

# Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for The Cuckoo Child by Dick King-Smith

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## Book Information

Dick King-Smith, The Cuckoo Child  
Quiz Number: 7666  
Walt Disney Press/Hyperion, 1993  
ISBN 1-56282-350-7; LCCN  
127 Pages  
Book Level: 5.7  
Interest Level: MG

With the unknowing help of his pet geese, eight-year-old Jack Daw decides to raise an ostrich on his father's farm.

**Award:** ALA Best Book for Young Adults; SLJ Best Book

**Topics:** Animals, Geese; Animals, Ostriches; Places, Farms

## Main Characters

Farmer and Mrs. Daw Jack's parents

Jack the story's principal character, a boy fascinated with feathered creatures

Margery Jack's sister, who teases her brother about his bird obsession

Oliver an ostrich Jack nurtures and with whom he creates a bond

The Wildlife Park director the man to whom Jack admits stealing the ostrich egg and who later offers Jack a job

Wilfred and Lydia Jack's pet geese and the "parents" of Oliver

## Vocabulary

**broody** said of hens inclined to sit on eggs

**clutch** amount of eggs laid at one time

**embryo** early form of an animal as it develops within its egg

**gallivanting** to move about joyfully

## Synopsis

Since his earliest memories, Jack Daw has loved birds. He has nurtured strong ties with all the feathered creatures on the Daw farm. The budgies, bantams, ducks and geese recognize Jack's

affection for them and, in turn, try to please him.

On a class trip to Wildlife Park, a large male ostrich entrances Jack. When a ranger shows the students a wheelbarrow loaded with nine ostrich eggs, Jack cannot resist temptation. He sneaks an egg, puts it in his backpack and takes it home.

After carefully researching the incubation period of an ostrich egg, Jack carries out a plan. He takes the eggs away from his broody pet goose, Lydia, and replaces them with his prized ostrich egg. Though the big egg puzzles Lydia and her mate Wilfred, they soon lovingly guard it.

When Oliver hatches, Wilfred and Lydia are proud parents, despite the confusion the large, awkward "gosling" causes. Although Oliver feels rejected after Lydia and Wilfred hatch a brood of their own, he becomes a hero when he saves the family from a fox attack.

Oliver proves to be a gentle, good-natured bird and wins the affection of the entire Daw family. However, Jack's father eventually questions his son about his acquisition of the ostrich egg, and Jack admits to stealing it. Soon Jack confesses to the Wildlife Park director and learns that he can keep Oliver until the park needs a male ostrich.

Jack is greatly pleased to be able to keep Oliver for an extended time and continues to give the bird loving care. Oliver thrives. Little by little, the bond deepens between the bird and the boy. Eventually, Jack is able to take a thrilling, full-speed ride on Oliver, clinging to the big bird's back.

Before long, the Wildlife Park director appears at the Daw farm and explains that the park needs a new, young male ostrich. The parting of Oliver and Jack is less painful than Jack had imagined. He sees that Oliver, now an adult, is happy to join a flock. The pain of separation is also lessened when the park director offers Jack a park life membership card and, later, a job managing the ostrich flock.

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## Open-Ended Questions

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

### Initial Understanding

Why is Jack unable to eat the eggs his mother prepares for his breakfasts?

*He respects birds and all stages of their development. An egg represents the first stage of a bird's life to him.*

### Literary Analysis

As Jack grows older, how does he show his maturity about his ostrich, Oliver?

*Jack realizes that Oliver is not really his. He also knows that Oliver's booming and displaying are signals that Oliver needs to be with his own flock. In short, Jack becomes less selfish about Oliver.*

### Inferential Comprehension

Why does Oliver eventually allow Jack to ride him?

*Jack has won the bird's respect and trust. He has also treated Oliver well and has been patient while training him.*

### Constructing Meaning

Jack has a way with animals. Describe a person you know who has the same talent. How is that person like Jack?

*Jack seems to be able to communicate with animals and to sense their needs. He is always gentle and patient with his pets.*

## Teachable Skills

**Understanding the Author's Craft** The author of *The Cuckoo Child* clearly writes to entertain. Yet, he cleverly includes interesting facts about ostriches. Ask the students to skim the book and to write down any facts about ostriches they find. Next, have them research ostriches in greater

depth and add to their fact list.

**Comparing and Contrasting** From his first hours of life, Oliver knows he is different from his "parents." For instance, when he sees himself in the still surface of the pond, he notices he looks significantly different. He also learns that he is unable to swim as his parents do. Have the students make two lists about how Oliver is like his "parents" and how he is different.

**Deriving Word or Phrase Meaning** The author of *The Cuckoo Child* uses personification when the poultry talk in the Daw barnyard. Although Jack and Oliver have a quiet understanding between themselves, the two do not actually talk. Ask the students to choose a scene from the book and write a page of dialogue between a bird and a human. For example, what would Oliver say to Jack when they prepare to take their first speed trial?

**Responding to Literature** After Jack steals the ostrich egg from Wildlife Park, he becomes concerned about how he will hatch the egg. He decides that Lydia, his goose, will take on the task. However, after researching the incubation periods of a goose egg and an ostrich egg, Jack learns that an ostrich egg takes a longer time to hatch. At that point, he decides that Lydia will need to concentrate not on hatching goose eggs, but completely on hatching his ostrich egg. Jack learns that incubation periods vary with different types of bird eggs. As an enrichment activity, have the students collect data on the incubation periods of various birds' eggs. Next, have them complete a bar graph, showing that information.