

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for The Music of Dolphins by Karen Hesse

Book Information

Karen Hesse, The Music of Dolphins
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Interest Level: MG

After rescuing an adolescent girl from the sea, researchers learn she has been raised by dolphins and attempt to rehabilitate her to the human world.

Award: Golden Kite Award/Honor Book; Publishers Weekly Best Book; State Award

Topics: Adventure, Rescue/Save; Animals, Dolphins/Porpoises; English in a Flash Recommended List, Library 3, Chapter 3, 90%; Natural Environments, Oceans; People, Children; READNOW - Demco Media Turtleback Books, Demco Media - Read Now Grades 1-3; READNOW - Perma-Bound, Perma-Bound - Read Now Grades 4-6; READNOW - Perma-Bound, Perma-Bound - Read Now Grades 6-8; READNOW - Renaissance Learning, RLI - Grades 6-8 (Theme: Surviving); Recommended Reading, California Recommended Lit., English, 3-5; Recommended Reading, California Recommended Lit., English, 6-8; Recommended Reading, Children's Literature Choice; Science, Misc./Other

Main Characters

Doctor Elizabeth Beck the researcher in charge of a feral-child facility in Boston

Doctor Troy Doctor Beck's colleague, who works mostly with Shay

Justin Beck Doctor Beck's son

Mila the main character; a teenage girl lost at sea as a child, who has been raised by dolphins and knows only their culture

Mr. Aradondo the housekeeper at Doctor Beck's facility

Sandy Doctor Beck's assistant

Shay a feral child found in Idaho

Vocabulary

cay a low island

fluke one of the two parts of a whale or dolphin tail

mangrove a tree or shrub with spreading roots in tropical swamps

mussels shelled animals related to oysters and clams

Synopsis

Mila is a young teenage girl who was lost at sea at the age of four. She is discovered by a U.S. Coast Guard rescue plane on an island off the coast of Florida. Government personnel soon realize that she has stayed alive because she was cared for by a dolphin family.

The Immigration and Naturalization Service of the United States and the governments of the Bahamas, Haiti, and Cuba disagree over the custody of the child. Custody is eventually awarded to Doctor Elizabeth Beck, a specialist working under a grant issued by the National Institute of Mental Health. She is a research professor of cognitive and neural systems at Boston University and has designed a unique facility at the Charles River campus in Boston for studying feral children like Mila. One of the objectives of the facility is to stimulate a "human" response in such children. Also in Doctor Beck's care is a girl named Shay who recently had been found in the mountains of Idaho.

Utilizing picture books and computers, Mila shows significant progress in language and social development. Shay does not. Mila also improves because she is being introduced to music. Her first responses in music involve blowing into a recorder. She progresses from three to five to seven notes. Music appears to have been important in her life with the dolphins and helps her transition to her new family.

A man who signs his letter "Papi" writes to Mila to tell her that he believes he is her father. Through the

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letter and some explanations from Doctor Beck, Mila learns about her family. She had been flying from Cuba with her mother and brother many years ago when their plane crashed. Mila's mother and brother were killed. Her father had stayed in Cuba and had since remarried. He and Mila cannot meet because of differences between the American and Cuban governments, but he wants to see "his little dolphin girl" again. Mila does not want this reunion. She says that her family consists of Doctor Beck, her son Justin, her assistant Sandy, and Shay.

Mila misses her dolphin family and the warm waters where she used to swim, so one night she leaves the facility and swims in the Charles River. She gets sick and struggles for a long time to recover. The door to her room and the house are locked so she will not endanger herself again. The locked doors are very frustrating for Mila. She asks Doctor Beck to unlock them, but Doctor Beck refuses, saying the government has rules about protecting children like her and that she must obey their rules. If she disobeys, the government will take Mila away. Doctor Beck explains that before Mila can be free with unlocked doors, she must learn the language and the rules of her new world.

As the story progresses, Mila periodically recalls her experiences with her dolphin family and resolves that she will one day return to them. Doctor Beck always tries to point her in another direction hoping she will soon be acclimated to her new society. Mila, however, begins to fail both physically and emotionally.

When Mila learns Shay is being moved from their house because Shay has not made the kind of progress expected, Mila feels closer to her goal of being reunited with her dolphin family. She finally persuades Doctor Beck and Justin to return her to the sea near the spot where she had been discovered. She is reunited with her dolphin family when Justin puts his arms around her, picks her up, and places her back in the water.

Open-Ended Questions

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

Initial Understanding

Why is music so important to Mila?

When Mila first hears music, she considers it a miracle. She feels the music inside her. In many ways music reminds her of the sea -- of waves pounding on rocks, of rolling waves filled with foam, of whale talk, and of dolphin laughter. When she makes music either by singing or by playing the recorder, it replicates dolphin talk, laughter, and life in the sea. When she has been away from the sea too long, however, she can no longer remember how or why the music had been important.

Literary Analysis

What is unique about the style and format of the book?

The book begins with the thoughts and feelings of the main character, Mila. These thoughts are indicated by italic type. The author next gives the reader necessary information about the characters and the setting through a newspaper article. The rest of the book is told by the main character with the beginning of her story presented in very short chapters set in very large type. Within the first two chapters, very short sentences are used. As the book continues, progressively longer sentences, longer chapters, and smaller type are utilized. This style is meant to reflect the progress of Mila's knowledge of language and societal rules. As Mila's ability to cope with her new society decreases and her longing for the sea and her dolphin family increases, the chapter length again decreases while the type size increases.

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Inferential Comprehension

Mila and Shay are both considered feral children. Why does one make progress socially while the other does not?

The reader never discovers many details about Shay's early life. However, Doctor Beck does tell Mila that Shay had another family, one who can no longer see her because they did not know a good way to love and care for her. Besides not speaking, not responding to the training, and not cooperating either in social or educational activities, Shay moves by hopping rather than walking. Even though Mila has not been around humans for many years, she was still nurtured, fed, and cared for by her dolphin family. She is cooperative and even eager to learn the language and do all the things her new human family asks. She tries to help Shay by showing affection and encouragement.

Constructing Meaning

Why is the "humanization" of Mila by Doctor Beck a failure?

Some students may respond that Mila had been in the sea too long to completely change her ways. Others may realize that one of the things Mila repeatedly refers to missing is touch. She reflects on the many times that the dolphins touched each other and her. She frequently tries to touch Shay, Sandy, Doctor Beck, and Justin. They are not all responsive to her apparent need for contact. She concludes her story by expressing happiness that Justin had put his arms around her when he placed her back into the sea.

Teachable Skills

Recognizing Setting Mila has spent most of her life in the water, but when the reader learns about Mila, she is on land. Obtain an enlarged map of the eastern seaboard of the United States showing the Caribbean islands. Have the students identify Mila's life beginning in Cuba and progressing to Cay Sal; Anguila Cay; Miami, Florida; Boston, Massachusetts; and finally, back to the islands near Florida.

Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors The article at the beginning of the story indicates that the Cuban, Bahamian, and Haitian governments each battle against two departments of the American government over custodial rights to Mila. Based on the locations of the four countries and on the historical relationships among them, initiate class discussion about why there would be a dispute over custody of Mila. The class could consider why the scientists working under the National Institute of Mental Health ultimately won custody.

Recognizing Details Dolphins in a group are called a "pod." Divide the class into four groups asking each group to search encyclopedias and the Internet for other names associated with animal groups. After a designated time limit, have the groups compare the number and uniqueness of the names found.

Extending Meaning Even though *The Music of Dolphins* is fiction, the reader can assume that feral children have probably been discovered in the United States. Have the students research and write a report on any stories of feral children. If no factual evidence can be found of feral children, have the students create a story of a child found in a wilderness area. Have them include their ideas on the history of the child as well as ideas for treatment of the child and introduction into society.