

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

After the Goat Man

by
Betsy Byars

Book Information

Betsy Byars, After the Goat Man

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126 Pages

Book Level: 4.5

Interest Level: LG

An overweight, sensitive boy gains the insight and strength to overcome his problems through his search for and discovery of a friend's grandfather, known as the Goat Man.

Award: ALA Notable/Best Books

Topics: Family Life, Grandparents; Humor/Funny, Funny; Natural Environments, Wilderness; Places, Cities; READNOW - Demco Media Turtleback Books, Demco Media - Read Now Grades 4-6

Main Characters

Ada Harrison a young girl who befriends Figgy

Dr. Harrison Ada's father, who treats Figgy's broken leg and plans to help the Goat Man find a new country home

Figgy a young boy who tries to help his grandfather after they are both forced from their cabin because of highway construction

Harold Coleman a humorous, overweight boy who also befriends Figgy

Ira Gryshevich, the Goat Man Figgy's stern grandfather, who arms himself and reclaims his cabin to prevent its destruction

Vocabulary

hermit a person who prefers to live away from others

mortgage a claim given to one's property in case a debt is not paid

orthopedic shoes special shoes designed to correct bone or joint deformities or abnormalities

Synopsis

After the Goat Man is the humorous yet sometimes serious account of three children and an old man as they struggle with the necessary harsh realities of their lives. As the book opens, three children, Figgy, Harold, and Ada, are playing Monopoly on Ada's porch. Harold and Ada have been friends for a number of years, but Figgy has only known them since they began their game a day and a half before. He had been passing by as Ada and Harold were setting up the game and he had asked to play. Figgy is losing the game when Harold, the leader of the trio, finally becomes tired of the long game and quits. Although it is only three o'clock in the afternoon and far too early for dinner, the overweight boy heads home to satisfy his enormous appetite. Ada then quits the game as well, despite Figgy's protests.

Figgy runs home, intending to return after dinner. A dog barks at him, but he feels safe clutching his "lucky" rabbit's foot. The rabbit's foot, however, has not brought much luck for him: his mother is dead and his father's whereabouts are unknown. Furthermore, highway construction has forced him and his grandfather to relocate from their cabin in the woods to a house in the city. While Figgy does not mind the move, his grandfather has become very bitter and potentially dangerous. When Figgy arrives at the new house, he finds that his grandfather has left and, according to a neighbor, is carrying a shotgun. Meanwhile, Harold and Ada hear on the news that Ira Gryshevich, the "Goat Man," has moved back into his rural cabin and threatens to shoot anyone who tries to remove him. Harold and Ada are unaware, however, that the Goat Man, nicknamed for the two goats he used to own, is actually Figgy's grandfather.

Figgy returns to Ada's house to tell his friends he cannot stay to play another game. When they ask him why, Figgy at first refuses to explain, but then reluctantly tells them his grandfather is missing. They tell him about the news report stating that his grandfather is back in his cabin. The three make plans to visit the Goat Man to try to prevent him from shooting anyone. Ada and Harold set out on bicycles, but Figgy is terrified of bicycles since an

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accident several years before when he "borrowed" a bicycle and crashed. He is too embarrassed to admit his fear, so he sets off running to the cabin by himself. Despite not being able to find Figgy, Ada and Harold determine to go on to the Goat Man's cabin anyway. They eventually spot Figgy walking down the new highway, and Harold insists on giving Figgy a ride the rest of the way to the cabin. Figgy hesitantly agrees, but Harold builds up too much speed, loses control of the bicycle, and runs off the road. Figgy breaks his right leg in the accident and insists that someone get his grandfather. Harold walks to the cabin and tells the Goat Man about Figgy's injury. The Goat Man returns with Harold and comforts Figgy, while Harold runs to a store down the road and calls for an ambulance. Figgy wants his grandfather to set his leg, but Ada tells Harold to ask her father, a doctor, to come. Ada's father treats Figgy at the hospital and returns with a good prognosis for Figgy and a promise to help the Goat Man find a home in the country.

Open-Ended Questions

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

Initial Understanding

This story begins with Figgy, Ada, and Harold competing in a game of Monopoly. The reader then learns Figgy is new to the neighborhood and his grandfather is called the Goat Man. It is not until the beginning of the fourth chapter that Figgy dares to tell Ada and Harold who his grandfather is. Why does Figgy not want to share his grandfather's story, and what makes him finally do so?

Figgy realizes that his grandfather is different and that some people think he is mean. The nickname "Goat Man" was once regarded with respect but since his grandfather refused to move out of his cabin, people use it in a mocking way. Figgy is probably embarrassed, but he finally must tell his friends the true story because he must go to help his grandfather at his cabin.

Literary Analysis

An author often uses the title of a book to tell something important about the story. What do you think the author is trying to suggest with the title *After the Goat Man*?

Answers will vary. Some students might interpret the word "after" as meaning "to go after," and that would indicate that someone might try to restrain the Goat Man. This does happen when Figgy and his friends ride out toward the cabin to find Figgy's grandfather. "After" could also indicate time, i.e., the period of time that will follow the "Goat Man" period in Figgy's and Ira's lives. The author leaves that to the reader's interpretation.

Inferential Comprehension

After the Goat Man is a funny, yet sometimes serious story about how two young friends help another friend in a time of crisis. How do you think most people would feel at the end of this story? Explain your answer.

The story seems to end on a happier note because Dr. Harrison talks about finding a place in the country for the Goat Man. This could also be a sad note because if Figgy's grandfather moved to the country again, Figgy would probably go too, and he would leave his two new friends behind.

Constructing Meaning

In the beginning of this story, Figgy describes his grandfather as being like a frog, a snake, and a bull. He goes on to conclude that his grandfather is like an animal protecting its territory whenever anyone, especially the highway department's men, arrive at his cabin. These men are taking away the old man's land and cabin to build a highway. Do you think it is right for authorities to take away someone's land? Explain your answer.

Answers will vary. This is a difficult issue but many people would argue that progress needs to happen, and if a landowner is given a fair deal, then it is acceptable. Others may say that land ownership is a basic American right and law abiding citizens should not have their property taken away.

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Teachable Skills

Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors The characters in *After the Goat Man* play Monopoly, drink Kool-Aid, and eat at Dairy Queen. These details help set the story in time and provide connections to real life for the reader. Have your students write a short story using cultural details that are relevant to their lives, such as popular games, drinks, restaurants, etc.

Comparing and Contrasting During this story, the author creates a bond between Harold and the Goat Man when Harold finally understands what the old man must be going through. Have your students make a list of how these two important characters are similar and how they are different. Students could make a poster which graphically portrays this.

Understanding Dialogue In this story, Harold complains that people often say, "I know how you feel" when they really do not know. People say other familiar things out of habit and may not even realize it or care about the response they receive. Have your students record similar remarks that their friends and family members say to them. For example, the question, "How are you doing?" is a very common greeting. They can then make a graph of the different responses and possibly which ones were said more often by males versus females, or older people versus younger, etc. Have them share their findings.

Responding to Literature One of the conflicts in *After the Goat Man* is Harold's struggle with his weight. The author humorously portrays him as a Dairy Queen addict who is not fond of exercising. Obesity is, however, a serious problem with today's youth. Have your students make a list of some of their favorite foods and snacks. Define calorie and help them find out the caloric value and fat content of their listed foods. Use resources to see how exercise and calories are related.