

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

My Father's Dragon

by

Ruth Stiles Gannett

Book Information

Ruth Stiles Gannett, My Father's Dragon
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Book Level: 5.6
Interest Level: LG

A young boy determines to rescue a poor baby dragon who is being used by a group of lazy wild animals to ferry them across the river on Wild Island.

Award: Book Sense Book of the Year

Award/Honorees; Newbery Honor

Topics: Adventure, Rescue/Save; Common Core State Standards Appendix B Titles, CCSS Grade Band 2-3; Fantasy/Imagination, Dragons; Recommended Reading, Book Sense 76 - Top Ten; Recommended Reading, NY Public Library 100 Best Titles; Recommended Reading, Oprah's Book Club - Kids Reading List

Main Characters

Elmer Elevator the narrator's father as a young boy; he is the main character of the story, who travels to Wild Island to save a baby dragon

mother Elmer's mother; she hates cats and does not let Elmer keep the old alley cat

the animals of Wild Island the various animals that Elmer encounters; they are distracted from killing Elmer by the gifts he gives them

the baby dragon an injured baby dragon held captive on Wild Island; the animals use him to transport heavy loads across the river to the other side of the island

the old alley cat a stray cat Elmer meets on his street; he tells Elmer about Wild Island and the baby dragon

unidentified narrator the person whose father is the main character of the story

Vocabulary

contradict to speak against or oppose

dignified appearing sophisticated or of a high position

hold the area in a ship that contains cargo

invasion an attack in order to conquer

trespassing entering the territory of another unlawfully

Synopsis

An unnamed narrator relates an adventure his father, Elmer Elevator, had as a young boy. One cold rainy day, Elmer meets an old alley cat that tells him about a mistreated baby dragon on Wild Island. The cat suggests that if Elmer rescues the dragon, the dragon may let Elmer fly with him. Elmer has always wanted to fly and is excited about the cat's proposal. The cat has visited the dangerous island and knows what Elmer can expect. Together, they plan Elmer's trip to the island, and the cat suggests all the necessary items for Elmer to pack. The cat is too old to make the trip, but he helps Elmer to stow away in the hold of a ship. Early the next morning, the ship heads to the port of Cranberry on the island of Tangerina.

After hiding in the hold of the ship for six days and nights, Elmer conceals himself in an empty grain bag. He is removed from the ship by unsuspecting sailors in Cranberry. He soon meets a fisherman who is nearly too frightened of Wild Island to speak about it. He warns Elmer that no one has ever returned alive from the island. Undaunted, Elmer finds the rocks that lead to Wild Island. He crosses the rocks at night so the wild animals will not see him coming and arrives on the island while it is still dark. Beyond the beach is a thick, dark, scary jungle. Elmer knows he has to find the river because the cat told him the dragon is tied along its bank. The wild animals use the dragon as a slave to carry heavy loads and passengers across the river that divides the island.

Elmer sleeps all day and starts his trek through the jungle in the late afternoon. He easily evades the boars and outsmarts the other animals he encounters with the supplies that the cat recommended. When he meets seven hungry tigers,

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he gives them his special chewing gum, claiming that if they chew it long enough, it will turn green and can be planted to grow more gum. The tigers are so busy checking each other's mouths that they forget to eat Elmer. When a rhinoceros is ready to drown Elmer in his weeping pool, Elmer gives him his toothbrush and toothpaste to shine his yellowed tusk. The rhinoceros forgets about Elmer. A hungry lion is easily distracted when the boy gives him a comb and brush to groom his mane. A fierce gorilla loses interest in twisting Elmer's arms when the boy gives each of six monkeys a magnifying glass to find the fleas bothering the gorilla.

Reaching the river, Elmer uses lollipops attached to the tails of seventeen crocodiles to lure them into forming a bridge for him to cross where the baby dragon is waiting. When Elmer arrives on the other side, he uses his jackknife to cut the thick rope around the dragon's neck just as all of the angry animals are crossing the crocodile bridge to kill him. The first crocodile finishes his lollipop, however, and swims away, leading the remaining crocodiles to the middle of the river, where the animals are trapped and at the mercy of the crocodiles. As Elmer and the grateful dragon fly away, they know that nothing will ever persuade them to go back to Wild Island.

Open-Ended Questions

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

Initial Understanding

How does Elmer happen to have the perfect items in his knapsack?

The old alley cat has already been to the island and knows what the animals are like. The cat helps Elmer determine what he should take so that he can thwart the animals.

Literary Analysis

What is the effect of writing this story in first person?

The reader never learns the identity of the narrator, other than that the main character is the father of the narrator. This point of view contributes to the mystery of the fantasy. It also gives the story more intimacy because the narrator's relationship to the main character helps the reader to take a personal interest in the main character's safety.

Inferential Comprehension

How is Elmer able to avoid being injured or killed by the animals on Wild Island?

Many of the animals on Wild Island are more interested in themselves than in what is happening in their environment. When the fierce animals first encounter Elmer, they want to eat him or kill him. But when Elmer gives them gifts, they do not even notice Elmer walking away because they are so interested in the items that he has given them.

Constructing Meaning

Pretend you are Elmer Elevator. What alternate plan could you create to cross the river if your lollipop trick did not work?

Students may suggest imaginative solutions using rafts, chopping down trees, relying on the help of a previously unmentioned animal such as an elephant, etc.

Teachable Skills

Recognizing Setting Elmer travels from the familiar territory of a city to a jungle island in the ocean. Review and discuss characteristics (climate, vegetation, precipitation, etc.) of a jungle with the class. Ask each student to research one plant or animal that is native to this biome. Students should share their research with the class. Discuss how these plants and animals have adapted to their environment. Then assign each student to sketch and name a fictitious plant or animal that could thrive in this biome. Have students present their sketches and oral

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explanations to the class.

Making Predictions The story ends with Elmer and the dragon fleeing the island and vowing never to return. Have each student write an epilogue predicting how the island animals behave after their departure and describing the voyage Elmer and the dragon take over the next few days.

Recognizing Detail Many trees are identified in the story. Elmer frequently uses these trees to hide from the animals on the island. Have each student select one of the trees mentioned in the story (palm, mahogany, tangerine, banyan) to research and write a report on its characteristics. Then have each student depict the tree in a drawing or three dimensional model that can be displayed in the classroom.

Responding to Literature Elmer leaves home and makes a dangerous, difficult trip to a fearful island to save an innocent baby dragon. Ask the students to choose a cause or situation for which they would be willing to make sacrifices. For example, a student may be willing to give up free time to help clean at a local humane society where mistreated animals are kept, or collect canned goods for a local food pantry to help hungry families. Conduct a class discussion focusing on injustices or inequities and how one person can make a difference.