

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

"B" Is for Betsy

by
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Book Information

Carolyn Haywood, "B" Is for Betsy

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Betsy experiences an interesting first year in school and looks forward to summer vacation at her grandfather's farm.

Topics: Community Life, School

Main Characters

Betsy a gentle little girl who at first fears and then enjoys her first year of school; she is frequently generous and usually well-behaved

Billy Porter Betsy's classmate who brings two tadpoles to school

Christopher Betsy's classmate who teases Curly

Curly a friendly cocker spaniel that many of the school children stop to greet on their way to school

Ellen the girl who becomes Betsy's best friend; she accompanies Betsy to Betsy's Grandfather's home for the summer

Father Betsy's doting father, who encourages Betsy's generosity

Grandma Pretzie an elderly poor woman who comes to the school yard to sell pretzels and often tells the children fairy tales

Kenny Roberts Betsy's classmate who gets in trouble for hiding Waggle the frog

Miss Grey Betsy's gentle but firm teacher, who tries to make her class entertaining and exciting for her students

Mother Betsy's kind mother, who surprises Betsy by giving her a beautiful tea set

Mr. Applebee the old man who owns Curly; he rewards Betsy for rescuing Curly by giving Betsy one of Curly's puppies

Mr. Patrick Kilpatrick the fatherly policeman who escorts the school children across a busy street

Mrs. Beckett Betsy's baby-sitter, who still considers Betsy a good girl even after she is disobedient one day

Mrs. Good (the Good Lady) a generous shopkeeper who often gives children treats

Mrs. Katie Kilpatrick Mr. Kilpatrick's wife, who treats Betsy kindly when Betsy becomes lost while walking to school

Old Ned a man who works at Betsy's grandfather's farm; he remembers school as a terrible place

Teddy Ellen's brother, who coaxes Ellen's dog to leave the classroom

the old lady an old woman who lives in a large house with a "No Trespassing" sign; she quickly forgives Betsy for picking her violets

the organ-grinder a street musician who threatens to beat his monkey after it runs away

Vocabulary

cloak-room a small room for hanging coats

coax to urge in a gentle way

errand a short trip taken to complete a task

organ-grinder a street musician who makes money by playing music on a hand-held organ that has a crank handle

sash a wide ribbon worn around the waist

switch a thin stick used for spanking

wilted drooping from a lack of freshness

Synopsis

Betsy fears school will be a terrible place because Old Ned, who works on Grandfather's farm, told her that teachers keep a switch in the corner to spank children. When she arrives at school on her first day, however, she is relieved to see that her teacher, Miss Grey, has no switch. Shortly after, a large dog belonging to a girl named Ellen comes to class and refuses to leave until Ellen's brother lures him away with a bone. At recess Betsy befriends Ellen by offering to let Ellen hold her beloved stuffed koala.

All September Mother walks Betsy to school so she can learn the way. Betsy especially likes being led

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across a wide street by the friendly policeman, Mr. Kilpatrick. However, when Betsy is allowed to walk by herself she loses her way and she must ask a woman for help. The woman tells Betsy to wait until her husband comes home for breakfast; her husband turns out to be Mr. Kilpatrick! Betsy happily goes to school in Mr. Kilpatrick's red police car.

One morning Billy brings two tadpoles to Miss Grey's classroom. The class names the tadpoles Wiggle and Waggle, and the children are very excited when Waggle grows legs. In the meantime the children are building a model Native American village. One day Kenny is alone in the classroom finishing his schoolwork. When Betsy and Ellen enter the room, Betsy notices that Waggle is gone. The children search, but they cannot find Waggle. Later, when the children see a wigwam jump, they find Waggle underneath the wigwam. When Miss Grey looks at Kenny, his red face reveals that he is the culprit.

Throughout the school year Betsy and Ellen's friendship continues to develop. One day they are at the Good Lady's store when Ellen admires a set of doll dishes. Betsy starts saving her pennies to buy the dishes for Ellen's birthday. Just before Ellen's birthday, Betsy shows her mother the dishes and mentions that she would like to buy them. Mother is in a hurry and does not listen to Betsy. That afternoon Betsy goes to purchase the dishes, but she finds out that they have been sold. Distraught, she goes home and tells Mother the heartbreaking news. Mother shows her that she bought the dishes to give to Betsy, but she says Betsy can give the dishes to Ellen. Ellen is sad that she cannot have a birthday party because her father works at night and sleeps during the day. When Ellen comes on her birthday to visit Betsy, Betsy gives Ellen the dishes and other children arrive unexpectedly with more presents. Ellen sees a donkey game on the wall, and she realizes she is having a birthday party at Betsy's house!

Every morning in the schoolyard a poor old woman nicknamed Grandma Pretzie sells pretzels and tells stories. At Thanksgiving when Miss Grey asks the

class to whom they would like to give a food basket, one girl suggests Grandma Pretzie. The class plans the basket, but Betsy later tells Father she is disappointed that the class cannot give Grandma Pretzie a turkey. Sometime later, Father comes home with two turkeys. When Miss Grey is assembling the basket, she mysteriously adds a turkey. When Betsy later asks Father about the extra turkey he bought, his eyes twinkle and Betsy knows his secret.

On the way to school Betsy often stops at a neighbor's yard to pet Curly the dog. One day Betsy's classmate Christopher fools Curly into doing tricks by pretending he has a treat for her. Upset that Christopher did not give the dog a treat, Betsy determines to bring Curly a treat herself. She buys a box of puppy biscuits after school, but when she goes to school the next day Curly is missing. After school Betsy is walking home when she hears a dog whining. She finds Curly trapped in a pit and takes Curly home to her owner. When Curly has puppies sometime later, Curly's owner rewards Betsy by giving her one. Betsy names her puppy "Thumpy."

Betsy's parents go on vacation in April, and Mrs. Beckett comes to babysit Betsy. It rains all week, and by Friday Betsy is grumpy. She refuses to eat her oatmeal or wear her rubber overshoes. On the way home she trespasses into someone's yard and picks violets. She is nearly home when she realizes that she left her school-bag in the yard, but the bag is gone when she returns to retrieve it. She is upset when she gets home, and she eventually apologizes to Mrs. Beckett for her behavior. The next day she decides to replace the stolen violets with a bouquet of pansies. The old woman living in the house greets her pleasantly and returns the school-bag, which had been picked up by the gardener.

In May posters announce that soon the circus will be coming to town. Miss Grey asks the class if they would like to present their own circus for the sixth grade class. During their performance, a monkey suddenly comes through the window and begins to eat their peanuts. Miss Grey calls outside to the organ-grinder who is searching for the monkey. At

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first he threatens to beat the monkey for running away, but Betsy persuades him not to. Instead, the organ-grinder and the monkey perform for the class.

Betsy is promoted to the second grade in June, and Father promises to reward her with a surprise. On the day Betsy is to leave to spend the summer on her grandfather's farm, she is pleased to learn that Ellen is coming to spend the vacation with her! The story ends with Betsy and Ellen telling Old Ned that school is wonderful.

Open-Ended Questions

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

Initial Understanding

How does Betsy feel about school by the end of the year?

By the time Betsy returns to Grandfather's farm, she feels that school is a fun and exciting place. She feels that her teacher was kind, and she likes most of the people she met there. She is also proud that she was not only promoted but was also the top female student in her class.

Literary Analysis

How do Betsy's parents expect their daughter to behave?

Betsy's mother calls Betsy her "great big girl" because her mother wants to encourage her to be brave. Her mother expresses pride that she is big enough to go to school, and she lets Betsy walk to school on her own as soon as she feels Betsy is ready. Her mother expects her to follow the guidelines that she gives her, such as not crossing the wide street without the policeman, not talking to strangers, and not pausing to look into the shop windows. Betsy's parents also encourage her to be generous. When Betsy says that she wants to give the doll dishes to Ellen, Mother agrees and helps her repack them. When Betsy wishes that Grandma Pretzie could have a turkey for Thanksgiving, Father buys an extra turkey and donates it to the food basket. In addition, Betsy is encouraged to do well in school; Father promises her a special surprise if she gets promoted to the second grade.

Inferential Comprehension

When Betsy scolds Christopher for teasing Curly, why does Christopher say that he is glad he is not a girl?

Christopher refuses to feel guilty for disappointing Betsy and attributes Betsy's objections to her gender. He assumes that girls have a more sensitive conscience than boys do and therefore are not able to enjoy doing the "fun" things that boys can do without caring if they are right or wrong.

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Constructing Meaning

Was Betsy justified in acting the way she did when Mrs. Beckett tried to make her eat oatmeal and wear rubber overshoes?

Students' responses will vary. Some students will feel that it is inappropriate for Betsy to refuse to do what Mrs. Beckett asks her to do. Others may believe that Betsy's behavior is justified because Mrs. Beckett should not try to force Betsy to eat or wear something. Still others may feel that while Betsy should not be rude to Mrs. Beckett, her frustration is understandable because she has had a disappointing week and probably misses her parents.

they thought school might be like and how their ideas about school have changed over time.

Teachable Skills

Describing Actions or Events Miss Grey's class transforms the classroom into a circus complete with a barker, performances, and a refreshment stand. Have the students create a classroom circus similar to the one in Betsy's class. Invite another class to enjoy their circus as Betsy's class does.

Recognizing Details Miss Grey encourages the students to help a member of their community by preparing a food basket. The children put a lot of thought into what Grandma Pretzie might need or like to have. Have the students conduct their own food drive to help the needy in their community. Ask the students to consider what might be most useful for the needy as well as what might be a special treat for them.

Comparing and Contrasting Betsy is described as being "a very good little girl." Have the students read one of Beverly Cleary's books about Ramona. Then have the students compare and contrast Ramona's behavior to Betsy's behavior. Students should compile their results on a chart.

Responding to Literature This book begins with an account of Betsy's first day of school and shows how Betsy's feelings about school change. Have the students write about how they felt on their first day of school. Ask them to include what