

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

James and the Giant Peach

by
Roald Dahl

Book Information

Roald Dahl, James and the Giant Peach
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126 Pages
Book Level: 4.8
Interest Level: MG

Madcap adventures take place as young James enters a peach as big as a house and encounters wonderful new friends.

Award: ALA Notable/Best Books

Topics: Fantasy/Imagination, Misc./Other;
Recommended Reading, California
Recommended Lit., English, 3-5

Main Characters

Aunt Spiker James's tall and thin aunt who mistreats him

Aunt Sponge James's fat and very short aunt who mistreats him

James Henry Trotter a young orphan boy who escapes from his cruel aunts in a giant peach

the Centipede an impertinent, overgrown centipede who enjoys being a pest

the Earthworm a blind and timid worm who is used as bait for seagulls during the flight of the peach

the Glow-worm a shy worm who lights the inside of the peach with her tail

the Ladybug a kind and gentle ladybug who comforts James

the Old-Green-Grasshopper an elderly grasshopper who plays beautiful music

the Silkworm a lethargic worm who spins silk to help her friends

the Spider a kindly spider whose silk helps the peach escape from danger

Vocabulary

gossamer sheer, light, or delicate material

martyr a person who makes great sacrifices for a good cause

pandemonium a wild, noisy uproar

saucy impertinent or disrespectful

steeplejack a person who builds or cleans chimneys

ticker-tape a strip of paper on which telegraph messages were printed

Synopsis

Four-year-old James Henry Trotter is removed from his happy home after his parents are eaten by an angry rhinoceros that escaped from the zoo. He spends the next three years living with his abusive Aunt Sponge and Aunt Spiker, who do not allow James to play with any other children. One day when James feels particularly distraught, a strange old man approaches him in the garden with a bag of green crystals. The man tells James that the crystals are magic and instructs James on how to use the magic so that he will never be miserable again.

James takes the bag of crystals and tries to sneak past his aunts to get into the house. As he passes by the base of an old peach tree, however, he slips on the grass and spills the contents of the bag. The magical crystals behave like worms and burrow into the ground away from James's grasping fingers. James is so upset that he feels like crying.

Not long after, James's aunts notice a peach growing on the top of that same peach tree. To their amazement, it grows until it is nearly the size of their house. The aunts concoct a scheme for turning the peach into a tourist exhibit and, consequently, make a lot of money. One night, when James is sent outside to clean up the litter that has been thrown around the peach, he discovers a large tunnel in the peach's side. James follows the tunnel through the peach and enters a doorway leading into the peach's stone. Once inside the stone, James meets a fantastic group of oversized insects who have been affected by the magic. They treat James with kindness and plan to take James away from his aunts by releasing the peach from the tree.

The giant Centipede chews through the peach's stem, freeing it from the tree. The peach begins to

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roll all the way to the ocean, crushing James's aunts along the way. James and the insects enjoy quietly floating on the ocean until they realize that sharks are viciously attacking the peach's base. James devises a plan to lift the peach out of the water. He uses the overgrown Earthworm to attract hundreds of seagulls and then ties the seagulls to the peach so that it is carried away as they fly.

Though this plan gets them out of the water, the crew encounters new dangers while flying across the sky. The impertinent Centipede hurls insults at some Cloud-Men, and the group narrowly escapes being destroyed when an entire city of Cloud-Men hurls hailstones at them.

When the clouds clear away, the group realizes they have crossed the ocean and now float above New York City. James wisely decides to lower the peach by cutting the seagulls loose one at a time. The plan works beautifully until an airplane flies by and abruptly cuts all the remaining strings at once. The peach plummets downward and comes to rest, skewered on top of the Empire State Building.

At first, the citizens of New York are alarmed by the peach and its odd inhabitants, but after James introduces them in a long poem, the city welcomes them with a ticker-tape parade. They all become successful and happy in New York, and James writes a book about his adventures.

Open-Ended Questions

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

Initial Understanding

At the end of the story, how do you think the giant insects are able to find jobs in the human world?

The insects are able to find jobs that relate to their individual strengths and abilities. Obviously, the Centipede knows a lot about shoes because he has forty-two feet. The Earthworm's pink skin is perfect for a cosmetic company, and the Silkworm and the Spider are naturals at spinning thread. The Glow-worm could light up the Statue of Liberty as well as an electric light could, and the Old-Green-Grasshopper has always been a master musician. The only insect who does not find a job is the Ladybug, who marries the Head of the Fire Department.

Literary Analysis

What are some of the elements in *James and the Giant Peach* that make it a "fantasy"?

This story has a very fanciful, fairy-tale-like quality to it. The characters are very whimsical, and many of the events in the story could never have occurred in real life. Among the elements that comprise this fantasy are the magical growth of the peach, James's scheme to harness seagulls to fly the peach, the appearance of the Cloud-Men, and the existence of giant talking insects.

Inferential Comprehension

In what ways does James change over the course of this story?

When James lives with his aunts, he is lonely, sad, unappreciated, and unloved. His aunts consider him stupid and want nothing to do with him. When James meets the group inside the peach, however, they treat him kindly and consider him "a genius" as he comes up with solutions for their problems in the floating peach. Finally, in New York City, James becomes famous and has hundreds of friends and visitors.

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Constructing Meaning

When the Earthworm serves as bait to attract seagulls to the peach, he is called a "martyr." What is a martyr and in what way does the Earthworm act as a martyr?

Martyrs are people who willingly sacrifice themselves for a good cause. In this case, the Earthworm is willing to risk being pecked by seagulls in order to help his friends escape the dangers of the sharks.

exchanges of dialogue in *James and the Giant Peach* involve different characters saying the same thing in their own words. For example, when James proposes his seagull scheme, he is met with cries such as "Ridiculous!" "Absurd!" "Poppycock!" "Balderdash!" and "Madness!" Assign small groups to participate in an exercise in which one word is spoken and the next student must say a similar word. Work around the group circle and see how many synonyms and colloquial expressions each group can produce.

Teachable Skills

Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors At the end of the story, the City of New York honors James and his friends with a ticker-tape parade. Some of the most significant people and events in twentieth-century America have been honored or commemorated by such parades through the streets of New York. Have the students research the procedures and honorees of New York's ticker-tape parades. Depending on the age of your students, you may also have them create their own ticker-tape parade for a person in their school.

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Understanding the Author's Craft James and his friends experience a variety of fantastic adventures, on the land, in the sea, and in the air. To help students appreciate the author's imaginative plot, have students write an additional chapter for the book involving a new adventure for the floating peach and its inhabitants.

Understanding Dialogue Several of the
