

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

The Wolfling

by

Sterling North

Book Information

Sterling North, The Wolfling
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Book Level: 5.6
Interest Level: MG

A young boy raises a wolf pup to maturity in the forests of southern Wisconsin.

Award: Misc./Other

Topics: Animals, Wolves; Interpersonal Relationships, Friendship; Natural Environments, Forests; People, Pioneers/Settlers

Main Characters

Bubs Mooney Zeke's ignorant and bullying son, who causes trouble for Robbie

Ellen Trent Robbie's good-hearted mother, who encourages Robbie to further his education

Ezra Trent Robbie's stern father; a hardworking farmer

Heath Henderson a local granary owner and farm implement dealer who offers Robbie a job

Ingeborg Skavilain (Inga) the bright, sensitive thirteen-year-old friend and young sweetheart of Robbie

Margretta Kumlien Thure's gravely ill wife; a loving woman who eloped with Thure from Sweden and is raising four children with him

Miss Hitchcock the schoolteacher at the one-room schoolhouse

Old Three Toes the mother of Robbie's wolfling

Robbie Trent the principal character of the story; a thirteen-year-old boy who raises a wolf pup and longs to leave the farm to continue his education

Thure Kumlien the naturalist neighbor of the Trents, who Robbie admires and confides in

Wolf the wolfling Robbie raises as a his loyal companion

Zeke Mooney a dishonest fur trader

Vocabulary

academy a secondary or college-preparatory school

lupine resembling a wolf

non sequitur a statement that does not logically follow the thoughts that precede it

ostensibly outwardly; on the face of

patrimony an inheritance from a father

stile a set of steps for crossing a fence

usury charging a very high interest rate on borrowed money

viands food

Synopsis

Robbie Trent is a twelve-year-old boy who lives with his parents, Ezra and Ellen Trent on a farm in southern Wisconsin in the 1870's. He is expected to do two-thirds the work of a man and is obligated to work for his father until the age of twenty-one. Robbie's mentor is a professor who lives with his wife and one of their sons on the neighboring property. Thure Kumlien, a Swedish naturalist, teaches Robbie the names and ways of the woodland animals. He recognizes Robbie's intelligence and encourages him to continue his schooling beyond the eighth grade. On a walk they witness the pairing of Thure's dog with a wolf. Robbie sets his hopes on finding the wolf's whelping den and taking a pup to raise as his own. In the following weeks Robbie tries to buy time from his father in order to look for the den. Robbie learns the location of the den from the father of Bubs, a classroom bully. The following morning some men of the area gather at the den's location hoping to get a bounty for the wolf. On a dare, Robbie elects to enter the den if he is allowed to keep the pick of the litter. When he nears the she-wolf, she picks up one pup and escapes, and Robbie finds the pup's littermate, takes it home to raise, and names him Wolf.

Time with Wolf is scarce for Robbie, for planting season has come. A melancholy, itinerant ex-soldier named Dan is hired by Ellen to help with the farm

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work. He befriends Robbie and defends Robbie's need to have time off to be a boy. With Dan's help, Robbie gets the usually stern Ezra to give Robbie his thirteenth birthday off. Robbie fishes with Wolf, sees Inga, a school classmate in whom he is interested, and has a run-in with Bubs.

When school starts in the fall, Miss Hitchcock, the teacher, informs the children about a financial panic on the East Coast that will have rippling effects on the local economy. A wealthy businessman, Heath Henderson, hosts a party for the schoolchildren. He recognizes Robbie's mental math abilities and offers Robbie a job if he ever needs one. As the autumn progresses, prices continue to decline, and Ezra decides to sell the farm's hogs. In a surprising move, the usually practical Ezra buys a parlor organ for Ellen. She is overwhelmed, and Robbie witnesses a rare display of affection between his parents.

Robbie's problems with Bubs continue when he and Wolf discover that Bubs has stolen Robbie's traps. Bubs's father, a fur trader, in an unusual show of generosity, compensates Robbie for his loss. During Christmas vacation, Robbie gets a firm offer of a job from Heath Henderson and tells his parents about it, hoping he will be a financial help to his family. Ezra is outraged, thinking he will lose Robbie's help, and Ellen is worried Robbie will quit school. Robbie talks to Inga, who encourages him to continue his schooling. Another way to earn money presents itself after Bubs antagonizes Robbie into a horse race, and Heath Henderson, who witnesses the race, encourages Robbie to attempt to win the one-hundred dollar first prize at a Fourth of July contest.

As spring approaches, a house raising takes place on behalf of Thure Kumlien, who hopes to fulfill a promise to his dying wife. Meanwhile, Robbie's performance at school begins to suffer because his mind is on the race and getting money to buy his freedom from his father. Inga proposes they farm tobacco together to pay off Ezra and have money for tuition. Robbie agrees but is still determined to race.

On the Fourth of July, Inga sits in the stands with

Wolf, while Robbie lines up on the track with his horse. At the sound of the gong, Inga releases Wolf, who leaps up on Robbie's horsecart. With Wolf at his side, Robbie's only challenge comes from Bubs, who shamefully wins the race by whipping his horse. Robbie leaves with Inga, realizing his nightmare with Bubs is ending and his future looks hopeful.

Open-Ended Questions

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

Initial Understanding

How does Robbie feel toward Miss Hitchcock?

He admires and respects her. She is able to handle Bubs and other older students who are a challenge. He also appreciates Miss Hitchcock's generosity with her books, as they open up new worlds to his intellect. Although his relationship with Miss Hitchcock is not as warm as that with Professor Kumlien, he does look up to her.

Literary Analysis

What seems to be the author's general attitude toward children?

The author seems to like children and considers them curious, able, clever, and capable of feeling deeply and strongly. He shows Robbie as an intelligent and devoted boy who is willing to pay his father for time rather than run from responsibility. Inga is determined and a good problem solver. Even Bubs is shown to have some sense of goodness in his honesty with Heath Henderson.

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Inferential Comprehension

Ezra Trent softens during the course of the story. What are some examples of his changed manner?

Although he often speaks sternly, there are hints that Ezra is more tenderhearted than he appears. Some examples are his deciding not to whip Robbie, his honoring the promise he made to let Robbie keep Wolf even though he felt tricked into it, his purchasing of the parlor organ for his wife, his giving Robbie his thirteenth birthday off without making him pay for it, his agreeing to dance at the house-raising, and his allowing Robbie to race on the Fourth of July.

Constructing Meaning

Robbie regards Thure Kumlien as his mentor, a wise and trusted teacher. Who would you consider a mentor in your life, or who would you choose for a mentor if you wanted to learn about something in depth? Why did you choose this particular individual?

Answers will vary. Students should name an individual and some valuable and helpful characteristics of that person. They may hone in on a particular field in which the individual is knowledgeable and enthusiastic.

Teachable Skills

Recognizing Setting Although the story is set in southern Wisconsin, *The Wolfling* also mentions many other places. Have the students obtain a map or maps of Europe and the United States. Using a different color for each of the main characters, have the students trace the paths of immigration of Thure and Margretta Kumlien, Ezra Trent, and Ellen Trent. They can also indicate the locations of the Civil War battles where Dan fought, the place where Miss Hitchcock was raised, and the town of Albion, where Robbie and Inga hoped to go to school.

Comparing and Contrasting Robbie's life and responsibilities are quite different from most twelve year olds growing up in America today. Ask the students to compare Robbie's life to the

life of a typical twelve-year-old boy in the areas of school, work, spending money, punishments, and recreational time and interests. Present the contrasts in a creative format, such as a "Then and Now" poster or a homemade movie video.

Recognizing Details Robbie is good at mental math. Both Thure Kumlien and Heath Henderson recognize this ability in Robbie. As a change of pace from the usual math or reading lesson, have students practice mental math. Ask each student to design at least one mental math problem that involves calculation of distances or amounts related to aspects of Robbie's life such as plowing, trapping, or trading. The teacher could use these problems to sharpen listening and reasoning skills in a complete mental math unit or as individual enrichment experiences.

Understanding Literary Features One theme that runs through the story is the value of friendship. Many people are instrumental in helping Robbie meet his short and long-term goals. Create a time line of the main events in the story. Show who is responsible in helping Robbie through each particular difficulty. Discuss the possible outcomes of the situations if people had not been there to help or put in a wise word.