

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

Danny, the Champion of the World

by
Roald Dahl

Book Information

Roald Dahl, Danny, the Champion of the World
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A young English boy describes his relationship with his father and the special adventure they share together.

Topics: Adventure, Trials/Tribulations; English in a Flash Recommended List, Library 3, Chapter 14, 90%; Family Life, Fathers; Humor/Funny, Funny; Popular Groupings, Middle Grades Popular Authors/Starred Reviews; Sports/Recreation, Hunting

Main Characters

Captain Lancaster Danny's mean-spirited and cruel teacher

Charlie Kinch the village taxi driver who drives William and Danny back from Hazell's Wood with their pheasants

Christopher Clipstone Grace's young son

Danny the principal character in the story; a nine-year-old boy who adores his father and learns the arts of fixing cars and pheasant poaching from him

Danny's mother William's wife who shared in William's poaching adventures; she died when Danny was four months old

Doc Spencer a kindly old doctor who mends William's ankle and helps William in his poaching scheme against Mr. Hazell

Mr. Rabbetts one of Mr. Hazell's gamekeepers

Mr. Snoddy the kindly, alcoholic headmaster of Danny's school

Mr. Victor Hazell the snobbish and greedy owner of a brewery; he sponsors an annual pheasant hunt on his estate

Mrs. Grace Clipstone the vicar's wife who helps deliver the pheasants to William's filling station

Sergeant Enoch Samways an officer in the police force and William's friend who plays a trick on Mr. Hazell when he agrees to help him get back his pheasants

Sidney Morgan Danny's best friend at school

William Danny's father and best friend; he lets Danny in on his secret poaching passion and allows Danny to share in his adventures

Vocabulary

accelerator a pedal that is pushed to increase a vehicle's speed

beastly thoroughly horrible and savage

caravan a covered wagon that can be used for living quarters

dreaded fearfully expected

fiercely in a wild, lively manner

lavatory a restroom or bathroom

magnificent grand and dazzling in appearance

poacher one who unlawfully catches or kills game on another's land

roost to sit in order to rest or sleep

vicar a person who acts as the priest of a community

Synopsis

Nine-year-old Danny and his father, William, live together on a small plot of land surrounded by the vast estate of Mr. Victor Hazell. Danny's mother died when Danny was only four months old. Although poor in possessions, William has raised and nurtured Danny, giving Danny a childhood rich in love, fun, and stories. William is a car mechanic, and Danny grows up in the shop. Danny doesn't start school until age seven but has learned how to take apart and put together an engine.

Danny adores his father, but one night he awakens in the gypsy caravan they call home and discovers his father is not in bed. Worried, Danny waits up for him. When William returns, Danny learns his father has a secret vice that he has not practiced since Danny's mother died--poaching pheasants. William sees it as an art or a sport, not as stealing. He

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explains to Danny how his father before him had poached, the various poaching methods his father had developed, and the risk one takes of getting shot by the keepers in the woods. William promises Danny he will tell him the next time he plans to go poaching so that Danny will not worry.

About a week later, William announces to Danny his plans to poach the next day. He explains he always goes to Hazell's Wood since that is where the pheasants are. Danny's father does not like Mr. Hazell, so poaching his pheasants is a joy. Danny recalls an unpleasant experience with Mr. Hazell when he was younger and can see why his father would like getting back at such a rude and snobbish person. Danny helps his father soak raisins, the ultimate pheasant bait, for the event. The next day, as they repair an old car, they discuss William's planned poaching. William explains he must arrive at the woods precisely at twilight while the birds are still on the ground. It will be harder for the keepers to spot him in the dimming light. He has only an hour or so to catch a pheasant before they all fly up to the trees to roost for the night. He promises Danny he will be back by ten thirty. The time for William to leave soon arrives, and he walks down the road. Danny tries to do his homework but goes to sleep instead. He awakens and sees that the clock says ten minutes past two! Knowing his father never breaks a promise, Danny is worried and decides to go looking for him. Doing some quick calculations, he decides it would be best to drive in the car he and his father just repaired that day in case his father is injured. He does so and finds his father in a deep pit with a broken ankle. Mr. Hazell's keepers had dug the pit just to catch poachers. Danny rescues him and brings him home. William calls Doc Spencer in the morning. The doctor is outraged to hear the story of the injury and feels Mr. Hazell is playing unfairly. While Danny's father is taken to the hospital by ambulance to have a cast put on his foot, Danny learns that the doctor was a poacher himself when he was younger.

All seems well after that, but Danny's father seems more somber. More than a week goes by before Danny's father reveals what is bothering him. It's Mr.

Hazell. He drives by the filling station daily in his Rolls-Royce with a smug look on his face. Danny's father wishes he could somehow foil Mr. Hazell's annual pheasant-shooting party. Hundreds of rich and aristocratic people come for the shoot, and Mr. Hazell gains a sense of importance from hosting it. Danny's father would love to poach two hundred pheasants from the woods so that there would be no birds for Mr. Hazell's guests to shoot. The only way to do it would be at night after the birds have flown up to roost and the keepers have gone home. However, no one has found a way to poach a roosting pheasant. Danny has an inspiration that his father thinks might work. He suggests lacing raisins with the sleeping pills his father got from the doctor when he broke his ankle. William realizes if they open the pills and divide the powder, there will be enough for two hundred raisins. Danny's father proclaims Danny's new poaching method "The Sleeping Beauty" and together they make plans to carry it out that Friday evening before the shoot on Saturday. Danny will stay home from school on Friday so he can help prepare the raisins.

Friday arrives, and the raisin preparations proceed. Danny and William dress in dark clothing and leave at the appointed time. In the woods, they find the pheasants and see a keeper but are still able to scatter the raisins. They then leave the woods and wait close by for night to fall and the keepers to go home. When they reenter the woods, pheasants are dropping from the trees all around them. They bag one hundred twenty of them. Danny's father proclaims Danny the champion of the world. Danny's father, a seasoned poacher, has help waiting in the wings. He has arranged for a taxi to be waiting just outside the hedge. He and Danny get in with the birds and are driven to town to the vicar's house. Danny is shocked. His father explains the rationale for these actions--namely, they do not want to be found at home with the birds. A respectable woman such as the vicar's wife should deliver the pheasants to those with whom they will share the birds. They walk home from the village to their filling station in the darkness.

The next morning, Danny's father phones Doc

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Spencer, inviting him to the filling station for a surprise. After he arrives, the vicar's wife is seen coming down the road, pushing an oversized baby carriage at a full run. Just as she reaches the station, she snatches her screaming baby from the carriage. Pheasants come flying out of the carriage. The sleeping pills have finally worn off, and the birds are waking up. They are still groggy, so they soon land. Just at that moment, Mr. Hazell comes driving by. He is in a rage but cannot do anything because the pheasants are on William's property. Sergeant Samways arrives, and Mr. Hazell complains to him. The policeman suggests they drive the pheasants across the road back onto Mr. Hazell's property. William and Doc Spencer agree, each with a twinkle in his eye. They begin driving the confused birds, most of which land on or in Mr. Hazell's Rolls-Royce, scratching the paint with their talons and leaving droppings on it. Sergeant Samways suggests Mr. Hazell drive away to get the birds off, and he does so. The rest of the birds take to the sky. William is left with only six birds that he divides among his friends. Although Danny and his father do not keep all the birds they captured, they treasure the fun of the adventure.

Open-Ended Questions

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

Initial Understanding

Danny innocently thinks he and his father are going out alone to poach birds before the shoot. How is the poaching actually a web of conspiracy?

For the poaching plan to be successful, the help of other people is essential. William realizes that he and Danny cannot carry or even drag two hundred pheasants for six miles. He also wants to be able to share any of the birds he and Danny capture. Thus, he plans ahead both for transportation away from the wood in the taxi and for distribution of the pheasants by the vicar's wife.

Literary Analysis

How does the simplicity of Danny and his father's life influence their closeness?

Danny and his father do not have the distractions that many families have. Their home lacks electricity and is small, so they spend a lot of time together while Danny's father tells stories or talks about nature. Even though Danny's father is a car mechanic, he does not own a car himself, so he and Danny walk everywhere, engaging in conversation for long periods of time. Danny is also at his father's side in the shop, and they work together until Danny goes to school at a later age than other children. All the opportunities to be together lead to a close bonding between father and son.

Inferential Comprehension

Why does William agree with Sergeant Samways that it is a "fine idea" to shoo the birds off his land, even though he's just claimed that the birds are his and not Mr. Hazell's as long as they are on William's land?

Mr. Hazell is thinking of the pheasant shoot and all the birds that have somehow been removed from his property. He is most anxious to have them back so his important guests will not be disappointed. He does not consider his precious car when he agrees to the suggestion for getting the pheasants across the road. His Rolls-Royce has always been treated as a special possession, being perfectly polished with no dirt or scratches on it. It is Mr. Hazell's symbol of wealth and power and an excuse for his snobbery. Since he agrees with the method of returning the birds, he can blame no one for the damage the pheasants do to his car. The men shooing the birds have been aware of what the results would be and are happy to continue to "help" Mr. Hazell get his pheasants back.

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Constructing Meaning

Danny's father and Doc Spencer justify their poaching. What laws are often broken in society, and what excuses do people give for breaking them? Does rationalizing the illegality make it right?

Some of the most common law violations for adults are speeding while driving and finding ways to cheat on taxes. Adults give various reasons for violating the law, such as, "I give too much to the government as it is" in regard to taxes, or "I can push the limit by five miles per hour and not get pulled over" when it comes to speeding. Students may have a different perspective on laws or illegal or unsanctioned activities such as violating school dress codes or shoplifting. In general, rules are made to protect individuals or the society. Rationalizing lawbreaking usually helps the individual to feel better but does not, in itself, make the action right. Some may argue that if a law is grossly unfair under an oppressive government or leader, it may be right to break the law.

Teachable Skills

Understanding the Main Idea At the end of the book, Danny, the narrator, states that the main idea of telling the story of his poaching adventure was to show what a wonderful father he had. He then states that what children want and deserve is "a parent who is SPARKY!" Discuss with the class what "sparky" might mean. Does it mean a parent who only plays with children? Point out that Danny's father takes good care of him, works hard, and is very responsible. Yet Danny finds their life together to be wonderful and endlessly interesting. Have children think about and discuss reasons that this might be so. How is Danny's father a sparky parent? Have students write a narrative about an experience with a parent, a grandparent, teacher, or another adult where that adult made the experience fun, interesting, and exciting. Students may, alternatively, write a general description of an adult with whom they enjoy spending time and what it is about that adult that makes them want to spend time with him or her.

Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors England has a long and complicated history of poaching going back centuries. At some points in history, poor people had to poach on the vast estates of the rich in order to survive during hard times. At other points in history, they simply organized into gangs and wreaked destruction on private property. It seems that both aspects of this cultural phenomenon are present in Danny's father's experience of poaching. Danny's father and the other people in the village seem to accept poaching as a fair custom—even a game between social classes. When Danny's father was a boy, it was necessary in order to survive during hard times. Danny points out to his father that they are not starving. His father responds that Danny is missing the point of the game. He resents the arrogance and malicious cruelty of Mr. Hazell and poaches on his land as a way of paying him back. Have students do Internet research on poaching throughout English history. Give groups of students Internet search terms (or provide the site URLs yourself after doing preliminary searching) on different aspects of the subject. These could include such things as English social structures of landowning and land tenancy, the story of Robin Hood and how it reflects poaching as a point of contention between classes, and other aspects of the subject. Have each group present to the full class on their findings. Another possible avenue of discussion is modern poaching in places such as Africa and Southeast Asia and the impact that this activity has on endangered species. This poaching is damaging, but issues of economic survival are often also involved in that very poor people often sell the animals they kill in order to buy food. Is this the same kind of thing that Danny's father does by occasionally poaching pheasants? Students may express different feelings and opinions about this complex topic. Researching and reporting on modern poaching of endangered animals such as tigers, elephants, or gorillas might also be interesting for students.

Recognizing Setting Danny and his father live inside an old gypsy caravan that is propped up on bricks out behind their filling station. Discuss with

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children what exactly a "gypsy caravan" is. Explain the meaning of the word "caravan" in this context. Discuss the traveling way of life of gypsies, explaining that they often--especially in past centuries--traveled from place to place in colorful, horse-drawn wagons, in which they also lived. The gypsies painted their wagons in bright colors and designs, and each caravan was unique. This is the kind of caravan in which Danny and his father live. Find pictures of different gypsy caravans to show the students. A Google image search on the term "gypsy caravan" will bring up a great variety of images and examples. Read the description of the inside of the wagon on pages 5-7 of the book. Have students imagine what it would be like to live in such a small space. What would it be like to travel around with your house from place to place? Tell students that they will each design their own gypsy caravan. Using the description and the image examples as their guides, have them make a rendering of their own caravans. Students might use shoe boxes and construction paper or other materials to build a replica of a caravan. They might draw a floor plan of a caravan or make a diorama showing the inside. Help students brainstorm different ways in which they can build their model caravans. Students can then decorate their caravans in their own unique ways.

Understanding Literary Features The struggle between the rich and poor has been going on through every age. In *Danny, the Champion of the World*, the common folks are trying to pilfer the goods of the rich, haughty Victor Hazell. Many other stories share this common theme of the poor person or persons triumphing in some way over a wealthy snob. *Robin Hood* and *Cinderella* are just two examples. Have the students read another story with this theme. On a poster, they can then list the characters with a short description of each and list the major events that occur in the story. The students can give an oral report on their poster and end with a comparison of the story to *Danny, the Champion of the World* in terms of outcome and tone of writing.