

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

The Mouse and the Motorcycle

by
Beverly Cleary

Book Information

Beverly Cleary, The Mouse and the Motorcycle

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Book Level: 5.1

Interest Level: MG

A reckless young mouse named Ralph makes friends with a boy in room 215 of the Mountain View Inn and discovers the joys of motorcycling.

Award: Young Reader's Choice Award/Nominee

Topics: Animals, Mice; Popular Groupings, Middle Grades Popular Authors/Starred Reviews; Recommended Reading, California Recommended Lit., English, 3-5; Transportation/Vehicles, Motorcycles

Main Characters

Keith Gridley a young boy on vacation with his family; he lets Ralph ride his toy motorcycle

Matt a bellboy at the Mountain View Inn

Mr. and Mrs. Gridley Keith's parents

Ralph an adventurous mouse who enjoys riding motorcycles

Ralph's father the mouse who had died when he was poisoned by aspirin

Ralph's mother a widowed mouse who constantly worries about Ralph's safety

Uncle Lester Ralph's overbearing uncle

Uncle Victor Ralph's uncle, who fell into a wastebasket and was thrown out with the garbage

Vocabulary

exterminator someone who destroys vermin and insects

incinerator a machine which burns things (often garbage) to ashes

pandemonium a situation of wild, or out of control, commotion

pilfering stealing

Synopsis

Keith Gridley and his parents arrive at an old inn in California after making a long drive from their home in Ohio. From the moment they enter their room, they are being watched by a young mouse named Ralph, who lives with his family in a knothole in the wall. Keith leaves his toy motorcycle out on a desk when he and his parents go to dinner. Ralph cannot resist and goes to inspect the cycle. He mounts the cycle, but tumbles into the wastebasket when he is startled by a ringing telephone. He is trapped with no way to escape.

Keith comes back from dinner and finds his motorcycle in the wastebasket with Ralph. The boy is delighted to find a mouse and tips the wastebasket over so the mouse can walk out on his own. Their mutual love of motorcycles allows them to understand each other completely, so Keith allows Ralph to climb on his cycle, and he explains that he has to make noises to make the motorcycle run.

Ralph enjoys the cycle so much that he asks to ride it in the hallway at night. Keith gives him permission, but cautions him to be careful with it. Ralph rides that night and, in spite of being spotted by a dog, he enjoys himself and longs to explore the rest of the hotel. Later, Keith surprises Ralph by offering him "room service" -- a peanut-butter sandwich brought from the dining room. Then, Keith announces that he is going away with his parents that day, and Ralph persuades him to leave the motorcycle behind. Ralph has no intention of driving the motorcycle, but cannot resist the temptation of testing the motorcycle's power against the vacuum cleaner that the maid is using to clean under the bed where he is hiding. He ends up driving into a pile of laundry and is taken to the laundry room. He chews through the linens to free himself, but he cannot get the motorcycle out, so he leaves it behind.

He returns to the knothole feeling guilty and ashamed for abandoning the cycle. When Keith gives Ralph a present, Ralph confesses about the cycle. Keith is disappointed, but he soon forgives

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Ralph because he has done foolish things himself. Meanwhile, the chewed laundry is discovered and the hotel workers are aware of the mice's presence. Ralph devises a plan for the mice to stay hidden and rely on Keith's room service to feed them until the mice are forgotten.

Keith, however, soon becomes sick with a fever. He is in need of aspirin to lower his temperature, but none can be found. Ralph realizes that he must help his friend. He goes through some dangerous situations and risks his own life to find an aspirin for Keith. He loads the pill on a toy ambulance and takes it to his friend. Ralph is a hero, and Keith is feeling better by the next morning. The motorcycle, however, is still missing. Then Matt, the bellboy, shows up and returns both the ambulance and the motorcycle. Keith asks Ralph to move back to Ohio with him. Ralph realizes that he would be unhappy living in a cage and turns down the offer, so Keith gives Ralph the motorcycle and hopes to write a composition about Ralph and his adventures for school.

Open-Ended Questions

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

Initial Understanding

Why does Ralph feel sorry for Keith?

Ralph is able to live out his fantasy by riding a motorcycle, while Keith is not. Keith very much wants to ride a motorcycle, but he is not old enough. Also, Keith tells Ralph that, even when he is old enough to ride, his mother will never let him. Ralph realizes that he has a certain freedom that Keith does not have.

Literary Analysis

What is the relationship like between Ralph and Keith?

Keith is immediately interested in Ralph. He enjoys living out his motorcycle fantasy by watching the mouse ride his toy cycle. At first, though, Ralph is more interested in Keith's motorcycle than in Keith. And when Keith only gives Ralph and his family peanuts and crackers, Ralph is more concerned about his meals than Keith's health and seems to be taking advantage of the boy. Soon, however, Ralph becomes genuinely concerned about Keith and takes a risk to bring the boy an aspirin. Though Ralph declines an offer to go and live with Keith, Keith shows his friendship by giving him his motorcycle.

Inferential Comprehension

At the end of the book, Keith tells Ralph that he seems "grown-up" and "responsible." How does Ralph show that he has become grown-up and responsible?

When Ralph first loses the motorcycle, he takes responsibility by admitting his mistake to Keith instead of lying. Next, Ralph shows how responsible he is when he comes up with a plan for his family after the chewed linens are discovered. He suggests everyone remain in their mouse holes and depend on Keith's room service until the hotel employees forget about them. And, finally, Ralph risks his own life and uses his creativity not only to find an aspirin, but also to deliver it to Keith's room.

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Constructing Meaning

Ralph's mother often worries about her son. In fact, she worries quite extensively about many things. Are her worries justified?

On one hand, her worries are justified, because she has lost not only her husband, but also Ralph's Uncle Victor. Life for a mouse is very dangerous, as they are considered pests and people want to get rid of them. They must sneak around and pilfer things from others in order to exist. But on the other hand, her worries for her son may not be necessary. Although Ralph has done some foolish things, he proves himself capable and trustworthy by formulating a plan to find and deliver an aspirin to Keith. Ralph shows that he can take care of himself.

breed? Where can they be found? What do they eat? Do they prefer any particular climate? Which diseases do they spread? Do they make good pets?

Responding to Literature Ralph loves the motorcycle because of its speed and his desire for freedom and adventure. Have your students write a page explaining where they would go and what they would do if they had a motorcycle. For example, they might want to go on a cross country trip or go to visit a specific place such as Disneyland or Niagara Falls. What would they take with them? How long would they be gone?

Teachable Skills

Understanding Literary Features Ralph refers to his "famous ancestor" and wonders how he ran up noisy clocks. He also refers to the nursery rhyme about mice getting their tails cut off with a carving knife. These probably refer to "Hickory Dickory Dock" and "Three Blind Mice." Have students write a short nursery rhyme about Ralph's adventures.

Making Predictions Mrs. Gridley sees Ralph ride across the floor on his motorcycle. She is instantly startled, but Keith and her husband convince her she is just imagining things. Other than that, Ralph manages to keep himself well hidden from most people. How might this story have been different if Mrs. Gridley had continued to insist she had seen Ralph, or if she had seen him on another occasion? Would Keith have explained to his mother that Ralph was his friend? Would Mrs. Gridley understand? Would Ralph show her the things he could do? Would Mrs. Gridley accept a mouse? Students can write about their ideas or discuss them with the class.

Recognizing Details Mice are often viewed as pests, and many people are frightened of them. There are numerous expressions about mice, such as "quiet as a mouse." Have students find out the facts about mice. How often do they