

# Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

## Abel's Island

by

### William Steig

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### Book Information

William Steig, Abel's Island  
Quiz Number: 101  
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117 Pages  
Book Level: 5.9  
Interest Level: MG

Stranded on a deserted island, a lovable young mouse discovers inner resources he did not know he possessed.

**Award:** Misc./Other; Newbery Honor; Phoenix Award/Honor

**Topics:** Behavior, Misc./Other; Natural Environments, Islands; Recommended Reading, California Recommended Lit., English, 6-8

### Main Characters

Abelard Hassam di Chirico Flint (Abel) a well-educated mouse who discovers his strength of character when he is stranded on an isolated island for a year

Amanda Flint Abel's beloved wife

Gower Glackens a simple-minded old frog who becomes stranded on the island for a brief time and keeps Abel company

owl the bird who terrorizes Abel

### Vocabulary

**catapult** a device used to throw objects a great distance  
**engulfed** swallowed or covered up by something  
**indignant** extremely angry  
**prolonged** lasting a long time  
**skirmish** a quick battle or fight  
**sustenance** food

### Synopsis

*Abel's Island* is the story of the adventures of a mouse named Abelard Flint. One day in August, Abel is out on a picnic with his wife, Amanda, when

a violent storm strikes. When Amanda's scarf is blown away, Abel foolishly leaves the cave where they are sheltered to retrieve it. Abel manages to catch the scarf, but he is whirled uncontrollably by the wind until he catches a board that soon becomes a boat on a river. Abel is rushed over a waterfall and finally comes to a halt in the branches of a tree on an island in the middle of a river.

Being a well-educated mouse who has led a pampered life, Abel does not take his situation too seriously until he realizes that no search party is coming and he almost drowns three times when his attempts at boat building fail. Abel tries several ways to get off the island, but as each effort fails, Abel becomes more and more discouraged. He desperately misses his wife and worries that his family believes he is dead.

Fall approaches, and Abel comes to terms with the fact that he is going to be on the island for a while. He learns to make a fire and starts stockpiling food. He uses a star that he identified with in childhood as a source of moral support, believing that the star is watching over him and providing him with a link to his beloved wife. He also discovers he has an artistic side when he sculpts a statue of his wife to help him ward off loneliness.

One day in November Abel finds a book and a watch on the beach. He begins reading the book and listening to the comforting tick of the watch. He settles into a routine of reading, sculpting, and floating notes asking for help down the river.

Just as Abel is accepting his new life, he is confronted with a new problem. One night he is scooped up by a hungry owl. Abel fights the owl off, but he is terrified of another encounter. He makes himself a spear and carries it wherever he goes. When he finds a feather from the owl, he tries to cast a spell on the owl to paralyze its evil force. His conflict with the owl comes to its climax when Abel is attacked a second time and becomes so enraged that he taunts the owl into chasing him around a tree. The owl gives up when it becomes confused and crashes into the tree. Abel does not see the owl

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again, although he does spend some time after the battle shouting horrible curses at the owl feathers he has collected.

Winter arrives, and Abel stays inside his log until a thaw in February, when he goes out to read some more of the book on the beach. He underestimates the weather, however, and he becomes severely ill. For the first time, he feels resentful towards Amanda, whose loosely tied scarf has caused him to be cut off from his loving family and warm home. Eventually he recovers, and when spring arrives, he feels better about his situation.

In April a frog named Gower Glackens relieves Abel's loneliness when he washes up on the island after being carried away by the river. Abel sculpts a statue of his new friend. Gower is impressed and tells Abel he is a great artist. Abel is encouraged and feels that he may have a profession waiting for him after he escapes from the island. Gower leaves when the river returns to normal. He promises to send a rescue party, but when none arrives, Abel assumes that Gower has forgotten him.

One day in July Abel realizes that the water level of the river has dropped. Abel manages to swim across the river and starts on his way home. He feels a little sorry to be leaving the home he has grown to love, but he is anxious to be reunited with Amanda. He encounters one more obstacle on his journey home. A cat accosts him as he is sleeping. Abel outwits him and finally makes it home to his wife, who is overjoyed to find out he is alive.

## Open-Ended Questions

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

### Initial Understanding

Why does Abel go out into the storm to retrieve Amanda's scarf?

*There are two factors that contribute to Abel's motivation for going after the scarf. One is that Abel is very protective of Amanda. When the scarf is blown away, he feels as if the storm has personally attacked her and he is determined to defend her. The other factor is what Abel himself concedes is his tendency to act impulsively and foolishly instead of thinking things through. He has done enough foolish things in the past that Amanda calls him "Abelard" whenever he starts to act impulsively. Abel also ponders his character flaws while on the island when he wonders why Amanda loves him.*

### Literary Analysis

How can Abel manage to survive on the island even though he has never worked before in his life?

*Not only is Abel determined to live, but he is also very self-confident. At first he does not even consider the possibility of failing, but after several botched attempts at getting off the island, Abel is less certain of himself. He believes, however, that giving up is not part of his family tradition, and he waits patiently for a solution to come to him. Abel is also aided by his intelligence and his hunger for knowledge. He comes to the island with an arsenal of information on edible plants and an incredible aptitude for problem solving which also helps him accomplish his goals.*

### Inferential Comprehension

What is the most likely reason Abel stops trying to get off the island for a while?

*Abel realizes he is not going to solve his problem as quickly as he originally hoped. He knows that if he wants to survive the approaching winter, he has to start focusing his energies on preparing for the cold weather. He stores up food and makes himself a warm cape. He also begins to worry that his situation is hopeless and that he will be imprisoned on the island for a lengthy period of time.*

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#### Constructing Meaning

Why might Abel return to the island after spending a year trying to escape from it?

*During his time on the island, Abel experiences a lot of emotional growth. He discovers that he can survive on his own and that he has great skill as an artist. He comes to love the island as a beautiful and nurturing place that not only sustained him physically, but also helped him mature emotionally and spiritually. Although it is doubtful that he would choose to live there permanently, he does feel a sense of attachment to it, and he may choose to visit it under more favorable circumstances.*

They give him a feeling of contact with Amanda, a sense of hope for the future, and a way to keep busy instead of dwelling on his predicament. Have the students imagine they are stranded on an island and they have one chance to send a letter in a bottle. What would they choose to write? Would it be a plea for help, a letter to loved ones, or possibly a combination of both? Have them write the letter and ask for volunteers to read theirs to the class.

#### Teachable Skills

**Recognizing Setting** Abel manages to survive in part because he has landed on an island with ample vegetation. So that the students may fully comprehend the significance of the setting in this story, have them research some of the plants that Abel mentions. Have them draw pictures of the plants and list some of the possible uses for them both from the book and their research. They could also suggest some other wild plants, that might have been useful for Abel, if they had been available on the island.

**Comparing and Contrasting** A major element of this story concerns the difference between the life Abel leads on the island from the life he led in Mossville. Have the students make a chart showing the significant differences. Have them write a brief explanation of how these differences affected Abel's story.

**Recognizing Details** Abel spends a great deal of time trying to make a serviceable watercraft. Have the students each build their own model boat. Ask them to record how they built the boat, what materials they used, and why they believe their boat could have been useful to Abel. Then try to simulate the river by using a sink or basin full of water, and have the students test the reliability of their crafts.

**Responding to Literature** The messages that Abel sends down the river serve many purposes.