

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

The Castle in the Attic

by

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Book Information

Elizabeth Winthrop, The Castle in the Attic

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William has a fantastic present in the attic that is able to transport him to another land and another time for a challenging and exciting adventure.

Award: State Award

Topics: Adventure, Misc./Other;
Fantasy/Imagination, Dragons;
Fantasy/Imagination, Misc./Other;
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Main Characters

Alastor the evil wizard who steals Sir Simon's father's kingdom and turns Sir Simon to lead; Alastor ruins Sir Simon's land and tortures his people for many years but is finally conquered by William

Brian the guard who watches over William while William entertains Alastor as a fool

Calendar Sir Simon's nurse, who is unable to stop Alastor from turning Sir Simon to lead; she feigns loyalty to Alastor but helps William when he comes to stop Alastor

Dick, the apple-tree man Tolliver's father, who had been cursed by Alastor when he tried to steal apples for his infant son, Tolliver; Dick is set free when William climbs an apple tree and brings him a magic apple

Dr. Anne Lawrence William's mother, who works as a pediatrician and has very little time for William

Jason William's best friend since first grade; Jason's feelings are hurt when he wants to play with the castle but William asks him to leave

Mr. Lawrence William's father, who has been too involved in his career to spend much time with William; he starts cooking dinners with William after Mrs. Phillips leaves

Mrs. Elinore Phillips William's English nanny, who has taken care of him for ten years; William shrinks her to prevent her from returning to England

Robert William's gymnastic coach; he challenges William because he recognizes William's natural talent

Sir Simon of Hargrave, the Silver Knight the lead knight who comes to life when William holds him; William helps save Sir Simon's country

Tolliver the young son of Dick, the apple-tree man, and grandson of Calendar; he greets William at the edge of the forest and travels with Sir Simon to the castle

William Edward Lawrence the insecure but loving child of busy parents who is distraught when his lifelong nanny tells him she is returning to England; he wants to keep her with him at all costs

Vocabulary

apparition a ghost or ghost-like vision

crone an old woman

recorder a simple wind instrument that has a flutelike sound

rummage to search through things

squire a young boy apprenticed to a knight

stalwartly in a determined fashion

Synopsis

When William, who lives in Southbrook, New York, learns that his nanny Mrs. Phillips is returning to England after caring for him all his life, William is determined to stop her. First, he hides her picture of her late husband and her pearl pin. However, when William's mother tells him that Mrs. Phillips will leave even without her things, William puts them back. Mrs. Phillips catches him, and he admits that he thought she would not leave if he hid them. Mrs. Phillips tries to comfort him by saying she has a surprise for him.

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When William returns from school on Monday, Mrs. Phillips shows him a castle in the attic. It had been hers as a child and now is William's. She tells William there is only one toy knight with the castle and that he should look at the small metal knight when he is alone. Later, William opens the knight's box and lifts him out, but he quickly drops him and runs because the knight moves in his hand. William comes back, and the knight introduces himself as Sir Simon of Hargrave, the Silver Knight.

On Tuesday, Sir Simon tells William about an evil wizard, Alastor, who tricked Sir Simon's father into relinquishing his kingdom to Alastor instead of bequeathing it to Sir Simon. When Sir Simon tried to fight Alastor, Alastor used two of his magic medallions to shrink Sir Simon and to turn him into lead. Thus, William finds Sir Simon as a toy in the castle. Apparently, however, William has a special power that enables him to turn Sir Simon from lead back into a living being. Sir Simon claims that he snatched the shrinking medallion from Alastor just before being shrunk himself, but William and Sir Simon are unable to make it work. Alastor still has the remaining two medallions, one that returns shrunken things to their normal size and one that turns things to lead.

The next day, William has to go to gymnastics practice after school and invites his best friend Jason to accompany him. After practice, William shows Jason the castle but then asks to be alone, wanting to keep the secret of Sir Simon to himself. That evening William brings Sir Simon live bugs, and Sir Simon is finally able to shrink them with the stolen medallion. Suddenly William's father comes up to the attic. He promises to make a moat for the castle and sends William to bed.

Before Mrs. Phillips leaves for England, she visits William's gymnastics practice. With Mrs. Phillips watching, William is finally able to complete a difficult exercise. At dinner William claims he cannot perform without Mrs. Phillips watching, hoping to persuade her to stay. Mrs. Phillips contends it is all in William's mind. As they are playing chess, William realizes he can stop Mrs. Phillips from leaving by

shrinking her. When Sir Simon complains of being lonely, William suggests Mrs. Phillips come live in the castle. Sir Simon tells William to get Mrs. Phillips's consent first. According to the legend surrounding the medallions, people shrunk unwillingly will lose time in their own world until they are restored to their normal size. William says he will speak to her and makes plans with Sir Simon to shrink Mrs. Phillips the next day.

After school, William walks with Mrs. Phillips to the bus stop to say good-bye. Sir Simon is hiding in William's pocket and, at the last minute, he uses the medallion to shrink her. By the time William gets Mrs. Phillips and Sir Simon back to the castle in his pocket, Sir Simon has discovered that William did not get her permission to be shrunk. Mrs. Phillips refuses to speak to William until she is restored to her normal size. After several days of silence, Sir Simon tells William that Mrs. Phillips will only speak to William if he is small enough to come into the castle to see her. When William objects because he would be trapped in a small world, he begins to realize what he has done to Mrs. Phillips. The day after William's father installs the moat for the castle, William has Sir Simon shrink him, deciding that he must help Sir Simon defeat Alastor and recover the medallion that will permit them to return to their normal size.

William tells Mrs. Phillips that he has made a mistake, and the next day he starts training as Sir Simon's squire. They plan to travel back to Sir Simon's former kingdom to reclaim it from Alastor. Mrs. Phillips has William practice his gymnastics to use in the battle against Alastor. After a week, Sir Simon declares them ready, and he and William leave.

One of their first challenges is to travel through an enchanted forest. Sir Simon emphatically warns William to stay on the path, but when Sir Simon thinks he sees his beloved horse, he ignores his own advice and leaves the path. William must find his own way out of the forest. At the forest's edge, William meets a young boy, Tolliver, who gives directions and warnings and promises to watch for

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Sir Simon. As William travels to Alastor's castle, he meets an old man who wants William to climb an apple tree to retrieve for him the one red apple high in the tree. William remembers Sir Simon's advice to be kind to the needy, so he retrieves the apple and follows the instructions that he must not take a bite of it himself. As soon as the old man takes a bite, he becomes young. He explains to William that he is Dick, the son-in-law of Sir Simon's old nurse Calendar and that Alastor had put a curse on him. Dick also tells William that the dragon guarding Alastor's gate can be conquered by stabbing it in the right thigh while staring into its eyes.

As William travels, he hears rumors that Sir Simon has once again been captured by Alastor and turned to lead for a second time. Feeling discouraged, he struggles on and defeats the dragon at the castle gates. William claims he has come to ask for a job entertaining Alastor as his fool, and a guard leads him to Alastor. William demonstrates his acrobatics, but he becomes afraid when Calendar wonders how he got past the dragon. A soldier says he let William in the side door, and William is given the job. Alastor then takes William to see the people he has turned into lead. William is horrified to find Sir Simon and Tolliver there.

A week later William is forced to watch Alastor turn a man into lead. By showing Calendar that her grandson, Tolliver, has also been turned to lead, William persuades Calendar to tell him how to defeat Alastor. Calendar tells William to get Alastor's magic necklaces and then face his own weaknesses in Alastor's mirror. When Alastor comes in to demand a performance, William uses his acrobatics to knock Alastor down and snatch the necklaces. Alastor makes William face the mirror, and William recognizes the cruelty of his deeds when he sees in the mirror an image of Mrs. Phillips imprisoned in his heart as a small person in the castle in the attic. William reminds himself that he is here to undo this wrong as well as to help Sir Simon regain his kingdom. He then makes Alastor look in the mirror. Alastor cannot stand to see the evil inside himself, and Calendar, grabbing the magic necklaces from William, turns Alastor to lead and shrinks him before

William can stop her.

After the battle William uses his special power to revive all the lead people. Later he travels with the medallion back to Mrs. Phillips in the castle. Alastor, still made of lead, has magically appeared in the castle, but Mrs. Phillips warns William not to touch Alastor lest he be brought back to life. Mrs. Phillips and William restore each other to normal size, and Mrs. Phillips watches William do his gymnastics routine once more before she leaves for England.

Open-Ended Questions

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

Initial Understanding

Why does William decide not to follow Sir Simon off the path into the forest?

Sir Simon has stressed to William the consequences of leaving the path, and William remembers this when he is first tempted to follow Sir Simon. He is terrified of being left alone in the forest, but he is determined to save Mrs. Phillips. He knows that if he leaves the path there is a good possibility that both he and Sir Simon will be lost forever.

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Literary Analysis

What kind of person has Calendar become after spending years with Alastor?

Calendar seems to have once been a loving and kind woman, but years of living under Alastor's rule have made her suspicious and cynical. She is still disturbed by the things that Alastor does, but she no longer tries to stop him. She does still retain feelings for her family, though. For example, she finally tells William how he can defeat Alastor after William explains that the boy who had been turned to lead was her grandson. However, Calendar's main goal in life seems to be getting revenge on Alastor. When it is clear that Alastor is too weak to harm her, she steps forward and turns him to lead. She has been so filled with hatred for Alastor as well as remorse for not having been able to stop him that she is not quite the same person she used to be. When Sir Simon tells her she is forgiven, she is able to rejoin her family and return to a somewhat normal life.

Inferential Comprehension

Why does William see Mrs. Phillips imprisoned in his heart when he looks in Alastor's mirror?

The image of Mrs. Phillips locked in his heart that William sees in the mirror represents two things. First, William has physically prevented Mrs. Phillips from leaving for England by shrinking her and making her his prisoner. Second, William sees himself in the mirror because he has refused to let go of Mrs. Phillips emotionally, which is what caused him to shrink her in the first place. William breaks the spell not only by stating that he has come to undo what he has done to Mrs. Phillips, but also by recognizing that he must have confidence in his own abilities rather than rely on her for support.

Constructing Meaning

What is Mrs. Phillips's opinion of William?

Mrs. Phillips has a rather complex opinion of William's character. She feels that he is gentle and good-hearted, but she also recognizes that William uses her as an emotional crutch because he does not have the self-confidence to act on his own. Mrs. Phillips also thinks that William does not focus hard enough on the things that he is trying to accomplish. She realizes that William is neglected by his parents and hopes that they will be forced to spend more time with him once she leaves. She also hopes that William's inability to do his gymnastic routine will change once he is used to her not watching him.

Teachable Skills

Recognizing Setting William magically travels to Sir Simon's kingdom in this story. Have the students draw a map of William's travels. Have them include the details that William gives about the landscape through which he travels.

Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors Alastor uses alchemy to gain control over Sir Simon's kingdom. Have the students research the "science" of alchemy and write a paper defining the theory and describing some of the experiments that were attempted. They could also research some of the famous alchemists.

Responding to Literature William uses his special skills to defeat Alastor. Have the students identify their special skills. Have them create a poster showing how they might use their own special skills to conquer Alastor.

Recognizing Feelings There are many emotionally charged moments in this story, such as Mrs. Phillips giving William the castle, William shrinking Mrs. Phillips, and William defeating Alastor. Have the students choose an event they believe is particularly emotional and describe what they think the different characters in the scene are feeling. Emphasize that many times characters have complex emotions that cannot be summed up in a single word or short phrase.