

# Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

## Catherine, Called Birdy

by  
Karen Cushman

### Book Information

Karen Cushman, Catherine, Called Birdy  
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The daughter of an English country knight keeps a journal in which she records the events of her life, particularly her longing for adventures beyond the usual role of women and her efforts to avoid being married off.

**Award:** ABBY Children's Award/Honor Book; ALA Notable/Best Books; American Bookseller Pick of the List; Booklist Editors' Choice; Golden Kite Award/Honor Book; Horn Book Fanfare; NCTE Notable Children's Books in the Language Arts; Newbery Honor; SLJ Best Book; State Award

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### Main Characters

Aelis a young girl who spent time studying etiquette with Birdy and becomes her friend

Aislinn the mother of Birdy, who tries to raise her daughter to be a proper lady

Birdy, Catherine, Little Bird the young daughter of a country knight who, in order to escape the boring chore of spinning, gladly keeps a diary-like book in which she chronicles the good and bad aspects of her life

Edward Birdy's brother, who believes writing will make her less childish and more learned

Ethelfritha an odd but lovable widow, who becomes George's wife and Birdy's friend

Geoffrey a handsome boy taken in as a foster child at Stonebridge, who falls out of Birdy's favor when he mimics Perkin

George Birdy's favorite uncle, who returns from a crusade but loses his zest for life when Aelis marries another

Meg Birdy's friend, who finally gets to marry because of Birdy's help

Morwenna the nurse who is critical of Birdy's needlework, but is loved by Birdy

Perkin a goat boy who is Birdy's best friend and confidant

Robert Birdy's "abominable" brother, who later becomes more likeable

Rollo Birdy's father, who likes to drink ale and who tries to marry her off for the best deal

Shaggy Beard an older, almost toothless baron, who asks for Birdy's hand in marriage, but dies before a deal is arranged

Stephen the son of Shaggy Beard, who wishes to honor his father's marriage contract

Thomas another of Birdy's brothers

### Vocabulary

**clodpole** a blockhead

**crusades** Christian military expeditions

**nummers** actors in rural plays traditionally performed in England at Christmas

**popinjay** the green woodpecker

**saffron** an orange-yellow color

**soothsaying** the foretelling of future events

### Synopsis

*Catherine, Called Birdy* is the day-to-day account of a young girl who lives in England in the late 1200s. She has several caged birds, which is why she is called Birdy. She is coerced into writing a "book" to please her brother, who sees the exercise as educational and a means to tame his sister. Birdy sees it as an opportunity to escape the drudgery of embroidery and spinning, which all proper ladies must learn to do. The story only spans about one year in Birdy's life, but it represents a huge leap in her maturity.

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Birdy has strong opinions about her "beastly" father, who drinks too much and abuses her, her brother Edward, whom she adores, her brother Robert, who is described as "abominable," and her nurse Morwenna, who constantly hounds Birdy to do her work. Birdy also has strong feelings about the villagers who are indebted to her father, who is their lord.

Birdy's life becomes much more complicated when her greedy father decides it is time she is betrothed and married. He expects to receive money and gifts for his daughter's hand. Birdy regards this practice of arranged marriages as terribly unfair because she sees that the villagers are allowed some say in whom they marry. It is one more reason for her to wish she was a villager.

Birdy is clever and plays many childish pranks to discourage her prospective suitors. While they work, they only prove how immature she really is.

One suitor, an older, scruffy man of means whom she names Shaggy Beard, is persistent. Despite her stubborn protests, her father determines that he will be the man she marries. Birdy manages to stay unattached until she is forced to make a fateful choice. She comes upon a pitiful bear at a fair that is in danger of being killed, and her love for animals dictates that she use the silver given to her by Shaggy Beard to save the animal. By taking the money, she is also saying yes to Shaggy Beard's proposal.

As the time for the wedding arrangements nears, Birdy panics and runs away to escape what would surely be a dreadful life. While hiding out at her uncle George's place, however, she comes to realize that she needs to honor her commitment to marry and make the most of it. This major act of acquiescence on Birdy's part symbolizes her emergence as a mature young woman.

Finally, this more mature "lady" returns home to face her fate, which, with the aid of good storytelling, changes dramatically when she learns Shaggy

Beard has died. His son, Stephen, who appears to be the kind of person she could love, offers to marry her in place of his father. The rest of the story, which is left to the reader's imagination, could probably be summed up with, "and they lived happily ever after."

### Open-Ended Questions

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

#### Initial Understanding

What made Birdy give in to a marriage to Shaggy Beard?

*She needed to use Shaggy Beard's gift of silver to buy a pathetic dancing bear to save it from probable death. By accepting and using the silver, she was accepting Shaggy Beard's proposal.*

#### Literary Analysis

Determine the conflict of the story. What is the author's position on the conflict? Based on the story, to which side of the conflict does the author appear to be sympathetic? To which side is she sarcastic? Cite examples from the story to show this.

*The main conflict revolves around an arranged marriage. The author, through Birdy's character, shows she is against it. Through her portrayal of Rollo and Shaggy Beard as "beasts," the author shows her disgust for this practice.*

#### Inferential Comprehension

The main character is called by two names, Catherine and Birdy. Explain how these two names represent the two different lives she leads. Identify which life she prefers and tell why you think so.

*The life of Catherine is one filled with the duties of a lord's daughter, which include needlework and spinning, accommodating guests, and ministering to the sick. Birdy's life is one that involves enjoying the simple things, such as walks in the fields and playing games with other children. The fact that Catherine goes by the name of Birdy is a good indication of which life she prefers.*

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## Constructing Meaning

What insight into human nature do we gain from *Birdy*?

*Birdy* teaches that one has to be true to oneself, or a person won't find any happiness in life. But she also realizes at the end that one still has to do what is expected of that person. The challenge is to do both.

remedy for a common illness or condition. Then have them create an advertisement, in the form of a poster, in which they draw a picture of it and extol the healing powers of their product.

## Teachable Skills

**Understanding Characterization** *Catherine, Called Birdy* is written in a diary format from Birdy's point of view. Her negative feelings about her father, Rollo, are blatantly presented. However, her view is only one side of the story. Ask your students to choose a scene from the story in which Birdy and Rollo are interacting. Then have them rewrite the scene from Rollo's point of view.

**Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors** For many readers, many aspects of life in medieval times would seem harsh and boring. However, the characters in *Catherine, Called Birdy* did enjoy some pleasures, such as their saints' days celebrations and fairs. Have your students review the activities which took place as entertainment. They could do additional research if necessary. Ask students to come up with games and activities that would have occurred during Birdy's time and have them put on a "fair" for younger students. Students can also dress in clothing appropriate for medieval times.

**Making Predictions** This story ends with the main character about to enter into marriage with a man she virtually does not know. The reader is given a few hints about Stephen's personality. Have your students "flesh out" the rest of Stephen's character. Then have them write a final chapter in which the couple marries and settles down.

**Identifying Reasons** In this story, one of Birdy's duties is to treat the illnesses and injuries of the villagers. She makes poultices and medicines as remedies. Have your students "discover" a