

# Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for The Animal Family by Randall Jarrell

## Book Information

Randall Jarrell, The Animal Family

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HarperTrophy, 1965

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180 Pages

Book Level: 5.4

Interest Level: UG

This is the story of how a man finds a family.

**Award:** Newbery Honor

**Topics:** Adventure, Life Changes; English in a Flash Recommended List, Library 3, Chapter 8, 90%; Humor/Funny, Funny; Interpersonal Relationships, Friendship; Series, Newbery Honor Roll

## Main Characters

**bear** the cub the hunter brings home to raise as a pet after he shot the mother in self-defense

**boy** the orphaned child, found by the lynx, who is raised by the hunter and mermaid as their son

**hunter** a husky man who is wise in the ways of the forest and had been lonely for a family of his own

**lynx** the large wild cat that is kept as a pet by the hunter and mermaid

**mermaid** the half-human sea creature who comes to live with the hunter and becomes part of his family

## Vocabulary

**breaker** a large wave which crashes or "breaks" into a froth on the shore

**figurehead** a carving, usually of a woman or female creature, found on the prow of a ship

**mermaid** a mythological sea-creature that has the upper body of a human but a fish-like tail below the waist

**mussels** sea creatures that have a soft body which is protected by a hinged shell similar to that of a clam; they are often eaten as a delicacy

## Synopsis

Down near the seacoast lives a lonely, gentle hunter. One night he hears singing that seems to come from the midst of the waves and, upon investigation, he discovers that the singer is a mermaid. The hunter begins to establish a relationship with the mermaid by singing back to her, and over time the two become acquainted. The mermaid learns to speak his language, and eventually she even comes to live with him at his house on land, although she periodically returns to the sea to visit the other sea people. The hunter and the mermaid teach each other about the differences between their cultures, and they also come to understand themselves better as well.

The two are happy living together, and even though the hunter is no longer lonely, he still feels that their family is not complete and has a recurring dream about his desire to have a boy to live with them. One day the hunter returns from a hunt with a bear cub, which soon becomes a loved member of the family. The bear grows quickly because of his voracious appetite and has a continuing need for sleep. This later frightens the mermaid, who thinks he is dying when she discovers him hibernating in a cave for the winter.

The bear is a wonderful pet in spite of his periodic misadventures, such as his run-in with a swarm of bees. However, the loss of his company because of hibernation makes the long days of winter seem even longer than before. One day the mermaid returns from a short visit in the sea to discover that the hunter has brought home another pet, a lynx kitten, who becomes an irreplaceable member of the family. Even though the lynx tends to get into mischief, the hunter and the mermaid love it, and the lynx returns their affection.

The couple is happy with their two pets, but there is still something missing. One day the lynx discovers a boy on the beach who has been orphaned in a shipwreck. With the help of the bear, the lynx brings the boy back to the cabin. When the hunter and mermaid return from their walk, they are delighted to discover the child there. Soon it seems that the boy has always lived with them. The hunter makes him

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miniature bows and arrows and teaches him the ways of the forest, and the mermaid teaches him her language and the ways of the sea. Their lives have become complete, and the three live happily with the bear and lynx in the little house by the sea.

## Open-Ended Questions

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

### Initial Understanding

Why do the sea people believe "all good comes from the sea"?

*The sea people say this because they are familiar with the sea and are comfortable there. The land is a strange place to them and because it is different, it scares them. They do not know how to survive there, so as a result, they do not think it is a good place.*

### Literary Analysis

The mermaid ignores all of the warnings of the sea people to befriend and love the hunter, and she even eventually moves onto the land. What does this show the reader about her character? What qualities does she possess? Explain your answer.

*Students answers may include that she must be brave and independent to move to a strange land, clever to learn the hunter's language, open-minded to accept the differences between her and the hunter, and good-humored to handle all the difficult situations that she and the hunter encounter due to misunderstandings.*

### Inferential Comprehension

Compare and contrast the bear and the lynx.

*Both creatures live with the hunter and the mermaid in peaceful harmony. They are found by the hunter as babies, but the bear is orphaned, whereas the lynx is stolen away from its mother. The bear is larger and more clumsy than the lynx, which is very graceful and delicate. Growing up, the bear is constantly breaking things accidentally, but the lynx only destroys one item -- the hunter's mother's handkerchief. The lynx is much neater than the bear, as it is much better about washing itself and keeping itself clean. However, both animals love the hunter, the boy, and the mermaid dearly.*

### Constructing Meaning

The author draws an analogy between the mermaid and a seal when he says, "If you had a seal that could talk, would you want it to sweep the floor?" What does this analogy mean?

*If someone had a talking seal, that person would consider the seal an extraordinary thing, and would not expect it to do ordinary things. It would be enough just to have the seal around to talk to even if it never did anything. For the hunter, the mermaid is the same way. He believes she is extraordinary, and just having her there for company is enough for him. He values her for who she is, rather than for how useful she is.*

## Teachable Skills

**Understanding Characterization** In the story, the hunter makes models of his parents for the mermaid so she can see how they looked. Using modeling clay, have the students make their own models of their favorite characters from the story based on the descriptions and the images they have formed in their minds.

**Comparing and Contrasting** The mermaid tells the hunter she never gets bored, even when they stay in the house all day to stay out of the rain. Ask the students what they do to keep from getting bored when they have to stay in the house all day long. Create a book containing ideas for

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activities to overcome boredom. Have each student contribute a page that has a short, illustrated explanation of his or her favorite doldrums-fighting activity. Make sure each student in the class gets a copy and ask them to compare and contrast their ideas.

**Recognizing Feelings** When the mermaid first begins to learn the hunter's language, she is sometimes baffled because she does not know the words to express her thoughts to the hunter. To help the students understand her feelings and to appreciate the creativity used by people who are learning a new language to communicate, play the game *Taboo* with the class. The game requires one player to get the rest of his or her team to guess a word without using several words that are commonly associated with it.

**Understanding the Main Idea** In the story, several different kinds of creatures are brought together and live in harmony, helping one another. In nature, there also exist many relationships between very different animals that benefit both creatures. Have the students pick one character in the story and show how it benefits from living with the other characters and how it helps the others as well. Then have the students research another beneficial relationship that naturally occurs between species and write several paragraphs explaining the relationship and how each creature helps the other.