

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for Strider by Beverly Cleary

Book Information

Beverly Cleary, Strider
Quiz Number: 5442
William Morrow & Company Inc, 1991
ISBN 0-688-09900-9; LCCN
179 Pages
Book Level: 4.8
Interest Level: MG

In a series of diary entries, Leigh tells how he comes to terms with his parents' divorce, acquires joint custody of an abandoned dog, and joins the track team at school.

Topics: Animals, Dogs; READNOW - Demco Media
Turtleback Books, Demco Media - Read
Now Grades 6-8; Sports/Recreation, Track
and Field

Main Characters

Barry a friend of Leigh; the two agree to have joint custody of Strider

Dad Leigh's father, who is a truck driver until his truck is repossessed

Geneva Weston a red-haired girl who becomes Leigh's friend

Kevin Knight a friend of Leigh

Leigh Botts a boy who finds an abandoned dog on the beach; he later claims it as his own

Mom Leigh's hard-working mother

Mrs. Smerling the Bottses' landlady

Ms. Habis-Jones an English teacher Leigh refers to as "old Wounded-hair"

Strider a friendly dog Leigh and Barry find on the beach

Vocabulary

coax to get another to do something by flattery or gentle urging

custody the responsibility of caring for something

gunnysacks sacks made of a coarse material

mottled having spots or patches of different shades or colors

SPCA Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals

Synopsis

Strider is a story about Leigh Botts, a fourteen-year-old boy who lives with his mother in a small cottage in Pacific Grove, California. It is told in the form of a diary in which Leigh reveals his struggle to cope with the loneliness and confusion he feels because of his parents' divorce and his effort to fit in at school. The story is a sequel to *Dear Mr. Henshaw*, the book in which Leigh is first introduced. It is in this earlier book that Leigh writes to Mr. Henshaw, a famous author, who advises Leigh to begin a diary to express his thoughts. At first Leigh does not like keeping a diary, but then he realizes that it helps him to work through his problems.

As this book opens several years later, Leigh begins writing in his diary again. Early in June, Leigh and his friend Barry discover a dog on the beach nearby. The dog is afraid of the commands "sit" and "stay" because his previous owner apparently gave these commands to him when he abandoned him there. The boys name him Strider because he runs alongside them on the beach. The two boys then get food and water for the dog and are able to coax him to follow them home. The boys agree to "joint custody" of Strider. Leigh's mother is willing to allow Leigh to keep Strider part-time, even though she knows they will not be able to rent a better apartment because of rules forbidding dogs and in spite of the possibility that Mrs. Smerling, their present landlady, may either evict them or raise their rent because of Strider.

In mid-July, Leigh's father comes for a short visit, drops off a child support check, and takes Leigh and Leigh's mother out to lunch. Leigh senses, however, that his father may be having some financial problems because he notices his father's tractor trailer is not carrying a load, which means he is losing money.

Over the summer, Leigh gets into good shape running every day with Strider. And when school starts in September, he runs even more when a boy named Kevin begins chasing him every morning.

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Leigh had bought a colorful shirt at a thrift shop earlier in the summer. The shirt had been one of Kevin's favorites, but his mother thought it was tasteless, so she had given it to the thrift shop. Kevin wants it back, and he tries to catch Leigh to get it by force. One day Mr. Kurtz, the track coach, spots the two boys running and tells them they should put their energy to better use by running cross-country in the fall and track in the spring. But, Leigh decides not to run cross-country at this point.

In the meantime, Leigh's father loses his rig because he cannot pay for truck payments and repairs, so he is forced to leave trucking and take a job pumping gas at a gas station until he gets a better job driving a forklift. Also, Barry has gone out for football, and Leigh notices that Barry is falling behind on his share of "joint custody" costs for Strider. Since Barry is so busy with football and does not pay much attention to Strider, Leigh takes care of the dog most of the time. He becomes so attached to Strider that he does not want to give him back to Barry. The boys have an argument about the dog, and Leigh reluctantly gives full ownership of Strider to Barry.

As the school year progresses, Leigh becomes friends with Kevin, who is no longer angry about not getting his shirt back. In mid-February, Leigh and Kevin join the track team. The next day, when Leigh comes home from school, Strider is there waiting for him. Barry realizes that Strider really wants to be with Leigh, so Barry agrees to give full custody to him. Leigh asks Mrs. Smerling's permission for Strider to live there. The landlady gives her consent but requests that he put up a fence for the dog. Leigh asks his father to help build the fence. His father happily agrees, and while they work on the project together, the two deepen their relationship.

Leigh gradually improves his running times and performs fairly well at his first meet. He becomes friends with Geneva Weston, a fellow track team member whom he met during the summer and admired from a distance over the school year. He now feels that with his friends Barry, Kevin, and Geneva and with his success at track, he fits in and

belongs at school. And finally Strider accepts the "sit" and "stay" commands willingly because he knows Leigh will not leave him.

Open-Ended Questions

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

Initial Understanding

The coach tells the track team that "it's not the winning, it's the competing that's important." What does he mean by this?

The coach is referring to the true spirit of competition. People should focus on competing against themselves rather than competing against others.

Literary Analysis

Leigh finally tells Mrs. Smerling that Strider is his dog. Does her reaction seem out of character for her?

While Mrs. Smerling is presented as outwardly gruff, she seems to have another side to her that she tries to keep hidden. This is suggested by hints that she has known all along that Strider belongs to Leigh but has not objected.

Inferential Comprehension

How does Strider show that he wants to be with Leigh rather than with Barry?

There are many things that Strider does. One example is the way he places his paw only on Leigh's foot, indicating he does not want the boy to leave. Another example occurs when Strider is taken to Barry's house. Strider returns to Leigh on his own when he gets the opportunity.

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Constructing Meaning

Leigh and Geneva both agree that "the all-time number-one boring, stupid question" adults ask kids is: "What do you plan to do with your life?" Do you agree with this statement? Why or why not?

There are many possible answers. Some students may agree that this is the worst question an adult can ask them because it places pressure on them, it makes them worry about things that are a long way away, and it makes them feel they have to live up to others' expectations.

Teachable Skills

Describing Actions or Events Leigh and Barry write the commands for "sit" and "stay" on paper and teach Strider to respond to them because Strider becomes very upset when the commands are spoken. While the dog does not really read, he does learn to respond to these visual cues. There are many things that dogs can be trained to do and many ways to train them. Have students research and write a composition about some popular training methods for dogs. What are some basic commands? What are special tasks that dogs do for police or handicapped individuals?

Understanding Characterization Leigh's first semester English teacher, Ms. Habis-Jones, insists that her class avoid using "non-words" in their writing. Non-words include kinda, sorta, gonna, and others of that sort. Leigh, however, insists that those words really add flavor to his writing, especially when it involves dialogue. Have students write a short scene involving a situation in which the character's dialogue is important to the story. The dialogue should be the primary focus. The students can write one version using non-words and colloquial expressions and then re-write the scene using only words consistent with standard English. How does this affect the story, the characters, and the scene?

Understanding the Author's Craft Mr. Drexler, Leigh's second semester English teacher, asks his class to write a composition using only nouns

and verbs. Leigh writes about his track meet. Ask students to write a short composition, a paragraph or two, about an experience they have had. Students may use only nouns and verbs. Refer to Leigh's composition as a model. What effect does this type of writing have on the composition?

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