

# Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

## My Friend Flicka

by  
Mary O'Hara

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### Book Information

Mary O'Hara, My Friend Flicka  
Quiz Number: 516  
J.B. Lippincott, 1973  
ISBN 0-397-00981-X; LCCN  
266 Pages  
Book Level: 6.0  
Interest Level: MG

This classic tells the story of Ken McLaughlin and the filly he named Flicka.

**Topics:** Animals, Horses; Family Life, Growing Up; Series, Flicka

### Main Characters

Flicka the spirited young filly that Ken chooses for his horse

Gus the foreman of the ranch

Howard Ken's older brother, a smart and responsible boy

Ken a young boy who seems irresponsible until he gets a horse of his own

Nell McLaughlin Ken's mother, who identifies with her son's difficulty growing up

Rob McLaughlin Ken's father, who is usually critical of him even though he loves him

### Vocabulary

**charnel house** a place where bones are kept

**feral** of feline appearance

**gelding** a castrated male horse

**heifer** a young cow that has never given birth

**loco** crazy

**quirt** a riding whip made of a strip of leather

### Synopsis

Ken McLaughlin is a young boy who is an apparently hopeless dreamer. Much to the frustration of his father, Rob, Ken's daydreams interfere with his schoolwork, chores, and even the workings of the Goose Bar Ranch, which his father owns. The focus of most of his dreams is having a colt of his own, but this seems unlikely since his

father will not give him one until he deserves it, and nothing Ken does ever seems to turn out right. However, Ken's mother, Nell, finally manages to convince Rob that the only way Ken will learn to be responsible is if he is given a colt to care for. Rob tells Ken he can pick out any horse on the ranch for his own.

Ken is thrilled and begins to make his selection carefully. Although he requests a horse colt at first, he changes his mind after watching the two-year olds gelded and seeing the effect it has on them. One day, when he is out riding, he sees Rocket, the untamable and crazy mare his father keeps on the ranch only because she is incredibly fast. At her side is a sorrel filly, Rocket's year-old foal that has kept Rocket company since her newest foal had been killed by a mountain lion earlier that summer. It is this filly that Ken chooses for his horse, a decision that disappoints his father tremendously, as Rob considers Rocket and all of her offspring to be worthless. Although Rob tries to convince Ken to change his mind, the boy refuses to give up Flicka, as he names her, for any other horse.

Problems seem to multiply for Ken. When Rocket kills herself on the ranch sign as she is shipped out after Rob finally manages to sell her, it seems to prove Rob's point that she is crazy and worthless. When Flicka is finally caught, it also seems she is as crazy as her mother since she breaks out of the stable and nearly kills herself in her attempt to jump the high corral fence. Although she is badly injured, her weakened state gives Ken the opportunity he needs to win her trust by taking care of her. Gradually she learns that he only wants to help and love her, and eventually she gives him her love in return.

As the summer continues, Ken becomes increasingly mature and responsible as he learns to face reality instead of living in a dream. He begins to face his fears, the worst being that Flicka may really be loco and untrainable. This fear, however, is finally dispelled when he attempts to halter-break her and she accepts it easily, proving that she recognizes that he loves her and that she is sensible enough to

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trust him because of it.

Ken must face the probability of losing Flicka one last time when she develops a terrible fever due to an infection in the wounds she received in her earlier accident. His father declares she must be put out of her misery, and the night before she is to be shot, Ken goes out to the pasture to find her collapsed in the stream. He sits with her there all night, and by morning is half dead himself, while she begins to recover. As Ken battles his illness, his father battles the mountain lion, which has continued to cause problems for the rancher, and finally shoots it.

Although Ken's recovery is slow because he has lost almost all hope, he does improve. His father finally helps him understand that he has a responsibility to care for Flicka now that he has won her trust, and Ken goes back to Flicka to live his dreams.

### Open-Ended Questions

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

### Initial Understanding

Why is Rob McLaughlin often so critical of Ken?

*He is hard on Ken for several reasons. First, Rob is simply frustrated with him because their personalities are so different. Rob is a practical man who quickly sees what needs to be done and how to accomplish it, whereas Ken is a romantic dreamer who spends more time thinking about what he would like to happen than how he can make his dreams come true. Fear and worry also probably motivate Rob's harshness. He is afraid that Ken will never learn to face reality and will have problems throughout his life as a result. All parents want their children to succeed and will often blame themselves if their child fails or is miserable. Finally, it seems evident that Rob is simply not good at dealing with conflict tactfully. Whether he is talking to his wife, his foreman, or his sons, when he is faced with a problem or a mistake, he usually takes it out on the other person. Ken is not the only one whom Rob yells at, but he seems to take his father's criticism harder than anyone else does.*

### Literary Analysis

How does the author's technique of personifying the horses influence the reader's attitude towards them?

*By personifying the horses, the author is able to reveal human qualities in the horses. This allows the reader to identify with the horses and develop an emotional attachment to them.*

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### Inferential Comprehension

Does it seem likely that Ken will become a rancher like his father? Why or why not?

*It seems very likely that Ken will follow in his father's footsteps to become a rancher. As time goes on, he becomes increasingly responsible and capable of working on the ranch. He learns a great deal from his father about running a ranch and also has a natural understanding and love of animals. Ken's selfless attitude suggests that he would be the kind of rancher his father is, one who cares about his animals and is willing to sacrifice his own comfort to ensure theirs. It could be argued, however, that Ken would not want to be a rancher because his concern and motivation to be responsible are centered on Flicka, an animal he loves dearly. Perhaps if he did not love an animal, he would be less inclined to care for it. Also, it is possible that he may want to channel his vivid imagination and tendency to dream into a career in which they will be assets, such as writing or teaching.*

### Constructing Meaning

What do Rob's words mean when he states, "It couldn't be done but the darn fool didn't know it and went ahead and did it."? Why does Rob use them to explain why Flicka tried to jump the fence?

*His words mean that most of the time people (or animals) are held back by their own fear of failure. A fool who doesn't know something can't be done has no reason to be afraid of not accomplishing what he or she is trying to do. He or she has not set up any mental restrictions; therefore, he or she has made it easier to accomplish the goal. Rob uses the saying as an example to let Ken know that Flicka wasn't being stupid by trying to jump the fence. She had never tried it before and therefore did not know that she probably would not be able to do it. As a result, she was not trying to do something she knew would injure her, but rather was just attempting to escape in a way that seemed relatively reasonable to her.*

## Teachable Skills

**Understanding Literary Features** The mood of a

story is the emotion it evokes in the reader. Throughout the book, Mary O'Hara cultivates different moods in her readers through her descriptions of the characters and situations. Assign each student a subject to describe, making sure that each subject is assigned twice. Without any discussion among themselves, have the students write a two hundred-word paragraph that uses as much figurative language as possible. Then ask the students who have the same subject to pair up and compare descriptions. Discuss the mood each description evokes and why.

**Extending Meaning** Set up a horse auction in the class to sell Rob McLaughlin's horses, with one student as the auctioneer, several students as the sellers and the rest of the class as the buyers. "Sell" all of the main horses from the story (those that died may be resurrected). Take note of which ones were sold for the most money and those for the least. Ask the new "owners" why they wanted a particular animal. On what criteria did they judge the horses? Are they worth what they paid for them?

**Identifying Reasons** Like Ken, most people have a dream that they would love to see come true. Ask the students to think about what their greatest dreams are. Then have each one make a plan to accomplish his or her dream. Make sure they consider the steps they have to take to make their dreams come true, what obstacles may lie in their paths, and what each must do to overcome those obstacles.

**Understanding the Main Idea** Two of the major points made in the book are that human beings must take care of the animals they tame and must take responsibility for their actions. As a class, have the students choose something to adopt, perhaps an animal at a zoo or an animal shelter. Plan and run fundraisers to support the venture. Assign each student a responsibility to ensure their participation and the success of the project. Keep a weekly class journal on the progress of the chosen adoptee. Depending on what the adoptee is, it may be appropriate to use it in the following years.