

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for The Boxcar Children by Gertrude Chandler Warner

Book Information

Gertrude Chandler Warner, The Boxcar Children
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The resourceful Alden children survive without adult supervision and make a home for themselves in an abandoned boxcar.

Topics: Adventure, Survival; Family Life, Orphans; Mysteries, Detective Stories; READNOW - Demco Media Turtleback Books, Demco Media - Read Now Grades 1-3; READNOW - Perma-Bound, Perma-Bound - Read Now Grades 4-6; Series, Boxcar Children; Transportation/Vehicles, Trains

Main Characters

Benny Alden the youngest Alden, who is about five

Dr. Moore a doctor in Silver City whom Henry works for each day

Henry Alden the oldest of the Alden children, who takes a job in town to help support the homeless family

James Henry Alden the children's grandfather, who has put out a reward for their return

Jessie Alden the oldest girl in the Alden family, who is very responsible and organized

Mrs. Moore Dr. Moore's mother

Violet Alden an Alden child who is about ten

Vocabulary

boxcar an enclosed railway train car

dump a place where garbage is thrown away

fountain a place that contains a stream of water

orchard an area of land used to grow fruit or nut trees

Synopsis

The parents of the Alden children are dead, leaving

the four of them homeless and on their own. They are afraid to seek out their grandfather because they believe he will not like them. One night, the baker's wife notices them as they stand outside the bakery looking at the food through the window. The children go inside to buy some bread, and Jessie, the oldest girl, offers to do dishes in the morning if they can spend the night. Even though the baker's wife does not like children, she agrees because she wants their help with the dishes. When the children go to bed, Jessie and her older brother, Henry, overhear the baker and his wife talking about keeping the three older children but sending Benny, the youngest, to the Children's Home. Consequently, they wake the younger two children and leave immediately.

While in the woods, Jessie discovers an old train boxcar, and the children climb inside to get out of the rain. She thinks it will make a wonderful home for them. It is located near a brook where they can wash, and is not too far from a drinking fountain. Henry agrees, and they decide to stay in the boxcar. While Henry is in town, Jessie finds a stray dog and takes a thorn from his paw. Benny names the dog Watch, and he becomes the children's watchdog. The three younger Aldens go in search of treasures at a nearby dump. They find wheels, cups, plates, and other useful things for their new home.

Henry finds a job in Silver City working for Dr. Moore. He does all kinds of odd jobs for the doctor and the doctor's mother. The Moores are very kind to Henry. They let him take some extra vegetables from the garden and old nails. Dr. Moore is very curious about Henry and follows him home one night. He discovers the Aldens are living in the boxcar but does not say anything, as they seem happy and safe.

The days pass and the children continue to live in the boxcar. The Moores meet all the children when they come to their house to help with cherry picking. When Dr. Moore sees a notice in the newspaper that James Henry Alden is looking for his lost grandchildren, he sends Henry to the Silver City Field Day sponsored by Mr. Alden and others. At the

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Field Day, Henry decides to enter the free-for-all race and wins twenty-five dollars. He is awarded the prize by his grandfather, but neither is aware they are related.

When Violet becomes ill, Henry brings the doctor to the boxcar. Dr. Moore takes the children back to his house and finally calls Mr. Alden, who decides to stay and let the children get to know him before he reveals who he is. Henry knows he has seen Mr. Alden somewhere and when he figures it out, all the children are happy to discover he is their grandfather, for they like him very much. Mr. Alden takes them to live in his house where they each have their own room. When he realizes they miss the boxcar, he has it moved into his back yard. Violet promises they will never leave and their grandfather is pleased.

Open-Ended Questions

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

Initial Understanding

At first, Benny does not want to live in the boxcar. He is afraid the engine will come and take them away while they are inside. What might be some other reasons why the children should not live in the boxcar?

The boxcar provides shelter, but it is not as safe as a house. It has a door that can not be locked. There is no electricity to provide lights, heat, or to use to cook food. There is no telephone in case of an emergency.

Literary Analysis

There are four Alden children: Henry, Jessie, Violet, and Benny. What similarities do you see in the children?

An obvious similarity is that Henry and Benny are boys, while Jessie and Violet are girls. Henry and Jessie are very grown-up. They take charge and are responsible. Henry and Jessie turn to each other for advice about what should be done. Henry, Jessie, and Violet each take care to watch over those who are younger. Both Jessie and Violet are organized when it comes to keeping house in the boxcar. Jessie and Benny take an interest in Watch.

Inferential Comprehension

The Alden children reunite with their grandfather and everyone is happy. Based on what you have read, what do you think might have happened if their grandfather had not found them?

Dr. Moore and his mother genuinely like the children. It is likely they would have taken the children into their own home. If that were not possible, they probably would have allowed the children to stay until better arrangements could be made.

Constructing Meaning

The Alden children believe their grandfather did not like their mother, so they think he will not like them. They have chosen to run away from him, rather than seek his help. Do you think this is a good idea? Have you ever wanted to run away? Did it seem like a good idea at the time?

The children are truly afraid their grandfather is a mean person. It seems they feel they have no choice, but four children on their own with no home is not a good situation. There are many dangers the children could face trying to make it by themselves. Children need an adult to love them and guide them. They should give their grandfather a chance to help. Students will have varying answers concerning running away, but should determine that running away from a problem is not the best solution. They should always find someone to talk to about what is bothering them, rather than run from the problem.

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Teachable Skills

Recognizing Setting The Alden children find a home in a train boxcar. Chapter four tells how they divide the boxcar into a bedroom with pine needle beds and a sitting room or kitchen. The younger children find treasures such as cups and plates at a nearby dump they can use in their new home. Chapter five mentions some of the items the children find and how Violet and Jessie create a shelf for their items. Have students illustrate what they think the inside of the boxcar looks like. Alternately, have them illustrate what their own boxcar would look like if they lived in one.

Making Predictions The children do not think their grandfather will like them. They base this on their belief that he did not like their mother. Have students pretend they are Violet or Benny and write a letter to their grandfather. Brainstorm with the students what things the letter might include. What questions might the children ask? Will they ask to live with him? What do the students predict he might say in a return letter? It might be fun to work with another teacher to find students who are familiar with *The Boxcar Children* and have those students write replies back from Mr. Alden.

Recognizing Details Being on their own, the children learn to survive. They have no modern day conveniences, such as electricity or telephones. Have students create a list of all the things the children have to do without while living in the boxcar. Hold a BOXCAR CHILDREN family night, where students and parents spend an hour or two in the school's gymnasium or outside on the playground. Have students think of activities they can do that do not involve electricity or modern day luxuries. Be sure to include an opportunity for parents and children to read from *The Boxcar Children* series of books. (This will take some careful planning and much adult supervision.)

Responding to Literature The author of *The Boxcar Children* does not go into detail as to how the children feel about their parents' death, their grandfather's supposed dislike for them, or

having to live in a boxcar. Have students discuss how they might feel if they were one of the Aldens. After discussion, have them create a picture book with short captions describing these feelings. For example, as Henry, they might draw a picture of him working for Dr. Moore with a short caption reading, "I feel happy that I am making money to help my family." Benny might be drawn as saying, "I wish we had a real house to live in." Give ample time for a thorough discussion before this activity.