

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

Spider Sparrow

by
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Book Information

Dick King-Smith, Spider Sparrow

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Interest Level: MG

Spider, a baby abandoned on an English farm, grows up to be mentally slower than other children but manifests a remarkable talent for communicating with animals as he comes of age during World War II.

Topics: Animals, Misc./Other; Countries/Regions, England; Disabilities, Learning; Places, Farms; Recommended Reading, Junior Library Guild Selection; Technology, Communication; Wars, World War II

Main Characters

Albie Ephraim's son; he joins the army and goes to war

Ephraim Stanhope the horseman of Outoverdown Farm

John Joseph Sparrow (Spider) the central character of the story; he is an abandoned, retarded infant who develops a remarkable ability to communicate with animals

Kathie Sparrow Spider's adoptive mother and Tom's wife

Major Yorke (Mister) the gentleman owner of Outoverdown Farm

Percy Pound the foreman of Outoverdown Farm

Tom Sparrow Spider's adoptive father; he is a shepherd on Outoverdown Farm

Vocabulary

armistice a truce

deftly nimbly

impinged invaded

solace comfort

spinney a cluster of small trees

vicar a church official

Synopsis

On a spring night in 1926 in England, a baby boy is abandoned by his mother on a farm. Tom and Kathie Sparrow, a childless couple working on the farm, find the baby. Unable to locate the baby's mother, they adopt the child and raise him as their own. Two years later, the child, not yet walking or talking, creeps on all fours like a spider, inspiring his nickname. Tom, Kathie, and other people living and working on the farm notice that Spider is slow in his development, and they suspect he is retarded. As he grows older, it is determined he will not be able to manage in a school setting. However, Kathie and Tom notice that Spider has a special way with all the animals -- they are not afraid of him.

In 1939 Britain declares war on Germany. Some of the boys on the farm go to war, but Spider, now thirteen, is too young for the army. Percy, the foreman on the farm, gives Spider the only job he can understand, that of scaring the crows away from the newly planted corn. As the war escalates, the farm must produce more food for the population and the war effort. Spider continues to scare the crows and also learns how to clean and polish the horses' tack. When Spider turns fourteen, his parents give him a knife as a present. Spider learns to carve beautiful animals from wood with the knife. The people on the farm begin to realize that despite his handicaps, he has a special way with animals and a gift for wood carving. Spider is able to continue doing simple jobs, but Kathie notices that he tires easily and often becomes short of breath.

While the war continues, life on the farm remains much the same. Spider has no concept of the war or of anything other than his own small world. He is unaware of his skills with animals and his knife and is ignorant of his own mental shortcomings. When Spider is almost sixteen in 1942, he becomes ill from chasing the crows in a cold rain. A doctor examines him and notices that Spider has a heart murmur. Spider recovers from the illness, but his heart remains vulnerable. Kathie and Tom wonder how Spider would ever survive if they die. In the autumn after his sixteenth birthday, Spider dies

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peacefully in his little hut in the fields. Kathie and Tom are comforted knowing that Spider was always happy.

Open-Ended Questions

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

Initial Understanding

Kathie and Tom experience a wide range of feelings in the story. Describe the various feelings they have as Spider becomes an important part of their lives.

Before Spider was born, Tom and Kathie probably felt sad and disappointed that they had not been blessed with a child. When Spider arrives, they are suddenly filled with happiness and hope. Their successful adoption of Spider adds to their happiness. However, when they begin to notice that Spider is different and even retarded, their feelings turn to deep sadness and concern for Spider's reaction to possible mistreatment by others. They fear that he will not be happy. When they discover he has special talents, they begin to feel pride and happiness that he is able to do jobs that are ideal for him. Spider's first illness brings feelings of worry and doubt that he would ever be able to take care of himself if he outlives Kathie and Tom. And finally, when Spider dies, they have feelings of sadness and grief. But through that, they are able to feel comfort that he died happy.

Literary Analysis

Explain why people other than Tom and Kathie treat Spider differently as the story progresses. What characteristics does Spider have that affect the way people treat him?

When the people first realize that Spider is retarded, they make jokes about him. Billy Butt tells his nephews that if a lamb had been born deformed like Spider, Tom would have let the lamb die. He also thinks Tom and Kathie would be better off without Spider. He changes his opinion, though, after he sees Spider calm the broncos. Mister also realizes Spider is worth more than just a crowstarver when the horses are tamed and the fox and Spider are saved at the end. Treatment of Spider is changed from scorn and ridicule to respect and kindness. Spider is sweet, caring, and uncomplicated; people like him for what he is.

Inferential Comprehension

Spider dies at the young age of sixteen. In what way is Spider's life with Tom and Kathie similar to the lives of the lambs Tom shepherds?

Initially, when Spider's mother leaves Spider in the lambing pen, Tom is busy trying to save the life of an orphaned lamb. Tom feeds the lamb with a bottle and nipple. He uses the same bottle to feed Spider. Tom manages to convince another ewe to "adopt" the orphaned lamb, just as he and Kathie eventually adopt Spider. Death and merciful death are a part of Tom's lambing business. Billy Butt infers that perhaps Spider would have been better off dying a merciful death when he was first discovered. As the cycle of life and death is ongoing in lambing, so it continues with Spider entering the lives of Tom and Kathie.

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Constructing Meaning

The story is filled with references to Spider's ability to communicate with many animals. What are some specific early events that lead the reader to predict that Spider will do remarkable things with animals later in the story?

The first clue occurs in chapter three when Kathie is listening to an owl; the reader is led to believe that Spider is making the hooting sound. In chapter four, Spider makes a perfect imitation of a cuckoo's call and a cat's meow. All of these occur before Spider turns six, thus leading the reader to know that Spider will likely have special adventures with animals as the story progresses.

Teachable Skills

Responding to Literature Spider has a remarkable ability to communicate with all animals. Not only is he able to emulate the sounds of various animals, but the animals seem to have an intrinsic trust in him. Ask the students to observe an animal over a period of about a week. They can select a pet they have at home, an animal that is in their neighborhood, or a classroom animal for everyone to observe. The observation should focus on how the animal communicates -- sounds and noises, body language, movements, etc. The students should tie the observations to things that Spider may have seen the animals do. Have the students emulate Spider. How easy is it to mimic animal sounds exactly? Have each student write a short report on the observations. They should also compare their successes in copying animal sounds to Spider's success.

Understanding Dialogue The story is filled with local jargon that is difficult to understand at times. Some words are distinctly British, others are combinations or contractions of words with extra consonants or vowels inserted or omitted. Divide the class into two or three groups. Have each group make a list of words and definitions or translations that the entire class can later compare and discuss.

Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors Chapter twelve describes airplanes flying overhead as the men are in the fields. The chapter refers to "Dunkirk," "RAF" (Royal Air Force), "Messerschmitt," and "Luftwaffe." Divide the class into four groups, and assign one of the above terms to each group. The group is to do research to determine what the term means and then prepare a visual display and explanation to present to the class.

Recognizing Feelings There are a variety of feelings that are experienced by the characters and the reader throughout the story. Examples are sadness, worry, fear, and anger. Have students locate a scene in which an emotion is evoked and describe the scene to the class. The rest of the class is to guess the feeling.