

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

The Daydreamer

by
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Book Information

Ian McEwan, The Daydreamer
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An imaginative ten-year-old boy, who is best understood by his family, recounts some of the adventures he has while daydreaming.

Award: NCTE Notable Children's Books in the Language Arts; SLJ Best Book

Topics: Family Life, Growing Up; Fantasy/Imagination, Dreams

Main Characters

Barry Tamerlane a school bully whom Peter confronts

Gwendoline the big sister of one of the Beach Gang members, who keeps to herself

Kate Fortune Peter's younger sister, who makes Peter and Kenneth switch bodies

Kenneth Peter's younger cousin, who switches bodies with Peter

Mrs. Goodgame a rich old lady who turns out to be the neighborhood thief

Peter Fortune an eleven-year-old boy whose daydreams often get him into trouble

Vocabulary

bully a person who hurts people who are weaker

burglar a thief

googol ten multiplied by ten one hundred times

solemn serious; grave; gloomy

vanish to disappear

Synopsis

Peter Fortune is a quiet young boy who likes to daydream. Adults are often baffled by his behavior. They cannot seem to comprehend that a young boy could possibly sit still for so long. Peter is equally

baffled by adult behavior. He wonders why they do not want to have any fun. In his opinion, all adults do is worry about money and taxes.

Peter's daydreaming often gets him into trouble during school. One day, while he is supposed to be working on a timed test, Peter spends the entire period daydreaming about the number googol. Teachers consider Peter to be less intelligent than other students, but his parents realize he is a very creative young boy.

From this point the book is an account of several of Peter's daydreams. The first daydream is titled, "The Dolls." Peter and his sister, Kate, had shared a room for many years. When Peter finally gets his own room, both children are excited for the change. However, one day Peter wanders into Kate's room and is accosted by one of her many dolls. The "Bad Doll" is a disfigured doll who wants Peter's room for its companions and itself. Just when the dolls rip off Peter's appendages and yank out his hair, Kate walks into her room to find her brother playing with her dolls and creating voices for them.

Peter has his next adventure in the chapter, "The Cat." Peter and his old cat, William Cat, exchange bodies by "unzipping" each other. While in William Cat's body, Peter pushes a neighborhood tom cat out of William Cat's territory. When the two exchange bodies again, William Cat dies. Everyone in the family is concerned about Peter's reaction to the news. Peter is sad, but he is happy that William Cat had one more chance to feel young.

The next daydream adventure, titled "Vanishing Cream," begins with Peter's exploration of the kitchen drawer. The drawer is full of odd junk, but he finds a jar of vanishing cream. He decides to try it out on his family members who are sunbathing in the yard. After he makes them all disappear, Peter is happy to rule the house. He watches too much television, cleans up his family's mess, and eats a lot of junk food. Soon, he becomes sad and lonely for his family. He goes back to the kitchen drawer where Kate touches his shoulder and ends his daydream.

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In the next chapter, "The Bully," Peter is plagued at school by a bully named Barry Tamerlane. When Peter goes to Barry's birthday party, he is surprised to find that Barry is another ordinary boy with a teddy bear on his bed. When he returns to school and Barry demands an apple that Peter is eating, Peter confronts Barry. Peter tells Barry he is just like any other boy and questions whether he is real or a dream. Barry backs down as all the kids start to tease him. Later, Peter realizes that he, too, is a bully. He apologizes to Barry, and the two become friends.

In "The Burglar" we learn that someone has been stealing from Peter's neighbors for weeks. Peter is desperate to catch the criminal, so he fakes an illness on the day he thinks the burglar will come to his home. As he lies in wait, he drifts off to sleep. He is startled by a noise at his window. Soon he sees a person standing in his room. Peter is shocked to see that the thief is Mrs. Goodgame, a mean old lady who lives down the street. Mrs. Goodgame threatens to kill Peter, but he promises to give her the pictures he took of her for evidence. Mrs. Goodgame relents, and Peter assumes she will keep her end of the bargain by returning all the stolen goods. However, Mrs. Goodgame never returns the goods and continues to steal from her neighbors.

When Peter's Aunt Laura and her baby, Kenneth, come to live with Peter's family in the chapter titled "The Baby," he is not very pleased. Peter dislikes the baby, as he tends to ruin everything in his path. One day Kate points her magic wand at Peter, and he and Kenneth exchange bodies. Peter is then forced to see the world through Kenneth's eyes. He begs Kate to change them back. When Peter sees Kenneth in his body glaring at him, he pleads with Kenneth to like him, and the two switch bodies. With each in his rightful body, Peter declares he has changed his mind about Kenneth and takes him to the park with Kate.

In the final chapter, "The Grown-up," Peter's family vacations on the Cornish coast. There, Peter and

several other children make up the Beach Gang. As the grown-ups sit and talk, the Beach Gang goes on wonderful adventures. One night, Peter dreams that he awakens as an adult. All his concerns have changed. He falls in love with Gwendoline, the nineteen-year-old who is staying with his family. When Peter rises and realizes his experience was a dream, he runs to find the Beach Gang. As Kate calls to him, Peter stares at the ocean waves and realizes that growing up does not have to include giving up daydreams.

Open-Ended Questions

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

Initial Understanding

Is Mrs. Goodgame the neighborhood burglar, or is Peter dreaming the entire incident?

It is likely that Peter dreams the entire incident with Mrs. Goodgame. He is sleeping when his father comes home, he cannot find the roll of film, and the burglaries continue even after this event. Peter's house, however, is robbed that day and his model of the Eiffel Tower is missing. A student may therefore argue that it really happens.

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Literary Analysis

An antagonist creates problems for the main character of a book. In *The Daydreamer*, who or what are some of the antagonists?

Students' answers may be varied. One possible answer is Mrs. Goodgame. Mrs. Goodgame is the neighborhood thief who causes problems for everyone. She breaks into homes and steals valuable items from her neighbors. When Peter catches her in his home, she creates further problems for him. She threatens to kill him, and when he promises her he will give her the photos, she leaves his room. Another possible answer is Barry. Barry is the class bully. He is mean to all the children in the class. However, when Peter confronts him and tells him he is just like any other boy, Barry backs down. Soon after the incident, Peter and Barry become friends. Another possible antagonist is time. Throughout the story, the author discusses Peter's dilemmas with growing up. Peter is concerned that all he will care about will be "work, money and taxes, checkbooks, keys and coffee, and talking and sitting, endless sitting." In the chapter "The Cat," time also works against William Cat because after their adventure, William Cat dies.

Inferential Comprehension

If Peter had not dreamed that Kate caused Kenneth to switch bodies with him, do you think Peter would have changed his mind about Kenneth?

Peter is very annoyed by Kenneth. It is possible that he would have changed his mind about his little cousin, but it would have probably taken many years. By switching bodies with Kenneth, Peter is able to understand life from Kenneth's point of view. This experience is what prompts Peter to change his mind about Kenneth.

Constructing Meaning

The Daydreamer is full of figurative language. Ian McEwan uses many similes throughout the book. Find two examples of similes and discuss their meaning.

While Peter is in school, he becomes fascinated with numbers such as googol. As Peter starts to daydream, he pictures, "The zeros trailed into space like bubbles." Peter is so consumed with his thoughts about the googol, he does not finish his test. While Peter and his family are on the Cornish coast, he has a dream that he is an adult. When he awakens, he stares at the ocean and thinks the waves are "...like all the ideas and fantasies he would have in the future." It is at this point in the story that Peter realizes that growing up does not have to include letting go of one's dreams.

Teachable Skills

Comparing and Contrasting Ask your students if they ever daydream. Have them keep a journal of their daydreams for two days. Then, ask them to compare their daydreams to Peter's. What are the similarities? What are the differences?

Recognizing Details Peter becomes fascinated with the concept of googolplex. Have your students research googols. What are they? Why might Peter be fascinated with them?

Recognizing Feelings Peter and William Cat exchange bodies. Peter learns what it is like to be another creature for a short time. Ask your students to pick an animal they would like to exchange bodies with. Have them write a short story about their adventure.

Responding to Literature Peter makes his family disappear by using vanishing cream. At first, he enjoys their absence, but soon he misses them. Ask your students to pretend they made their family members disappear. Ask them to list five things they would miss most about their families.