

# Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

## Gay-Neck: The Story of a Pigeon

by

### Dhan Gopal Mukerji

### Book Information

Dhan Gopal Mukerji, Gay-Neck: The Story of a Pigeon  
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Book Level: 6.5  
Interest Level: MG

Gay-Neck, a carrier pigeon, is trained by his owner and has many courageous and spirited adventures over the housetops of an Indian village, in the Himalayas, and finally on the French battlefield of World War I.

**Award:** Newbery Medal

**Topics:** Animals, Birds; READNOW - Demco Media  
Turtleback Books, Demco Media - Read  
Now Grades 6-8; Wars, World War I

### Main Characters

Gay-Neck a beautifully colored carrier pigeon who serves in World War I; he suffers from fear but proves he is brave and determined

Ghond a very wise and skilled teacher of the boy; he is said to be the greatest hunter and has great knowledge of animals

Hira an initially conceited pigeon who seeks to attain leadership; later he proves to be a loyal team member and accompanies Gay-Neck to war and dies from a bullet wound

Jahore one of the boy's newly acquired pigeons; he gives his life to protect Gay-Neck from a pair of buzzards

Mrs. Jahore Jahore's widow; she later marries Gay-Neck and has children with him

Radja a good friend of the boy; he is a sixteen-year-old Brahmin priest

the boy a narrator and character who has a great love for his pigeons, especially Gay-Neck

the wild dog an animal that befriends Ghond and leads him to the German ammunition dump

### Vocabulary

**bivouacking** temporary camping

**Brahman** the traditional priest caste, which is at the head of the Hindu social caste system

**eyrie** an eagle's nest

**lotus** a flower that is considered a symbol of peace in India

**odyssey** a long journey or wandering

**reconnaissance** a mission in which information is gathered about an enemy

**Sanskrit Vedic** In India there are two languages, one is common and one is religious. Sanskrit Vedic is the religious language.

### Synopsis

The main narrator of the story, an unnamed boy, is the owner of a carrier pigeon that hatches a beautiful baby pigeon he names Gay-Neck. The name comes from the iridescent colors of its throat. Gay-Neck is quite hesitant in learning to fly despite his parents' attempts to teach him and the boy's coaxing with peanuts on the roof. Frustrated, Gay-Neck's father finally pushes his son so close to the edge of the roof that Gay-Neck has no choice but to fly. There is much excitement and rejoicing.

Gay-Neck improves in his flying, and the boy's training for him becomes more extensive. He trains him in directions, so that Gay-Neck will know how to get home from any location. One day, while sailing with the boy on the Ganges river, there is a terrible storm and Gay-Neck's father is killed.

The boy's parents take him and his birds to the Himalayas. Radja, a friend and Brahmin priest, and Ghond, a wise teacher of jungle lore, are introduced. One day there is a skirmish with some hawks. Gay-Neck's mother, thinking she can protect him, is killed by the hawks. Soon after, Gay-Neck flies away and is missing.

In search for Gay-Neck, Ghond, Radja, and the boy arrive at a Buddhist lamasery, or monastery. They are greeted by friendly lamas, or monks. A wise lama informs them that Gay-Neck has visited the lamasery, and they fed and healed him of his fear. The lama explains the dangers of fear. The characters leave the monastery and continue their

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search for Gay-Neck. In the jungle, they encounter tigers and elephants and Ghond brings them safely through each situation. Finally, the characters reach home, and they find Gay-Neck resting safely there.

The next morning, Gay-Neck flies away again, so Ghond and the boy set out for him once more. They return to the lamasery where the lamas tell them Gay-Neck has taken up with a flock of swifts and has flown southward. Soon Gay-Neck is recovered, and he takes over the narration as he relates his adventures with the swifts. He explains that he was so distressed over his mother's death that he wanted to die. He barely escaped an attack by hawks and then joined a family of swifts flying south. He saw many appalling things on his journey and was terribly upset with man's insensitivity to animals and animals' seeming cruelty to other animals.

Gay-Neck begins training for war. Ghond helps the boy buy many more carrier pigeons for his training, and eventually they all work together as a team. During training, one of Gay-Neck's loyal pigeons, Jahore, dies trying to save him from a pair of buzzards. The boy decides it will be good for Gay-Neck to marry Jahore's widow. The two pigeons mate, and Mrs. Jahore hatches their babies just before Gay-Neck and Hira are called to serve in World War I.

Gay-Neck is overwhelmed by the destructive machines of war. Everywhere there is noise and fire. His friend, Hira, dies when he is hit by a bullet in mid-flight. Gay-Neck soon sets out on a mission with Ghond. Ghond is to find a secret German ammunition dump that is located underground. He takes Gay-Neck with him, and they search in the night. Ghond is befriended by a wild dog because the dog senses no fear in him. Thrilled to have a companion, the dog shares food with Ghond and leads him to the munitions dump. Ghond gives Gay-Neck a message to deliver, revealing the location of the dump. Gay-Neck flies away, but a bullet breaks his leg soon after. Before long, Hindi troops arrive and an injured Ghond is rescued.

After the war, Ghond and Gay-Neck both suffer from

extreme fear. Gay-Neck will no longer fly and is terrified of many things. Gay-Neck and the boy meet Ghond at the lamasery, and the boy asks the wise lama for help. The lama advises the boy to pray faithfully at every dawn and sunset for courage and purity. When the boy's soul is healed, so will the pigeon's fear be healed. As for Ghond, the lama explains that a wild buffalo is attacking and killing people in a nearby village. He gives Ghond the task of bringing the murdering buffalo to justice in order to test his regained courage.

While Ghond and the boy are in the jungle searching for the buffalo, Gay-Neck again flies off. After the buffalo is killed, the two companions return to the lamasery in search of Gay-Neck. Gay-Neck is not there. The lama scolds Ghond for being so concerned with killing the buffalo instead of being concerned for Gay-Neck. He tells the two to return to Dentam. When they arrive, the boy is overjoyed to discover Gay-Neck has been healed of his fear and has flown all the way home. The journey has healed everyone concerned, and the boy ends the story with some words about fear and peace.

## Open-Ended Questions

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

### Initial Understanding

What is the source of Gay-Neck's fear?

*Gay-Neck's fear seems to come from seeing horrible things done to other creatures. He witnesses the death of his mother. Two of his pigeon friends die as well, one during the course of completely incomprehensible war and the other by a buzzard attack. On one of Gay-Neck's adventures, he witnesses a man imitating tigers so that he can trap peacocks. The man covers their eyes, ties the peacocks' feet, and carries them off hanging from bamboo poles. He also witnesses two crows mutilating a trapped owl. And finally, he witnesses man's cruelty during World War I.*

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## Literary Analysis

Who is the main character in this novel, Gay-Neck or the boy? Why?

*A case could be made for either character. The boy narrates the majority of the story. It is through his eyes that the reader learns most things. He cares for and trains his beloved pigeon and has many adventures while searching for him. Gay-Neck, on the other hand, has many adventures of his own, and we learn his perspective of events when he narrates parts of the story.*

## Inferential Comprehension

How does the novel show the intelligence of animals?

*There are many instances in the book of animal intelligence and creative decision-making. One example comes shortly after Gay-Neck's mother's death. He is so distraught over her death that he decides he wants to die, too. But he makes the decision that he will never allow himself to be a victim of the hawks that killed her. Instead, he makes his way to the eagle's eyrie so that he could become a meal for "the king of the air." Another general example is the way in which Gay-Neck outsmarts many of his enemies. He contemplates the best strategy, and he often remembers the way in which his father tumbled, and he tries to imitate that.*

## Constructing Meaning

The narrator reveals that the people of India hold mountains sacred and that they symbolize God to many people. Also, it is very important for certain mountains to remain untouched by climbers. Why might a mountain symbolize God, and why would it be important that certain peaks never be climbed?

*Mountains are perhaps one of nature's most beautiful and majestic sights. Mountains reach so high into the sky that they almost seem to touch the heavens. They are pristine, peaceful, and imposing. One might reason then that the holiness of the mountains would be tainted by humans climbing them, but if they remain untouched by humans, then they remain pure.*

## Teachable Skills

**Recognizing Setting** The narrator goes into great detail about the nests and living environments of various birds. The construction of swifts' nests is given much attention in the chapter titled "Gay-Neck's Odyssey (continued)." Have students carefully read the passages about how the nests are built. Then students can gather twigs, straw, leaves or whatever natural things they choose and prepare nests of their own. They also may use glue, twine, or other material to hold the nests together.

**Recognizing Setting** There is much detail given to the setting of this story. The story begins in Calcutta, but there are trips to the Himalayas. A small village called Dentam is mentioned, as well as the highest peak in the world, Mt. Everest. The sacred Ganges river is also mentioned. Have students prepare maps of India, with each student focusing on a different aspect or area that was featured in the book. Some might show Singalila where the lamasery is located. Another group of students can focus on Mt. Everest. Students should provide cultural, historical, and topographic information. Additional information can include climate, customs, and political information.

**Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors** Hinduism

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and Buddhism are mentioned often in this novel. Have students explore both religions to learn their origins. How are they similar? How are they different? What percentage of Indians are Buddhist, and what percentage are Hindu? Have students explore the different aspects and beliefs of each religion, as well as the deities involved.

**Describing Actions or Events** In America, pigeons are often regarded as pests. In the story of Gay-Neck, however, a much more impressive view of pigeons is presented. The boy in this novel works diligently to train his pigeons. The book describes pigeon training as an art dating back thousands of years in India. There are several types of pigeons mentioned as well: tumblers, carriers, fan-tails, and pouters. Have students research pigeons and pigeon training. How many species of pigeons are there? Where and when did pigeon training originate? For what purposes are trained pigeons used? Is the practice of pigeon training common today?