

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for The Borrowers Afield by Mary Norton

Book Information

Mary Norton, The Borrowers Afield
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These are the further adventures of the family of miniature people who, after losing their home under the kitchen floor of an old English house, are forced to move out to the fields.

Award: ALA Notable/Best Books

Topics: Adventure, Travel; Family Life, Misc./Other; Fantasy/Imagination, Misc./Other; Series, Borrowers

Main Characters

Arrietty the adventuresome fourteen-year-old borrower whose experiences are the source of Tom Goodenough's story

Homily Arrietty's mother and Pod's nervous but loyal wife

Kate the young girl to whom the adventures of the borrowers are told

Mrs. May (known as Miss Ada as a child) the old woman who lives with Kate's family and, as a child, lived in the house with the borrowers

Pod Arrietty's father; a clever and protective borrower

Spiller the orphaned borrower who befriends Arrietty's family and assists them in living outdoors

Tom Goodenough the old man who tells Kate the adventures of the borrowers that he learned from Arrietty

Vocabulary

annex a small addition or extra storage space

cache a secret hoard of something

caravan a home built in a wagon that can easily be transported from place to place

halliard a rope used to lift or pull something into position for use

martyr someone who sacrifices his or her own needs and wants for those of others

Synopsis

Kate, a young English girl, listens to the stories of Mrs. May, the elderly lady living with Kate's family. Mrs. May tells Kate stories about the borrowers, tiny secretive people who live in the nooks and crannies of well-kept homes and survive by "borrowing" whatever they need from their human hosts. Kate is thrilled when Mrs. May inherits a cottage near her childhood home and invites Kate to visit it with her. Kate eagerly accepts and, upon reaching the cottage, meets Tom Goodenough, an old man who had long lived in the cottage. After speaking with Tom, Kate realizes that, unlike Mrs. May, he had actually seen the borrowers, and had been in confidence with Arrietty, a young girl borrower. After Tom gives Arrietty's diary to Kate, Kate persuades him to share his stories by asking questions about the headings it contains.

Tom's knowledge of the borrowers begins where Mrs. May's information ends, at the point when Arrietty and her father, Pod, and her mother, Homily, fled to the field after being discovered in the house. In search of Homily's brother, who supposedly settled in a badger's set (den) with his family, the little family braves the dangers of the huge grasses, a curious crow and heavy raindrops to reach the edge of the field where they believe the badger's set to be. After the rain stops their search that night, the family takes refuge in an old boot, much to the consternation of Homily.

The next day, Pod realizes that it may be nearly impossible to find the other borrower family and convinces his wife that it would be wiser to settle down in the boot while they continue to explore the field. Arrietty, who is delighted by the many adventures that await, is enthusiastic about the idea, but Homily does not share her daughter's positive outlook. Instead, she constantly frets about the dangers they face and the certain death that awaits them if the winter catches them living outside. For the time being, however, the family adapts well to their new surroundings. Although they manage to

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survive, they only become truly comfortable after Spiller, a borrower who lives by himself, comes into their lives.

Arrietty first meets Spiller and brings him home to meet her mother. Homily is terrified by his dirty appearance and by the cricket he brings as a gift and orders him to leave immediately. In the meantime, Pod searches for the badger's set and discovers that it is occupied by foxes. After he returns to the boot to break the bad news to his family, Arrietty tells Pod about Spiller. Spiller later appears in their boot and informs Pod and Homily that he sent Arrietty down the nearby stream in his boat in order to help her escape from some Gypsies. When Homily realizes that Spiller has saved Arrietty's life, she takes a great liking to him and forgives his "borrowing" of two of the family's most valuable tools. The family's acceptance of Spiller is sealed when he produces a chunk of beautifully prepared meat, a treat which none of the family members have enjoyed since they left the house.

Spiller becomes the source of all their necessities. They never question his source, which remains a mystery until the day that their boot's previous owner, a Gypsy named Mild Eye, finds and reclaims it. The family awakens in the Gypsy's caravan and is nearly caught by him, but young Tom Goodenough appears with Spiller in his pocket and whisks them away to the tiny cottage in which he lives. There they discover a whole community of borrowers, including Homily's brother and his family. Safe and happy, they intend to make their own home in the wall of the cottage. Arrietty, however, curious about their new home, risks being seen by the humans of the cottage and sneaks out of their home in the wall and enters a room of the house. Here she discovers Tom and greets him, beginning the friendship in which she reveals to him the story of their adventures.

Open-Ended Questions

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

Initial Understanding

Why is Tom so afraid to have his stories about the borrowers published?

There are several possible answers to this question. First, he is probably afraid of being laughed at by whoever reads the story. Most people do not believe in the borrowers and think anyone who does believe in them is crazy. Second, Tom is probably also trying to protect his small friends. Most people would probably exploit the borrowers if they found out the tiny creatures really existed, and Tom seems aware of this and wants to prevent it from happening. Finally, he may be afraid that if the story were published, people would come to the cottage to see the borrowers for themselves, which would disrupt his life.

Literary Analysis

When discussing Spiller and his "borrowing" of their tools, Homily declares she is planning to explain to Spiller the ethic by which all borrowers are raised ("That you don't never borrow from a borrower!") What are some other ethics by which the borrowers live?

There are several commonly accepted rules by which the borrowers live. First of all, they do not believe it is good to trust human beings, and so they do not allow themselves to be discovered. However, it is perfectly acceptable to "borrow" from them all that is necessary to survive, as well as to "borrow" things that are not so vital.

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Inferential Comprehension

What is the difference between "borrowing" something and "stealing" something? Based on this distinction, did Spiller "borrow" the hat pin and half scissor or did he "steal" them? Defend your answer.

To the characters, it seems the major difference between the borrowing and stealing is how the loss of an object affects the person from whom it is taken. If the item is not absolutely necessary and its disappearance causes nothing more than a minor inconvenience it is "borrowing." However, if the item is considered valuable, either for its monetary worth or for its usefulness, and the person from whom it was taken will be negatively affected by its absence, the item is considered "stolen." At first, Spiller seems to have stolen the tools, because their loss is obviously a serious problem for the family. However, he seems to "pay" for the tools by bringing the family food and supplies in return, which makes their loss much less serious.

Constructing Meaning

Because the story is set in Britain, there are a number of words used in the book that are common terms in Britain, but are rarely, if ever, used in the United States. Find three of these words, give their definitions for the context in which they are used and, when possible, offer a synonym for each.

There are a great number of possible responses to this question. Some of the words students may identify are "stile," "badger's set," "caper," "moor," "bodkin," "besom," "gamekeeper," and "teetotal."

Teachable Skills

Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors In every community, there is an unwritten code of conduct by which everyone abides. An example of this is the rule which the borrowers follow of not borrowing from other borrowers. A code of conduct exists in every social situation, including the classroom. Discuss as a class some of the unspoken rules by which they live in the classroom and ask the students to explain why they obey them. Is it from fear of punishment,

courtesy for others, personal safety, or a combination of many reasons? Discuss the difference between ethics and assumptions. What is the danger of mistaking an ethic for an assumption or judgment?

Making Predictions In Mild Eye's caravan, Pod, Homily, and Arrietty come very close to being caught. Have the students discuss what would have happened if one of them had been captured. How would the other two borrowers have rescued him or her? What ordinary objects would they have used to accomplish the rescue?

Identifying Reasons The existence of the borrowers provides an explanation for why miscellaneous household items disappear. Students might find it fun to create their own explanations about the cause behind this. Have them write a short story that explains why a particular object disappears. Students should be free to choose whether the object disappears on its own, (i.e. a sock disappears from the dryer because it is the larval stage of a hangar) or whether it is taken by some other creature for some particular use.

Responding to Literature The borrowers develop creative uses for common household objects. Have each student bring in an object from home and think of a way a borrower would use it that is different from its usual purpose. Have the students display their object with a written explanation of its alternative use.