

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for The Incredible Journey

by
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Book Information

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Three house pets migrate through the wilderness to find their family.

Award: ALA Best Book for Young Adults; Canadian Library Association Honour; Misc./Other; NCTE Notable Children's Books in the Language Arts; SLJ Best Book; State Award; Young Reader's Choice Award/Nominee

Topics: Adventure, Survival; Animals, Cats; Animals, Dogs; Canadian Content, Canadian Content (All); Classics, Classics (All); Family Life, Pets; Natural Environments, Wilderness; Recommended Reading, NY Publ. Library Best Books for the Teen Age

Main Characters

Bodger an old bull terrier, whose looks terrify some; a natural clown who loves people and a good fight

Elizabeth Hunter a nine-year-old girl; the daughter of Jim and the goddaughter of John Longridge, who is the "self-appointed" owner of Tao

Helvi Nurmi a ten-year-old girl; the daughter of Finnish immigrants, Reino Nurmi and his wife, who rescues Tao from the river

James and Nell Mackenzie an elderly couple living in a farmhouse, who welcome first Bodger and then Luath into their home

Jim Hunter Luath's master, who is an English professor at a small university in Ontario

John Longridge a bachelor writer who offers to watch over the Hunters' animals while they are in England

Luath a single-minded young Labrador that longs for his master, Jim, and leads Bodger and Tao on the journey back to their home

Mr. Aubyn an old man, living in a small cabin near a derelict mine, who confuses the visiting animals with human visitors

Mrs. Oakes John Longridge's housekeeper, who volunteers to look after the animals while John is away hunting

Peter Hunter an eleven-year-old boy; Jim Hunter's son, who has been inseparable from Bodger since his first birthday

Tao a Siamese cat, the soulmate of Bodger, who is an indispensable helper on the journey

Vocabulary

austerely severe in manner or appearance; strict; forbidding

paroxysms any sudden or violent outburst, as of action or emotion

succored helped or relieved in difficulty, need, or distress

wanton malicious or unjustifiable; deliberate and without motive; unprovoked

Synopsis

John Longridge is a bachelor writer who lives in the northwestern part of Ontario. He has agreed to watch the pets of his friend, Jim Hunter, while he is on a professorship exchange in England for nine months with his wife, his son, Peter and daughter, Elizabeth. John becomes accustomed to the habits and idiosyncrasies of each of the animals. Bodger, a white, old bull terrier, craves human attention. Tao, the Siamese cat, is one to stand his own ground, loves warmth, and has a special relationship with Bodger. Luath, the young Labrador, is more reserved and often sits apart from the others.

Near the end of the animals' stay with him, John leaves on a hunting trip with his brother, leaving a note for Mrs. Oakes who has offered to care for them. After John leaves, Luath sets out for home to see his beloved master, Jim, and beckons the others to come along. By instinct, he sets a course due west, and the trip of over two hundred fifty miles begins. The animals are not missed for a while because a page of the note John wrote gets burned,

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and Mrs. Oakes thinks the animals are with John.

During the journey, the animals face many difficulties. Their pace is most often determined by the old dog's endurance. The hardships they face include encounters with a bear, a porcupine, a collie, and some irate people. Hunger is an ever-present gnawing drive. The Labrador must forget his training and learn to kill. Bodger's hunger and trust in human goodness bring them in contact with an Indian tribe, an old miner, and a kindly farmer and his wife. At one point, the cat becomes separated from the dogs and is feared dead when he is swept downstream in a river. He makes his way back, narrowly escaping a lynx on the way.

When it is discovered that the animals are missing, and people realize they have attempted to make the journey home, furious efforts are made to find out if anyone has seen the animals. Based on reports of their sightings, it is confirmed that they are headed due west to return home. John's spirits sink when he realizes the most difficult part of the animals' journey lies ahead. John visits the Hunters, who have returned from abroad, and suggests they visit their summer home to lighten the mood. Elizabeth is convinced to go along when she is assured that the summer home is on the path of the animals' journey. On the last day of their stay, while on a hike, Elizabeth hears a dog barking. Everyone waits anxiously. Tao is the first to appear, followed by Luath. After Peter and the others have given up hope of Bodger's return, the old bull terrier also appears, and the joyful reunion is complete.

Open-Ended Questions

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

Initial Understanding

The setting for *The Incredible Journey* is the Canadian wilderness. The trio of cross-country travelers must make a long journey to reach their destination. They set out during the autumn season. What were some signs that winter was fast approaching in the wilderness?

Frost was seen on the ground, some animals had their white winter coats, the leaves had turned colors, the animals fur was thicker, and some cabins were closed up.

Literary Analysis

Why did the author choose a third-person point of view to relate the story? What was the author able to communicate using this point of view that may not have been communicated any other way?

The third person allowed the author to tell the story in chronological order, from an all-knowing perspective. The difficult and painful, as well as the comical, moments of the journey are described. If the story was told from one of the human characters' point of view, he/she would have had to travel with the animals, and the journey would not be so incredible. If one of the animals were to relate the story, it could either be told from a purely canine or feline perspective, or it would demand that the animal put its feelings and experiences in human terms, as well as understand the instincts of its fellow travelers.

Inferential Comprehension

In this story, Tao, the Siamese cat, gets himself into many dangerous or unusual situations, such as being stalked by a lynx and being washed downstream after a beaver dam gives way. How does the cat's behavior change after a stressful event?

The cat seems to have an almost chameleon-like personality. Whether it is the stalking posture for hunting, or the hissing and spitting behavior until an escape is made, the cat will then sit after the event and calmly preen himself. This ritual is not rushed and the cat is then able to continue on its way with dignity and self-confidence.

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Constructing Meaning

Peter Hunter had known and loved Bodger, his faithful dog, virtually his entire life. It was very understandable that Peter grieved over the thought that he had lost Bodger. Think back about a time you grieved over the loss of a person or pet that was close to you. How did you handle that grief?

The way in which grief is expressed is very individual. For some, it is a private matter, and the person who is grieving wishes to be alone. Others need and want companionship. Sometimes grief is expressed through anger, denial, and/or tears.

Teachable Skills

Recognizing Setting The story is set in northwestern Ontario, an area of vast wilderness. It might be helpful for students to look at a map of Ontario and see its location within Canada and some of the adjoining provinces and states. Note the rivers, lakes, and other waterways within the province. Have the students find the St. Lawrence River and trace the path of the Hunters back from England aboard the steamer. Why had the steamer taken this route instead of going through Hudson Bay?

Understanding Literary Features Although the conflict may be animals versus nature, there is also an underlying theme of cooperation, of surviving the journey together. Create a time line of the main events in the story. Indicate which animal's prowess successfully led the group through a particular situation. Discuss whether the journey would have been successful if any one of the animals had been left behind.

Understanding Characterization The word "instinct" comes up repeatedly during the course of the story. Have the students define the term. Research the early domestication of cats and dogs. For what purpose were they domesticated? Work? Food? Protection? Students may wish to pick one of the breeds represented in the book and learn about it. What are the breed's physical characteristics? Tell about the history of the

breed. Many of today's pets were actually bred for specific purposes, such as killing rats on ships, pointing to prey, or tracking. It might be interesting to identify human instincts and compare them to those of the animals.

Understanding the Author's Craft The author is a master of vividly descriptive narrative. Choose a scene in the book and describe the images that come to mind as you read. What emotions are elicited? What words or phrases are responsible for creating the specific emotions and images? Look through the book and find five places where you feel the animals' behavior could be considered humanlike.