

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for The Grand Escape by Phyllis Reynolds Naylor

Book Information

Phyllis Reynolds Naylor, The Grand Escape

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Book Level: 5.0

Interest Level: MG

After years of being strictly house cats, Marco and Polo escape into the wonderful but dangerous outside world and are sent on three challenging adventures by a group of cats known as the Club of Mysteries. Book #1.

Topics: Adventure, Discovery/Exploration; Adventure, Escape; Animals, Cats; Community Life, Cliques/Clubs; Series, Cat Pack; Series, Club of Mysteries

Main Characters

Bertram the Bad a large, fierce Mastiff who lives in a fenced-in yard near the loft and has a reputation for eating cats

Boots and Elvis members of the Club of Mysteries

Carlotta a small, affectionate calico cat, who mothers all the cats in the club and has their affections

Jumper and Spinner the Neals' new brown-and-white kittens

Marco a smart, plump, gray-striped tabby cat belonging to Mr. and Mrs. Neal, who is able to read and devises a plan to escape from the Neals' house

Mr. Murphy a minor character, who parks his car in the garage below the loft

Polo a sleek, quick, gray-striped tabby cat belonging to Mr. and Mrs. Neal, who accompanies his brother Marco on the escape, longs for his mother, and likes to chew on long, wiggly things to comfort himself

Texas Jake (Texas, TJ) a large, orange cat who is the leader of the Club of Mysteries, is a good fighter, and does not want Marco and Polo around, but who has a kind heart and is loyal to the group

Vocabulary

encrusted covered

jovially merrily; full of fun

loft the upper floor, room, or space in a building

velveteen a velvet-like fabric made of cotton

Synopsis

Marco and Polo are gray-striped tabbies that belong to Mr. and Mrs. Neal. They are content as indoor cats until Marco has a brief experience outdoors. This leaves him aching to visit one of the ranches he has read about. His brother Polo wants to find his mother, and he becomes restless when the Neals remove his toys for safety reasons. When Mr. Neal leaves the door open while doing fall chores, the cats escape.

Marco's attempt to scavenge food from a trash can in Texas Jake's territory leads to a fight with the big cat. Later, when Marco and Polo can't find a warm, dry place to stay, Carlotta takes them to the lair of Texas Jake and his friends Boots and Elvis. To stay there, they must join the Club of Mysteries by solving three Great Mysteries.

Texas Jake is jealous of the attention Carlotta gives Marco and of his ability to read. He gives them three difficult and dangerous mysteries to solve and hopes they will not return. First, they must steal the treasure from inside Bertram the Bad's doghouse. Second, they must discover where water goes when it rains. Last, they must hide in Mr. Murphy's car to find out where two-leggeds go during the day.

Although they accomplish the tasks, several things disappoint Marco and Polo. They decide a "ranch" is not a wonderful place. Polo does not find his mother. Texas Jake is injured in a fight with Bertram the Bad. Then, the Big Burger restaurant buys a Dumpster with a tight-fitting lid. Marco, Polo, and the other cats return to the comfort of their homes.

When they return to the Neals' house, Marco and Polo are surprised to find two kittens in their

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velveteen basket. Initially, they do not get along with Spinner and Jumper. Then, the kittens find out about Marco's and Polo's adventures and listen attentively to their tales. The story ends with Spinner and Jumper plotting their own grand escape.

Open-Ended Questions

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

Initial Understanding

How was Marco and Polo's return to the Neals' house similar to their appearance at the loft?

Marco and Polo were unwanted at first by the cats in the loft and by the kittens at the Neals' house. Carlotta prevented a fight in the loft, and the Neals prevented a fight at home. Marco and Polo were accepted by Boots and Elvis when they revealed that Marco could read. They were accepted by the kittens when they told about their adventures.

Literary Analysis

In the beginning of the story, home was like a prison to Marco and Polo. At the end, home was the most beautiful word. Why did their opinion of home change?

Marco and Polo were disappointed by the ranch that they found. Polo did not find his mother, and Carlotta did not fall in love with Marco. They did not like to be dirty or hungry, so when the new Dumpster was noticed, they appreciated the comforts of home.

Inferential Comprehension

How were Marco and Polo different? How were they similar? Why did the author choose the names Marco and Polo?

Marco was plump, smart, and independent. He was looking for love. Polo was sleek, playful, agile, and not as smart as Marco. He was looking for a mother. Marco and Polo were both brave and kind. They were both restless in the beginning of the story and glad to be home at the end. The author named them Marco and Polo after the explorer Marco Polo.

Constructing Meaning

Will Marco and Polo leave again, or will they stay at home forever? Support your answer.

The answer may include the following: Mr. Neal supposes they will both be indoor-outdoor cats. They will leave occasionally to visit the other cats, especially Carlotta. They may go to a new place Marco reads about, or they may help the kittens with their escape. Polo may want to search for his mother again. Some students might think they will stay at home because they were disappointed with the ranch and grew to appreciate the comforts of home.

Teachable Skills

Understanding the Author's Craft The solutions to the mysteries solved by the club were humorous because they were not accurate. For example, Boots believed umbrellas made it rain, and Elvis believed people were not hairy because they took showers. Ask the students to make up a mystery and a solution from the point of view of an animal. To display their mysteries, take a small piece of paper, fold it in half and paste it onto a larger piece. Write the mystery on the outside of the paper and the solution on the inside so someone has to lift the flap to read the answer. Students can decorate their mystery picture as they wish.

Making Predictions At the end of the story, Jumper and Spinner are plotting their own grand escape. Ask students to write a short story

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describing their escape or their adventure. Students may be encouraged to include characters from the story or make-up new characters. They may want to include their reason for escaping, their means of escaping, an adventure outside, and their reason for returning or choosing not to return.

Responding to Literature Supplement the reading of this story with a visit to a humane society or veterinary office, or invite someone to visit the class who is knowledgeable about cat care. Bringing in live cats is fun for students if allergies are not a problem. Talk about the responsibilities of pet ownership. To direct the discussion toward more serious matters, ask students to look up statistics on the numbers of kittens born, stray cats impounded, or loose cats killed by automobiles each year. See how local statistics compare with national averages.

Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors In chapter twelve, Marco and Polo's story about their rescue by a fisherman led to a discussion about what life would be like if cats were in charge. For example, humans couldn't open umbrellas in the house, boil water, smoke, open windows, or put cats in the car. Ask students to choose an animal other than a cat. Make a list of rules that an animal would make if it was in charge. The story focuses on rules banning people from doing things; students should include rules that benefit the animal. For example, a dog might make a rule that they get free dog biscuits whenever they want them. Also, owners could not go anywhere without dogs, eat without sharing, or pet any other animal. Owners would have to pet dogs more, feed them more, and play games all day. Students can make election posters or short speeches in favor of the animal they chose.