

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

Bless the Beasts & Children

by

Glendon Swarthout

Book Information

Glendon Swarthout, Bless the Beasts & Children
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192 Pages
Book Level: 6.3
Interest Level: UG

They were the cast-away offspring of parents who were too busy. They were rejects until Cotton pulled them together on a fantastic mission to strike one final blow in the battle to save themselves.

Topics: Family Life, Away Alone; Family Life, Growing Up; Interpersonal Relationships, Friendship; Recommended Reading, California Recommended Lit., English, 9-12

Main Characters

Gerald Goodenow a neurotic child, who is overly dependent on his mother

John Cotton the leader of the group called the Bedwetters

Lawrence Teft III the juvenile delinquent of the Bedwetters

Samuel Shecker the overweight, obnoxious, only child of a famous comedian

Stephen Lally (Lally 1) William's brother and the son of overindulgent, self-centered parents

William Lally (Lally 2) Stephen's brother, who competes with his brother for their parents' affection

Vocabulary

culpable guilty

ignominy public disgrace

intransigent refusing to compromise or give in

intrepid fearlessly facing up to danger

perquisites a bonus or tip; something more than one's wage

petrified turned into stone

presage to portend or foreshadow

raucous hoarse or rough sounding

stasis stoppage or slowing of bodily fluids to an organ

tenuous thin or flimsy; vague

Synopsis

This is a story about six misfits from wealthy families who are sent to the Box Canyon Boys Camp to be made into men. The boys, ranging in age from twelve to fourteen, come together as a group after being cast out by the others at the camp. They are not good athletes, which is the criterion in the hierarchy at the camp. One camp tradition dictates that each cabin, or group, is ranked and a title and mascot given to reflect each group's achievement or lack of it. All the groups are given Indian names and a stuffed animal head, except the Bedwetters, who receive a ceramic pot.

As the story opens, Cotton is awakened by a nightmare and discovers that Lally 2 has run away. He wakes the others, and they set out to find him. They decide they need to join together and fix a terrible wrong, even if it is a tremendous risk. After riding horses into town, Teft hot-wires a truck, and they head for a game preserve.

Through flashbacks in the story, the reader learns about the problems that each boy has and why each was sent to the camp. It also becomes clear why the boys are going to the game preserve. They had witnessed a "hunt" in which people are allowed to shoot some of the tame buffalo supposedly to reduce herd size. The boys see the practice as unnecessary carnage and plan to release the buffalo before the hunt resumes the following day.

The boys face obstacles on the journey, but are able to pull together with Cotton's help, and in the end they finally feel confident enough to finish the mission without Cotton, who is sad that they do not need him anymore and elated that the group has matured.

Cotton frees the buffalo, but in his moment of triumph, he dies when he drives the vehicle, either intentionally or accidentally, over the edge of the

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Mogollon Rim.

Open-Ended Questions

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

Initial Understanding

Why did Cotton have mixed emotions when the group decided to go on without him after he "flaked-out"?

He was sad that the other boys no longer needed him to tell them what to do, but he was also happy that the boys could continue on their own. He had pretended to "flake-out" and give up to see if they could stand on their own feet, and they did.

Literary Analysis

How does the author use flashbacks in the story?

The author starts the story at the point where Lally 2 runs away, which causes the boys to decide to free the buffalo. The author uses flashbacks to fill in the rest of the story. The flashbacks tell the reader why the boys are troubled emotionally, how they got together in a group, and how they were treated at the camp.

Constructing Meaning

Why did Wheaties refuse to take the boys back to camp when the carnage started?

He wanted revenge for the boys' blackmailing him earlier in the summer. He thought the boys were sissies. He saw nothing wrong in the "three-day hunt." He saw their revulsion as another sign of their weakness and further proof of their lack of "manhood."

Teachable Skills

Recognizing Setting The story was set in Arizona. Suggest that the students research the American Buffalo and game preserves in the region. Are there preserves that stage a hunt to cull the herds? What would happen to the herd if

the old or sickly members were not killed to increase the food supply for the young and strong? Can the students see comparisons between the treatment of the buffalo and society's treatment of people?

Understanding Literary Features The theme of the story involves working together to accomplish goals one person alone cannot. Together, even a group of misfits attains the impossible. Have the students cite examples in the story that support this thesis.

Understanding the Author's Craft The author used extensive imagery to make the reader really "see" the beauty of the story's setting. Ask the student to locate passages in the story where imagery was used, and have them describe how the images affected how they felt at different points in the story. Have them find or draw pictures of what was described.

Understanding Characterization Suggest that the students find other books or even movies similar in theme to this story. Books such as *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, *Lord of the Flies*, *A Separate Peace*, or movies such as *The Goonies*, *The Sandlot*, or Disney's *Mulan* are some suggestions. Have the students choose characters to discuss and analyze, including motivations, conflicts, comparisons, etc. that contribute to the development of the plot and the eventual conclusion of each story.