concerned that Louis may not be able to attract a mate if he is unable to communicate with the female swans. Sam also is convinced that Louis is capable of learning and is determined enough to work hard to reach his goal.

Literary Analysis

What kind of zookeeper will Sam be? What are some indications that let you know that Sam is interested in caring for and protecting wildlife?

Sam will probably be a very good zookeeper. Throughout his life he spends much of his time exploring and learning about wildlife. He is very knowledgeable about the Trumpeter Swans and other animals in the wilderness camp that he and his father often visit. He also seems to have a love and understanding of birds and their enemies. In the story, he does everything he can for Louis. He will probably do the same for the animals in the Zoo.

Inferential Comprehension

Sam keeps a diary to write about his thoughts, activities, and observations. He always ends each entry with a question so he will have something to think about while falling asleep. If Louis had been keeping the same kind of journal, what are some of the questions that he might have written? Think of questions for some of the major events that occur during the story.

When Louis discovered he could not speak, he may have asked why he was born that way, how his parents felt about him, or what would become of him. Later when he learned to read and write and then found the other swans could not, he may have asked if he was special, or how he could communicate with them. When Serena fell in love with him, he most likely would have asked why he was so lucky.

Constructing Meaning

In chapter twenty, Louis's father returns to the music store to pay for the trumpet. Do you feel the storekeeper is justified in shooting the cob?

The storekeeper believes that the swan is returning to steal something else. He shoots the cob in an attempt to protect his store and his property. The students know that the cob is doing a good deed and are undoubtedly startled and dismayed when he is shot. But the students may also understand that the storekeeper is only trying to protect his store.

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Teachable Skills

Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors In chapter twenty, the shopkeeper decides to keep just enough of the money to pay for the trumpet and to fix his store. He decides give the rest of the money to the Audubon Society. Ask the students to do research on the Audubon Society. They should find out how and when it began, who started it, what its main goal and purpose are, and some examples of what the society is doing currently. Each student should write a short report and present the findings to the class.

Responding to Literature In the story, Louis writes a love song about Serena. Later he writes a poem about Sam and leaves it on the Head Man's desk. Have students write a song or poem about something they care about. Ask volunteers to present their poem or song to the class.

Extending Meaning Louis spends a great deal of time and energy learning to communicate. Communication is an essential part of our everyday lives. Ask the students to spend a pre-determined length of time, one hour or one class day, not talking to each other and only communicating through writing and gestures. After their experience, the class should discuss how they felt, what difficulties they encountered, how they overcame them, and how important communication is to them.

Identifying Persuasive Language Louis faces many challenges and interesting experiences during the story. Have the students work in groups of three or four to develop a television commercial to promote the sale of this book. The commercial should briefly describe what the book is about and what makes it interesting. It should also be able to attract the viewer's attention and be persuasive. They can write a script or memorize their lines and then present the commercial to the class.