

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

Runaway Ralph

by

Beverly Cleary

Book Information

Beverly Cleary, Runaway Ralph
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Ralph runs away looking for freedom but winds up a prisoner at a summer camp.

Award: NCTE Notable Children's Books in the Language Arts

Topics: Adventure, Travel; Animals, Mice; Humor/Funny, Funny; Transportation/Vehicles, Motorcycles

Main Characters

Aunt Jill a woman who works at Happy Acres Camp

Catso a cat at Happy Acres Camp who taunts Ralph

Chum a hamster living in a cage next to Ralph

Garfield (Garf) a young boy who captures Ralph at Happy Acres Camp

Karen, Lana two young campers at Happy Acres Camp

Matt the hotel's elderly bellboy

Ralph an energetic young mouse who lives at the Mountain View Inn

Sam a watchdog for Happy Acres Camp

Uncle Lester Ralph's uncle, who likes to give him advice

Vocabulary

droned spoken in a boring voice or tone

exhilarated happy or refreshed

ignominiously marked by shame or disgrace

perilously dangerously

rebellious unruly; not manageable

Synopsis

Ralph is the only mouse in the Mountain View Inn who owns a motorcycle. The motorcycle is a present from Keith, a former guest of the hotel. Every night after the night clerk falls asleep, Ralph is free to ride his motorcycle around the hotel. One night, Uncle Lester warns Ralph that he can not go on living like he has been, running around the lobby, watching TV, and riding his motorcycle at night. Ralph's mother, who is afraid of everything, agrees with Uncle Lester. When Ralph is forced to give his brothers, sisters, and cousins a ride on his motorcycle, he is furious. He feels he is caught between two generations of mice and that nobody understands him, so he decides to run away.

Ralph is angry with Matt when he refuses to carry the motorcycle down the steps. After a mishap in which the motorcycle ends up hanging on a twig, Ralph rescues his motorcycle and coasts on down the road. Ralph arrives at Happy Acres Camp where Sam, the watchdog, does not want to let him in. Ralph escapes, then falls asleep, only to be awakened by Catso, a cold-hearted tomcat. He is rescued by Garf, a young camper. Garf is allowed to keep Ralph in a cage in the craft shop, while Lana, another camper, brings Chum to camp. Chum, a hamster, lives in the cage next to Ralph. Chum tells Ralph that he had been bought at a county fair, and every summer he gets shipped off to camp with the girl who owns him.

Catso makes frequent attempts to enter the screen door to the craft shop. With each attempt, Ralph gets nervous and worried. Ralph would like to befriend Garf, but he notices Garf likes to sing songs in which animals experience horrible deaths. Each time Ralph decides to tell Garf about his motorcycle, the boy is singing another horrible song. Meanwhile, Garf tells Aunt Jill that he likes to be alone. She lets him make a sign telling everyone Ralph is his personal mouse. When Karen's watch is discovered missing, suspicion falls on Garf because of his unusual behavior, but Ralph knows it was Catso who took the watch.

Ralph becomes desperate to escape and go home. He discovers Garf can understand him and offers to

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tell the boy where the watch is if Garf will let him out of the cage. Catso makes it into the shop, knocks Ralph's cage into a worktable, and the bottom comes loose. Ralph escapes. Garf and Ralph strike a deal. Ralph will return Karen's watch to prove Garf's innocence, and Garf will return the motorcycle. Sam helps Ralph carry the watch to Karen's sleeping bag. Ralph gnaws a hole in the bag to slip the watch into and falls asleep inside. The girls discover him and trap him inside a hat. They give him back to Garf, who then gives Ralph his motorcycle and promises to take him back to the Mountain View Inn.

Open-Ended Questions

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

Initial Understanding

Garf admits he wants to be alone once in a while at camp. He shares a bedroom with his brother, and his parents like to keep him busy. What reasons might he have for wanting time to himself? Do you ever feel the need to be alone? Why?

There are many reasons people need time by themselves. Garf may enjoy time alone to gather his thoughts and think about things he enjoys. Personal space is important, and he does not appear to have any at home. He probably wants to do things he would like to do, rather than do what others are doing. Garf has an independent side that is hard to develop when he must always do activities with the other campers. He also seems to have a shy side, and perhaps being with a group is hard for him at times. Students' personal responses to their need to be alone will vary.

Literary Analysis

The story has a few suspenseful moments between Ralph and Catso. Find them throughout the story. Can you think of some suspenseful moments you have had in your life?

In chapter three, Catso has Ralph pinned to the ground while explaining to his family that "a live mouse is an interesting and instructive plaything." Each time Ralph spies Catso trying to break through the screen door into the craft shop he gets nervous. In chapter six, Catso makes it into the craft shop and taunts Ralph by leisurely licking and washing himself while Ralph nervously waits for him to pounce. Students might identify waiting for report cards, test scores, enduring dental and medical appointments, and watching sporting events as suspenseful moments in their lives.

Inferential Comprehension

At the end of the story, Garf returns Ralph's motorcycle. It is clear to the reader that he wants to return to the hotel, but the story ends before he does so. How do you think his family will react to his return?

Ralph's family should be thrilled to have him home. His mother, who is a constant worrier, will have been frantic because of his disappearance. She will be glad he is home and safe. He most likely will be severely reprimanded by Uncle Lester, who had warned him about his carefree ways. Ralph's brothers, sisters, and cousins will be happy to have him back, but will probably tease him about his adventures.

Constructing Meaning

Ralph feels he is caught between two generations of mice. The older generation is worried about "safety and crumbs," while the younger generation of mice is silly. Nobody understands him. Tell about a time in your life when you felt caught between two people or situations, or you believed nobody understood you. How did you feel? Was the situation resolved?

Answers will vary, but responses may include such emotions as anger, confusion, frustration, anxiety, hurt, and rebelliousness.

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Teachable Skills

Recognizing Setting The majority of the story takes place at Happy Acres Camp. Have students create a brochure advertising the camp. They can create the camp to their own liking. What activities would be inviting to young people? Brainstorm advertisements the students would deem memorable. What qualities do they have? Encourage students to use a combination of words and graphics.

Comparing and Contrasting The story has several important characters who are animals. Have students list the animals and their identifying characteristics. Once a list has been completed, students should create a poem or short story comparing or contrasting two or more characters. Another alternative would be to compare *Runaway Ralph* to other stories using animal characters. Suggest the well-known Aesop's Fables, in which animals are used to teach the reader a moral.

Identifying Reasons Ralph decides to run away after deciding nobody understands him at home. The only thing he takes with him is his motorcycle and helmet. Tell the students they have just won a trip to _____ and will be gone indefinitely. The airplane leaves in one hour. They have fifteen minutes to pack a bag and get a ride to the airport. Students should prepare a list of what they would pack and why. Are there some things they must have? What things can they leave behind? Stress the importance of explaining the reasons for their choices. Once all lists are completed, have them share their lists with the class. Finally, combine the lists into one class list in which the top five or ten items are agreeable to the majority.

Deriving Word or Phrase Meaning The story uses the literary device known as personification. Personification is attributing human qualities and characteristics to non-human subjects. Have students skim the story and identify as many examples of personification as they can find. Chapters may be assigned to groups of students

as an alternative option. Upon completion of the list, students can illustrate one example. The illustrations should have a caption.