

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for The Borrowers Afloat

by
Mary Norton

Book Information

Mary Norton, The Borrowers Afloat
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Mary Norton's beloved family of miniature people set out on a voyage in a tea kettle in search of a new home.

Award: ALA Notable/Best Books; Carnegie Medal/Honors

Topics: Adventure, Life Changes; Family Life, Moving to a New Area; Fantasy/Imagination, Misc./Other; Series, Borrowers

Main Characters

Arrietty an adventuresome young female borrower

Aunt Lupy Arrietty's pretentious aunt

Hendreary Homily's brother

Homily Arrietty's timid but determined mother

Kate a young girl who whole heartedly believes in the borrowers and their adventures

Mild Eye a Gypsy man who attempts to capture the borrowers

Mr. Beguid Mrs. May's lawyer and childhood acquaintance

Mrs. May an elderly woman who has shared her borrower stories with Kate

Pod Arrietty's adventuresome and clever father

Spiller a wild young borrower who helps Arrietty's family

Tom Goodenough the old gamekeeper who, as a child, had contact with the borrowers

Vocabulary

ballast weight carried in a boat for balance

dip a homemade candle

flotsam a collection of debris, often found in open water

mackintosh a heavy raincoat

mangle a machine consisting of two metal rollers that is used to press clothes

Synopsis

The Borrowers Afloat is the third story in The Borrowers series and continues from where *The Borrowers Afield* ended. Mrs. May, an elderly lady who has inherited a cottage on the property of her childhood home, has returned to inspect her new property with her young friend Kate. Mrs. May knows part of the story of the borrowers, tiny people who survive by "borrowing" what they need from humans, but Kate learns more about them from Tom Goodenough, the retired gamekeeper whom she befriends.

The story skips back in time to tell of Pod, Homily, and Arrietty, a family of borrowers who, with the help of Spiller, a wild, young borrower, and a young Tom Goodenough, are reunited with their relations who are living in Tom's cottage. Although they are happy to be back in civilization again, living with their relatives is difficult, and none of the three are truly happy. They are forced to leave when Arrietty finds out that Tom and his grandfather are leaving the cottage. In the best interest of both families, Pod declares that his family is going to go back out into the wild. Although it is difficult for the family to find a safe way out of the snug little cottage, with Spiller's help they manage to escape from the house in the middle of the night through the drainpipe.

Pod, Homily, and Arrietty wait in Spiller's teakettle cabin for him to take them downstream to Little Fordham, a model village that is the ideal place for a borrower family to occupy. While they are waiting, however, the spring rains cause a flood that sweeps the kettle downstream. The flood carries them smoothly until they get caught in a small island of flood debris.

Their situation, although frustrating, is not dangerous until they are discovered by Mild Eye, the Gypsy from whom they had escaped in the past. Determined to capture and exploit the borrowers, he

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makes several attempts to catch them, but the commotion that his failures create eventually attracts the attention of a passing policeman, who arrests Mild Eye for poaching.

Spiller, who thwarted Mild Eye's plans, then reappears and, after he collects them from the water, they all continue downstream in his boat toward Little Fordham, with only one reserved gardener as a witness.

Open-Ended Questions

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

Initial Understanding

Explain why Homily is so shocked when Lupy uses the expression "It's only human," to explain why she makes Spiller's suits.

In the eyes of the borrowers, humans mean trouble and danger. The humans are the ones who had smoked them out of the house and are creatures to be feared and avoided, for to be caught by humans would mean imprisonment and exploitation for the borrowers. As a result, hearing the expression "It's only human" does not bring to mind positive thoughts for Homily, as she sees humans in a negative light.

Literary Analysis

One of the things that makes it difficult for the borrower family to leave the cottage is that Tom's pet ferret is lurking at the door. In the pages leading up to this discovery, several characters make statements that foreshadow the ferret's appearance. Find these statements and explain why they are examples of foreshadowing.

Arrietty, Pod, and Hendreary all make comments about the ferret that should lead the reader to suspect that it might cause a problem in the future. First, as Arrietty relays the information that Tom had given her, she states that Tom is worried about whether he will find his ferret before he and his grandfather leave the cottage. Hendreary, at this point, is far more concerned about the humans leaving and merely brushes off the remark. A day or so later, Arrietty mentions to her father that Tom still has not found his ferret and, once again, her comment is dismissed. These comments suggest that the danger is out there, but everyone chooses to ignore it until the danger becomes immediate.

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Inferential Comprehension

While her family is staying with the Hendrearys, Arrietty notices many differences between her mother and her aunt. Compare and contrast Lupy and Homily.

Physically, the two women are very different; Lupy is stout, whereas Homily is thin and angular. However, their personalities are similar in that they both are very proud of their respective families and want the best for them. Both women seem to share a taste in furniture, as Lupy somehow acquires the same furniture that Homily once had in the big house and then refuses to give it back. Although both women are somewhat snobbish, Lupy is far more snobby than Homily is. Both women have very strong personalities and are very opinionated, but at the same time are very loyal, loving wives and mothers. Homily, although forced into it, is willing to explore the outdoors, whereas Lupy seems to be terrified of living there for very long. Finally, even though Homily is not happy about it, she is willing to acknowledge her humble roots, whereas Lupy tries to hide the fact that she grew up in a rain pipe.

Constructing Meaning

At the beginning of the story, Arrietty cannot wait to escape from the indoor life and return to life outdoors. Which of these two do you think would be a better environment for the borrowers to live in? List some of the desirable characteristics of your choice and explain why you think it would be better for them to live there.

Answers will vary greatly depending on students' personalities. Some may say that living outdoors is more exciting because the borrowers would have to fend for themselves, be completely independent, and face new challenges every day. On the other hand, some may consider living indoors to be better because it would probably provide more comfort and security and there would be new human treasures to borrow. Also, there would always be the opportunity to try to befriend a human.

Extending Meaning From the borrowers' perspective, many ordinary creatures and objects seem to be gigantic. Have the students find an object at home, at school, or outside. Then on a large sheet of paper, have each student draw a picture of a borrower and the object in its relative size.

Making Predictions Pod, Homily and Arrietty leave the cottage to start a new life for themselves soon after Tom and his grandfather depart. What would have happened if Tom had taken them with him to the hospital? What new adventures might the little family have had? Write a short story that tells about one of these possible adventures and be sure to explain how the borrowers creatively used some of the common objects in the hospital to build a home.

Recognizing Details Pod, Homily, and Arrietty travel to Little Fordham in the boat Spiller constructs from a knife box. Put on a boat race in the class, in which each student may enter a boat created from an object found at home. Prizes may be awarded, not only for the first boat to finish the race, but also for the most creative boat, the boat that can carry the most cargo, etc.

Responding to Literature Based on the descriptions of characters in the story, have students imagine what each character might look like. Provide magazines for students to find and clip pictures of people who best fit their images of several characters. Have students mount the cut-outs and choose a suitable scene from the story to act out by using the cut-outs and written dialogue.

Teachable Skills