

# Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

## Weasel

by  
Cynthia DeFelice

### Book Information

Cynthia DeFelice, Weasel  
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Alone in the frontier wilderness in the winter of 1839 while his father is recovering from an injury, eleven-year-old Nathan runs afoul of the renegade killer known as Weasel and makes a surprising discovery about the concept of revenge.

**Topics:** Adventure, Discovery/Exploration; Natural Environments, Wilderness; People, Pioneers/Settlers; Recommended Reading, California Recommended Lit., English, 3-5

### Main Characters

Duffy and Winston the Fowlers' dogs

Ezra Ketcham a victim of Weasel's wrath who harbors a deep hatred for Weasel; he rescues Pa and treats Pa's injuries

Job and Crabapple (Crabby) the Fowlers' horse and mule, which Weasel steals

Mama Fowler Nathan and Molly's mother, who died of fever some time before the beginning of the story

Miz Tizz the Fowlers' sow

Molly Fowler Nathan's nine-year-old sister, who worries about the well-being of people she loves

Nathan Fowler the principal character of the story; an eleven-year-old boy who hates Weasel for hurting the people he loves

Pa Fowler (Papa) Nathan and Molly's widowed father, who is one of Weasel's victims; he tries to discourage Nathan from seeking revenge against Weasel

Weasel a former army employee hired to remove Native Americans from the area around the Ohio River; he ruthlessly kills or disfigures people and animals

### Vocabulary

**aggrieved** upset because of ill-treatment

**cunning** crafty or shrewd

**poultice** a soft mass of medication, usually heated, that is spread on a cloth and applied to an aching or inflamed part of the body

**preyed** victimized or took advantage of

**privy** an outhouse or outdoor toilet

**stealthy** sneaky or secretive

**venison** deer meat

### Synopsis

In the Ohio wilderness of 1839, eleven-year-old Nathan Fowler and his nine-year-old sister, Molly, have been alone in their cabin for six days -- ever since their father failed to return from a short hunting trip. That evening, they open their door to a strange white man dressed in Native American garb. He wordlessly beckons the children to follow him, showing them their deceased mother's locket that their father always wore. Nathan and Molly gather supplies and, with their dogs, follow the silent man through the woods. At dawn they stop to rest. The man glimpses a figure across the Ohio river, and his face contorts with hatred. When Nathan asks what he sees, the man spells "Weezl" in the dirt. Nathan and Molly are horrified because they have heard stories of the notorious man named Weasel who first victimized Native Americans and now settlers. The Shawnee named him Weasel because his brown and white hair and his penchant for pleasure-killing make him resemble the violent animal. The man shows them that Weasel cut his tongue out of his mouth. They learn the man's name is Ezra and that he is leading them to their father.

Shortly thereafter they arrive at Ezra's Shawnee-style dwelling. Nathan and Molly discover that Pa is burning with fever. Ezra had stitched Pa's leg where it was caught in a trap, but it is infected. Ezra helps the children tend to Pa by making a poultice from a root in Mama's medicine bag, which Molly brought with her. The children sleep fitfully that night, and Nathan has nightmares of Weasel.

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Nathan realizes the next day that the family's farm animals have not been fed for two days and knows he must return to care for them. Ezra reluctantly draws him a map in the dirt to show him the way back. Nathan promises to return by nightfall and to bring the horse and mule with him. Since Weasel took Pa's gun, Ezra gives Nathan a Shawnee club-shaped weapon and demonstrates how to use it.

Nathan is greeted by silence when he returns to the Fowler cabin. He discovers that Weasel has slaughtered the family pig and chickens and taken the horse and mule. Recalling his father's definition that a savage is one who does not bury the dead, Nathan buries the dead animals before heading back to Ezra's dwelling, called a we-gi-wa. As night falls, he hears an unusually loud snap of a twig and realizes he is being stalked. He hides in a crevice, but a man calls him out. He moves into the path to face Weasel, who is holding Pa's gun. As Weasel advances towards Nathan in the darkness, Nathan throws the Shawnee weapon. The last things Nathan remembers hearing are a shot and a loud scream.

When Nathan awakens, he finds that he is bound hand and foot in Weasel's unkempt cabin. Weasel, swearing because a mere boy has caused him to shoot himself, is drinking whiskey as he removes a bullet from his ankle. Weasel tells Nathan how Ezra and he were hired by the army to "remove" the Shawnee from the area so it would be safe for white settlers. After a time, Ezra changed his views about the Shawnee, however. He resigned from his army job and married a Shawnee woman. Weasel brags that, in retaliation, he killed Ezra's wife and unborn child and cut out Ezra's tongue so Ezra could no longer defend the rights of the Shawnee.

Shortly afterward, Nathan tricks the drunken Weasel into cutting his ropes so he can relieve himself. Although Weasel reties Nathan with some old cloth, Nathan releases his new bindings while Weasel sleeps, grabs the rifle, and escapes from the cabin. When he returns to Ezra's home, he tells Ezra and his family about his narrow escape. Nathan bitterly

regrets that he did not kill Weasel and feels he now shares a bond with Ezra in their mutual hatred of Weasel. After a few more days, Pa is strong enough for the family to return to their farm.

Pa tells his children that Ezra has been a part of their family's life for years, dating back to the time that Pa and Mama gave Ezra and Ezra's pregnant wife a ride from town. Through the years, Ezra has watched out for the Fowler family and left items in the stone wall on the Fowler property that he knew the Fowlers needed. When Pa explains that Weasel left him for dead when he was caught in the trap, Nathan's hatred for the killer grows. Molly becomes worried about Ezra and leaves a note in the stone wall begging Ezra to start a new life with his wife's family in Kansas. After Nathan says that someone should kill Weasel, he becomes frustrated because Pa explains that they should not seek revenge. Pa claims that someday Weasel will get what he deserves.

Ignoring Pa's advice, Nathan sneaks out of the house with Pa's rifle and heads toward Weasel's cabin to kill him. When he arrives, he finds Weasel's badly decomposed body where he has died in his bed. Nathan runs to Ezra, who returns with Nathan to bury Weasel's body, reminding Nathan once again of Pa's definition of civilized behavior. When Ezra walks Nathan back to the Fowler house, Nathan gives Molly's note to Ezra. After telling Pa of Weasel's death, Nathan admits that Pa was right when he said that revenge does not make hurt go away.

Nathan, Pa, and Molly enjoy the spring planting and the fiddling contest and dance. Molly finds a note from Ezra saying that he is moving to Kansas. Nathan understands Ezra's note, which states that Weasel is now "small"; the hurt Weasel caused is really only a small part of life. Like Ezra, Nathan is willing to move on to new things.

## 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

Sometimes a small kindness is returned many times over. How is this shown in the story?

*Ezra and his wife "adopt" the Fowler family after Mama and Pa give them a ride from town. They repay the Fowlers' small kindness over the course of the next months by leaving helpful gifts for the family. Even after Ezra's wife dies, Ezra watches over the Fowlers and leaves medicine for Mama when she is ill with fever. Ezra comes to Pa's aid when he is hurt and helps to care for him as well as Nathan and Molly. Ezra continues to watch over the Fowlers after Pa recovers and helps Nathan with the unpleasant task of burying Weasel.*

### Literary Analysis

What makes *Weasel* a "coming of age" story?

*A "coming of age" story traces an adolescent's passage into adulthood. Initially, Nathan hates Weasel for the hurt that Weasel has caused. He is eager for revenge although his father warns him that revenge does not remove hurt. When Nathan discovers that Weasel is dead, he marvels that Ezra, who has good reason to hate Weasel, is willing to bury his enemy. In addition, Nathan sees changes happening around him. He rejoices in the spring planting and the community festival. When Nathan's father enjoys the company of another woman at the dance, Nathan realizes that his father may someday remarry. Ezra moves to Kansas to live with his wife's family. Nathan, however, vows that he will always remember Ezra, Ezra's wife, and the Shawnees with every song he plays on his fiddle. However, Nathan is no longer consumed with hatred. He now understands that the hurt people like Weasel cause is only a small part of life.*

### Inferential Comprehension

When Nathan and Ezra bury Weasel, why does Nathan feel it is important to be "civilized"?

*Nathan's father has told him that the difference between a civilized person and a savage is that a civilized person buries the dead. When Ezra picks up a shovel to bury Weasel, Nathan realizes that his earlier plan to kill Weasel out of revenge would have made him a savage just like Weasel.*

### Constructing Meaning

In what ways do the Fowlers keep Mama's presence in their lives?

*Pa tells stories of Mama, especially tales that reveal Mama's kind, generous spirit. He also faithfully wears her locket, which contains a lock of her hair. Nathan and Molly try to maintain Mama's flower garden and take comfort in the aromas that come from Mama's medicine bag. Nathan fondly remembers his childhood, such as when he compares the view of his ranch from a distance to the toys his parents bought from Isaac the Peddler for him. Molly's mother instilled in Molly many housekeeping, cooking, and healing skills; Molly tries hard to remember them.*

## Teachable Skills

**Recognizing Cause and Effect** Pa explained to Nathan that some people label other people as "savages" in order to make them easier to hate and, subsequently, drive off or hurt. The government hired people like Ezra and Weasel to force the Shawnee and other Native Americans to move west of the Mississippi under the Indian Removal Act of 1830. Have students research this legislation and choose one Native American group that was relocated under this act. Students should write an explanation of how the act affected the Native American tribes they have chosen.

**Responding to Literature** When Molly unties Mama's medicine bag, Mama's memory comes back to Nathan in a rush of scents. Smell is a powerful sense, although it is often not

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considered as important as sight and hearing. Certain scents have positive associations, while others may remind people of unpleasant times. Ask students to write a short essay about a particular smell that they associate with someone or some event in their lives.

**Identifying Reason** Nathan learns that Ezra initially joined Weasel in killing the Shawnee. At some point, Ezra had a change of heart, resigned, and married a Shawnee woman. The author does not give further information about what may have prompted Ezra's change in attitude. Ask students to compose letters that Ezra might have written to the Fowler children to explain one or more events in his life that changed his feelings toward Native Americans. Students should share their stories with the class.

**Recognizing Detail** Herbal remedies were common before modern medicines were developed. In recent years, however, natural medicines have become popular again. Ezra and the Fowler children use the contents of Mama's medicine bag to heal Pa's leg. Ask students to research various herbal remedies that were used in the 1800s or that are currently popular. Then have students each write a list of ten herbal remedies they would include in their "medicine bags." Their lists should include the name of each herb, how it is used, and the ailment or injury it heals.