

# Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

## A Dog Called Kitty

by  
Bill Wallace

### Book Information

Bill Wallace, A Dog Called Kitty

Quiz Number: 607

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137 Pages

Book Level: 4.2

Interest Level: MG

Ricky has had a fear of dogs since, as a toddler, he was attacked by a rabid one. He eventually overcomes his fear through a relationship with an abandoned puppy on an Oklahoma farm.

**Award:** Misc./Other; State Award

**Topics:** Animals, Dogs; English in a Flash  
Recommended List, Library 3, Chapter 10,  
90%; Family Life, Pets; People, Children

### Main Characters

Arthur Sendens an employee of an oil company whose friendship with Ricky and Kitty leads to Kitty's death

Brad McNeil Ricky's good friend, who urges him to overcome his fear of dogs

Butch Sammy's aggressive but cowardly dog

Chuckie Ricky's lively younger brother who sometimes tries to get Ricky in trouble

Dad (Nick) Ricky's father, who does not understand Ricky's fear of dogs

Joel Havelly a small boy who is targeted for abuse by Sammy during Ricky's birthday party

Kitty the stray pup that becomes Ricky's loyal pet

Mama (Helen) Ricky's patient and unassertive mother, who tries to keep the peace in Ricky's household

Martha Dad's sister from St. Louis; Dad goes to help after her son is killed and her husband and daughter are injured in an auto accident

Ricky a sensitive boy who has had a phobia of dogs since a rabid dog attacked when he was small

Sammy Darlinger a stubborn bully who refuses to learn not to pick fights with Ricky

### Vocabulary

- alfalfa** a plant that is widely grown for animal feed
- commotion** a confused and noisy disturbance
- derrick** a tower that supports a drill over an oil well
- panic** a sudden state of wild fear
- pesky** troublesome and annoying
- rabies** a deadly disease of the nervous system that attacks warm-blooded animals
- scraggly** messy and not properly groomed
- stadium** a structure, often without a roof, used for sporting events
- thicket** a group of shrubs growing closely together
- whimpering** crying in a small, soft way

### Synopsis

Ricky's father had always talked about his dream of moving from the big city of St. Louis to a farm. One day he proves it wasn't just a dream when a moving van shows up in front of the family's apartment and Dad shows Mama the deed to a farm in Oklahoma. Dad responds to Mama's shock by saying that he, Ricky, and Ricky's younger brother, Chuckie, are moving with or without her. Mama comes along, but the tension between the parents lasts until little Chuckie makes everyone laugh after the family has been on the farm for a couple of weeks.

One Saturday, Mama is feeding the barn cats when a stray puppy attempts to join them. The cats attack the pup and chase it away. Mama feels sorry for the puppy, but she knows Ricky is terrified of dogs. That day she takes Ricky to play football with his friends. During the game an aggressive boy named Sammy pushes Ricky down after Ricky scores a touchdown. The other players defend Ricky's score, but Ricky loses his temper and fights back. When Sammy's dog Butch approaches, Ricky becomes frightened and runs away while Sammy yells at his dog to attack. Ricky climbs to the top of a fence to escape. Ricky's friend Brad comes to help Ricky, and Ricky tells Brad that a rabid dog attacked Ricky when he was a small child. Brad advises Ricky to overcome his fear and explains the fight to Ricky's mother

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when she is angered by Ricky's mud-covered, wet clothing.

When Ricky arrives home, Dad is angry about Ricky's fighting. Mama sends Ricky to do his chores, but while Ricky is stacking bales, he discovers the stray puppy. He climbs the haystack to escape the friendly pup and is stranded until the pup hears Mama feeding the cats. At supper, Ricky has to explain the fight to Dad. Dad forgives Ricky for fighting but is annoyed that Ricky ran from Sammy's dog. Ricky emotionally defends his fear and is sent to his room. Later, Mama also encourages him to overcome his fear.

A few days later, Ricky hears the pup whining while he is tending to his horse, Beauty. He finds the emaciated pup and feels thankful the pup will not be around much longer. That night though, images of the starving pup's big eyes prevent Ricky from sleeping, and he gathers food from the kitchen. Ricky sneaks the food to the puppy and is still fearful when he touches the dog, although he can't help smiling while watching the puppy eat. For weeks Ricky secretly feeds the stray with the intent of sending him away when he is strong enough. Gradually Ricky becomes used to touching the dog, but he keeps the dog's feedings a secret by feeding him during the cats' mealtime. One day, the dog eludes Ricky and races out to fight with the cats. One of the terrified cats climbs up Mama. Ricky's secret becomes public, and the dog is named Kitty because he comes when Mama calls the cats.

As the first day of school comes near, Dad and Ricky build a pen to prevent Kitty from getting into the traps baited with poisoned meat farmers use against wild dogs and coyotes. Unfortunately, Kitty refuses to stay in the pen. A solution to this problem occurs to Ricky after one day at supper Chuckie eats a hot pepper from Dad's plate. As Chuckie is recovering from the surprise and pain from eating the pepper, Ricky decides to protect Kitty by training him to avoid strange meat. Ricky scatters pepper-loaded meat in the yard, and Kitty quickly learns the lesson.

Shortly before Christmas, Dad receives a call from his sister saying her family has been in a serious car accident. Mama insists Dad travel to St. Louis to help his sister. Mama and Ricky will tend to the cows. They must especially watch for the pregnant heifers. Unfortunately Mama gets the pickup stuck in the mud, so when a heifer goes missing, Ricky must search for it on foot. Kitty, who accompanies Ricky, finds the heifer and her calf far from the house, but before Ricky can help them, a pack of vicious wild dogs arrives. After the dogs attack Kitty, Ricky runs in terror. He falls and hurts his knee, but when he hears Kitty crying in pain, he knows he must return to save him. Together Ricky and Kitty fight the dogs. Soon after the battle, Mama arrives and takes them home. She calls doctors to attend to their wounds while the dogs are hunted down. They test negative for rabies. Dad learns the story when he returns that same night to a chaotic household.

Kitty and Ricky recover from their wounds. However, some time after the battle, Kitty is killed when he runs next to a truck that has just released a load of heavy pipes. Ricky tries to conceal his grief but refuses to get another dog.

Mama plans a big birthday party for Ricky right before he starts sixth grade although Ricky is not in a party mood. She has invited Sammy, who is in Ricky's class. While Ricky is warning Sammy to stop bullying people, Sammy's dog, Butch, attacks a small, stray puppy that has been frequenting the farm. Ricky intervenes but insists that the pup must not be encouraged to stay. He puts thoughts of the pup out of his mind, but later the pup causes a commotion when Mama is feeding the cats. Soon afterward, Ricky goes to the kitchen and gets scraps to take to the barn to feed the pup.

## Open-Ended Questions

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

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### Initial Understanding

How does Mama act after Ricky and Kitty fight the pack of dogs?

*Mama saves Ricky and Kitty by arriving just as Ricky is struggling with the shock of the fight and their injuries and with the problem of getting home. Mama remains calm and focuses on action. First, she finds a doctor who will come to the house to care for Ricky even though the hour is late. Next, at Ricky's urging, Mama phones the vet, who arrives before the doctor. She helps the vet hold Kitty while his wounds are being tended. The next morning, Mama capably handles a houseful of people, including neighbors, the vet and the doctor, and later the sheriff, who brings the welcome news that the wild dogs tested negative for rabies. Finally, an astonished Dad returns from helping his sister, Martha, to a chaotic home. It falls to Mama to explain everything to him.*

### Literary Analysis

This story follows the pattern of many stories about children and dogs. List some ways this book is like other dog books.

*First, many stories about children and their relationships with animals have a character who is coping with a personal problem that the dog or other animal helps resolve. Often this problem has caused the child to feel lonely or alienated. In Ricky's case, his fear of dogs is alienating him from his parents and causing him embarrassment around his friends. Through his love for Kitty, Ricky discovers he can love and trust a dog. Second, the stories often include humorous exploits of the child and the dog. Examples in this story are Kitty's battles with the family's barn cats, or Kitty's first training session with hot peppers in meat. Third, the stories explain the efforts of the child to nurture and protect the animal. This book describes Ricky feeding Kitty scraps at night and training him to avoid the coyote traps. The stories also include a heroic moment when the animal and/or the child accomplish some dangerous feat in order to save the other, such as when Ricky and Kitty fight the dogs. Ricky has come to love his dog so much that the formerly dog-phobic boy faces and fights a pack of wild dogs to save Kitty. Finally, many of the stories include the tragic death of the beloved animal and show how the child struggles to deal with the loss. Kitty dies in a freak accident. Ricky, secretly grieving, refuses to get a new dog until he meets a starving, stray pup that reminds him of Kitty.*

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### Inferential Comprehension

Why does Ricky try to hide the way he feels after Kitty dies?

*Ricky's stated reason is he does not want his parents to worry about him. But Ricky also may not show his feelings because of how his parents respond when Ricky is afraid of dogs. Dad is openly disapproving of what he considers Ricky's weakness and demands Ricky toughen up and simply stop being afraid. Mama is more sympathetic, but she also feels Ricky should force himself to overcome his fears. She also is openly troubled about dealing with Dad's anger over Ricky's problems. These responses to Ricky's fear of dogs may have made Ricky feel the need to stifle his emotions about Kitty's death. He realizes his parents are not comfortable with strong emotions, and he may feel expressing his feelings could cause his parents to interfere.*

### Constructing Meaning

How do you feel about Dad's insistence that Ricky overcome his fear of dogs?

*Answers will vary. Some students will feel Dad is unreasonable and should be more understanding. They may point to the fact that Ricky experienced a traumatic dog attack and underwent painful rabies shots when he was just a small child. Other students may simply believe Ricky needs to be told to deal with his fears. They may feel it is time for Ricky, as he matures, to try to grow stronger. Some students may agree with Dad's position that Ricky should deal with his fear but believe Dad should provide support or find professional help for Ricky.*

## Teachable Skills

**Extending Meaning** Ricky is able to overcome his phobia of dogs by taking care of Kitty. Have the students research phobias and some methods used to cure them. Have the students write a paper explaining why Ricky acted the way he did. Students should include their opinion of whether the way Ricky's phobia is cured is the best way to cure a phobia.

**Identifying Persuasive Language** Dad basically forces Mama to leave St. Louis by telling her he is moving to the farm in Oklahoma whether she is coming or not. Have the students write another version of this scene with Dad by using persuasive speech to talk Mama into wanting to move to Oklahoma.

**Responding to Literature** This book contains some scenes that are troubling, such as the first football game, the story of the coyote-getters, and the fight between Kitty and the stray dogs. Have the students select a scene that disturbed them and write a paragraph about their concerns. Have them give their opinion about whether the scene is necessary to the story. Have them defend their position with reasons why they believe the scene is integral to plot and character development or why it is not.

**Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors** Kitty comes to Ricky as a stray, and some stray animals do find homes; however, problems caused by people dropping dogs along the side of the road in the countryside are mentioned at least twice in this story. Sometimes the animals starve to death. Other times stray dogs turn wild, travel in packs, and attack farm animals. Invite a representative from a local animal shelter or humane society to speak to the class. Ask the speaker to cover topics including proper care of pets, population control, and humane options available to those unable to keep a domestic animal.