

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for The Midnight Fox by Betsy Byars

Book Information

Betsy Byars, The Midnight Fox

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Interest Level: MG

Tom, a city boy forced to spend the summer on his aunt's farm, is afraid of animals--until he learns to love a black fox.

Topics: Animals, Foxes; English in a Flash Recommended List, Library 3, Chapter 5, 90%; Places, Farms; Recommended Reading, California Recommended Lit., English, 3-5

Main Characters

Aunt Millie Tom's kind aunt, who believes all boys are as rough-and-tumble as hers were

Bubba Uncle Fred and Aunt Millie's son, who no longer lives at home; Tom stays in his room

Father Tom's father, who wishes Tom were more athletic and stoic

Fran (Mom) Tom's mother, who hopes that Tom will enjoy staying on the farm

Hazeline the daughter of Fred and Millie, a young woman who becomes Tom's friend, although her main interest is her boyfriend

Mikey Galter Hazeline's boyfriend, who in the end proves that he loves Hazeline just as she is

Mr. Hunter a neighboring farmer who dynamites a fox den to solve his fox problem

Petie Burkis Tom's inventive and sympathetic playmate; he wants to be a newspaper reporter

the baby fox the black fox's playful and vulnerable only offspring

the black fox an intelligent and beautiful fox; Tom feels his entire life is changed by seeing her

Tom an intelligent but insecure young boy who grows stronger and more confident when he bonds with a black fox

Uncle Fred Tom's quiet and capable farmer uncle, who loves to hunt

Vocabulary

clasp held firmly with one's hand

collapse to break down or fail suddenly

discovery a finding that was previously unknown

hutch a cage made of wood with wire sides

muscular powerful and strong

opportunity chance

particularly especially

ravine a deep, narrow valley with water running through it

swollen puffed to a larger-than-normal size

thicket a group of shrubs or small trees growing close together

Synopsis

Nine-year-old Tom insists he will hate staying on his Aunt Millie and Uncle Fred's farm for two months of the summer while his parents go on a trip. Tom's mother tells him that the farm is beautiful, but Tom retorts that animals hate him. Tom's father finally persuades Tom to at least pretend he wants to go to the farm because Tom's mother will not be able to enjoy their trip bicycling around Europe if Tom is not happy. Just before leaving home, Tom tells his good friend Petie some of his fears about the farm, and Petie promises to write him.

After Tom's parents drop him off at the farm, Tom begrudgingly prides himself on controlling his negative feelings. He remembers his father always talking about control being important for the athletes he coached. He also wanted Tom to have more control since Tom used to cry or be easily upset when he was younger.

Aunt Millie shows Tom to her son Bubba's old room, where Tom will stay. Tom is annoyed that Aunt Millie thinks he is just like her own rugged boys were when they were young. Aunt Millie also shows Tom the tree outside the window. Her boys used to use it to sneak out of the room, but Tom informs her he is afraid of heights. Tom is bored the first days of his stay. While he is sitting in a field, writing a reply to a

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letter from Petie, he suddenly sees a beautiful black fox. The moment feels like a turning point in Tom's life, so special to him that he is unable to mention it in his letter to Petie. That night he questions Aunt Millie's daughter Hazeline about foxes. She tells him that farmers will often destroy a fox den to keep the fox from stealing chickens for its babies. Tom feels sickened by Hazeline's tale.

For four days Tom sits in the fields, waiting to see the fox again. One beautiful day the fox crests the hill and catches a mouse. Tom follows her into the woods, where the black fox suddenly disappears. At the farmhouse, Tom tells Hazeline about following the fox, and she says that a fox will lead enemies away when they are close to her den. When Tom continues to question her, she suggests he ask her father, Tom's Uncle Fred, who knows about hunting and animals. Tom is reluctant to do this because he does not feel comfortable around Uncle Fred. Days and weeks pass, and Tom sees the fox many times. One day he accidentally discovers the fox's den and watches the single baby fox playing with its food. Tom decides he will not return because he knows the fox might move her den if she thinks it has been discovered.

One evening, Tom and Hazeline float on inner tubes on the pond for hours, something fearful Tom thought he never would do. He and his aunt and uncle, and Hazeline and her fiancé, Mikey, then laugh and tease each other. Tom falls asleep with a smile on his face, feeling the best he's ever felt in his life. Things change quickly, however. Within a couple of days, Aunt Millie announces the black fox has killed her turkey, as well as a chicken the week before. As Aunt Millie urges Uncle Fred to get rid of the fox, Tom tries to think of a way to stop him. That night Tom appeals to Hazeline for help, but she is distraught because Mikey wants her to lose twenty pounds before he'll marry her. Tom listens to Hazeline explain that she cannot control her eating before she finally tells him she cannot help him save the fox.

The next day Tom joins Uncle Fred hunting for the black fox. Tom tries to mislead him, but Uncle Fred

easily finds the fox's den and captures the baby fox as bait to draw the mother fox to the farm. Tom appeals to Hazeline again, but she insists she cannot stop her father. Further, Hazeline is concerned about preparing herself in case Mikey shows up. When Mikey does finally arrive, Hazeline plays coy for eleven seconds before agreeing to go with him. That night, Uncle Fred watches for the fox from the porch. The black fox appears, but Aunt Millie makes noise, and Uncle Fred shoots at the fox and misses. A thunderstorm arrives, and the hunt is postponed. In an effort to save the foxes, Tom fearfully uses the tall tree outside his bedroom window to exit the house in the middle of the night. He goes to the baby fox's cage and releases it. For a moment he enjoys the sight of the baby fox reunited with its waiting mother. He then rings the doorbell and tells Aunt Millie that he has set the baby fox free. Aunt Millie is surprised but understanding. Tom apologizes to Uncle Fred. Tom, looking up at Uncle Fred, suddenly realizes that his uncle understands him more than anyone does. Uncle Fred tells Tom that he doesn't like to see wild things caged up, either.

Approximately a week later, Tom's parents arrive with Petie. Tom is glad to see everyone, and as he leaves for home, he tries to find the right words to thank Aunt Millie and Uncle Fred. He realizes they have been very kind to him, especially since they never mentioned the fox to him again after that night. Hazeline invites Tom and his family to return for her wedding. On the way home, Tom admits to his mother that he loved the farm. Tom continues his life at home, but in the succeeding years, it is his memories of the black fox that are the clearest and most important to him.

Open-Ended Questions

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

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Initial Understanding

Why does Tom tell Aunt Millie and Uncle Fred that he would never forget how good it was to be on the farm with them?

First of all, he is appreciative of how gracious Aunt Millie and Uncle Fred are about his rebellious act. He is even more appreciative of the fact that they seem to understand his actions. Tom does not feel his parents understand him, so it is a wonderful treat for him to have adults who do not condemn his behavior. Beyond this, Tom realizes that his aunt and uncle may actually understand why he loves the fox. The fox is so special to Tom that he has difficulty talking about it to anyone. The black fox has changed his life. Until he tells his aunt and uncle he has set the baby fox free, the only person he has admitted his feelings to is Hazeline, and she has usually been too involved in her own problems to be sympathetic. This makes Tom feel he has a unique bond with Aunt Millie and Uncle Fred.

Literary Analysis

What are the different ways the author uses to show what kind of person Petie is?

One way the author reveals Petie's character is to describe scenes between Petie and Tom as they are happening. The author also has Tom remember specific events that occurred with Petie, such as when Petie thought he was dying. Besides this, the author gives several examples of Petie's newspaper-style writing in the letters to Tom. Finally, the author frequently has Tom envision events as he imagines Petie would write about them, such as when Tom describes Hazeline's crying with a headline.

Inferential Comprehension

What are the most likely reasons that Tom goes to Hazeline for help?

Because she is the youngest person in the house next to himself, Tom feels that Hazeline is the only person to whom he can talk freely. Tom thinks that Hazeline understands her parents. He assumes she knows what will prevent them from killing the fox. Tom also assumes that he has formed a relationship with Hazeline that will compel Hazeline to act on his and the fox's behalf. Also, when she is not preoccupied with her boyfriend, Hazeline is talkative and gives Tom information about foxes and their relationship with people in the community and with her parents.

Constructing Meaning

Why was Tom so angry with his parents? Did he have good reasons for feeling that way?

Some students will feel that Tom's parents are not considerate of his feelings, unfairly forcing him to go to a strange place. They may also feel that Tom's parents are too critical of his sensitivity and are too judgmental of his character. Other students may feel that Tom's reluctance to go to the farm is odd and that Tom's anger is extreme for the situation. Students may have the opinion that Tom is being selfish by not making it easy for his parents to depart for an enjoyable vacation.

Teachable Skills

Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors Tom wishes to learn more about foxes but hesitates to question Uncle Fred for fear that Uncle Fred will guess his secret and want to hunt the fox. Have the students write a report that focuses on the lives of foxes in a forest environment. Have students also include how foxes are affected by living near a farm or other area settled by humans.

Extending Meaning Tom remembers a game show he and Petie made up called "This is your Bad Moment" because at first he is frightened when Hazeline invites him to swim in the farm

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pond. Have students make up their own game show to express their feelings about something. Students may wish to focus on positive emotions rather than negative ones. Have students explain how the show works by giving a scenario similar to the example given in the book.

Identifying Persuasive Language After Tom tells Aunt Millie he has released the baby fox, he discovers his aunt and uncle are much more sympathetic than he assumed they would be. Have students write a scene in which Tom tries to persuade Aunt Millie and Uncle Fred to spare the fox, but his aunt and uncle are not sympathetic. Ask students to include the responses of Tom's aunt and uncle.

Recognizing Feelings Tom and Petie believe Petie is going to die the following Saturday, but Tom is going to live seventy-nine years. Tom says, "Petie felt awful, I could see that, and I felt even worse, and if there had been any way in the world I could give him nineteen or twenty of my seventy-nine years, I would have done it in a minute." Tom and Petie are very close friends. Have students make two lists of actions and statements, one of Tom's and one of Petie's, that demonstrate the closeness of their friendship.