

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

Later, Gator

by

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Book Information

Laurence Yep, Later, Gator
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Teddy finds that his imagination has gotten him into trouble once more, when he buys his younger brother, Bobby, an alligator for his birthday.

Topics: Animals, Alligators; Family Life, Birthdays; Family Life, Brothers; People, Chinese American

Main Characters

Bobby an eight-year old boy; he is a model child who receives a pet alligator for his birthday

Grandmother Teddy and Bobby's grandmother

Harold (Father) Teddy and Bobby's father; he works at a fish store

Mother Teddy and Bobby's mother; she encourages Teddy to be kind to Bobby

Mr. Wong the landlord of the family's apartment building

Oscar Bobby's pet alligator

Teddy Bobby's older brother, who buys his brother a pet alligator for his birthday

Uncle Curtis a brother of Harold; he writes his scientific observations of the alligator in a notebook

Uncle Mat another brother of Harold

Vocabulary

barker a person, usually at a carnival-like event, who draws crowds to his booth with a loud voice

ly-cee Chinese word for small red envelope

mah-jongg a Chinese game similar to gin rummy that is played with tiles

ricksha a two-wheeled carriage drawn by a man

Synopsis

Later, Gator is the story about two brothers growing

up in San Francisco's Chinatown. The older brother, Teddy, whose imagination often gets him into trouble, narrates the story. As the story begins, Teddy's younger brother, Bobby, whom everyone seems to adore, has a birthday approaching. Pushing for Teddy to buy his brother a nicer gift than the white socks that he bought at Christmas, Teddy's mother suggests a pet turtle. However, Teddy decides that buying a baby alligator instead from the pet store would afford him the opportunity to "develop Bobby's character."

Though Teddy anticipates his brother will be horrified at his gift choice, Bobby is delighted and decides to name the alligator Oscar. Not wanting to keep the alligator, but also not wanting to be the villain, Bobby's mother improvises for the time being and brings out the turtle island that she has purchased for Bobby's birthday. The alligator quickly destroys the plastic island, so Bobby chooses one of his mother's cake pans for the gator's home and later places it in the bathtub.

Having read the information cards on alligators at the Academy of Sciences, Bobby knows that they are carnivorous. He feeds Oscar some raw chicken that his mother planned to use in their father's favorite cashew chicken dish. As relatives arrive for Bobby's birthday party, they all take great interest in observing the alligator and help feed it the rest of the chicken. Even Teddy begins to feel a thrill at the experience. When Harold, Teddy and Bobby's father, arrives home and discovers the alligator has been fed his chicken, he angrily declares that only garbage may be fed to Oscar.

That night, a disheartened Bobby tells Teddy that he is willing to sell his prized birthday gift, a Willie Mays baseball mitt, in order to buy food for Oscar. Pitying him, Teddy offers to help him scavenge in the garbage cans at restaurants after school the next day. An old Chinese man at the first restaurant does not believe the boys are collecting food for an alligator. Believing instead that the family is facing financial hardship, he contacts other restaurants, and the boys return home with numerous shopping bags of food. The boys' father is furious and

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accuses the boys of ruining their good family name by begging, but Mother calms him by reminding him that he instructed the boys to feed Oscar garbage.

As they finish dinner that evening, relatives begin arriving with leftovers for Oscar. Bobby leads them to the bathroom only to discover that Oscar is gone. When Teddy sees Bobby crying, he feels sorry for him. Though Teddy admits that he was playing a trick on Bobby when he gave him the alligator, Teddy is committed to help him find it. For days they put plates of food out to lure it, but Oscar is nowhere to be found. Despite their inquiries and efforts for several days, Teddy eventually finds Oscar dead on the bathroom floor.

When Teddy offers to buy Bobby another gator, Bobby says that one was enough. However, he wants to have a funeral for Oscar. Neglecting to tell their parents that Oscar was found dead, the boys bury him that night in a park on Nob Hill. Back at home, Teddy's parents ask him to sign a pledge, stating that he will not buy anything potentially dangerous again. Seeing the opportunity to deal, Teddy asks his father for money to buy Bobby a turtle. In the end, things are back to normal, except that Mr. Wong, the landlord, is still checking for alligators in the walls.

Open-Ended Questions

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

Initial Understanding

When Teddy asks Bobby why he does not get mad when he picks on him, Bobby replies, "Maybe because it takes someone like me to handle our friends -- and someone like you to handle our enemies." What does he mean by this?

Bobby realizes that his likeable nature makes it easy for him to make friends, and that Teddy's temperament makes him a good defender against adversaries. Bobby sees the advantages of both personalities.

Literary Analysis

Teddy and Bobby live in an apartment in Chinatown. Describe the apartment building and discuss whether it would be a good place to raise a pet alligator.

The three-story apartment building has a mattress in the hallway. Sounds such as a neighbor's Chinese opera music and coughing can easily be heard through the walls. The building smells of herbs boiling on the landlord's stove. Laundry is hung on a line on the rooftop. These details show how cramped and crowded the building is, emphasizing that the small apartment and its location in the city make it virtually impossible to raise an alligator.

Inferential Comprehension

Uncle Curtis seems to enjoy studying the alligator and often writes in his notebook. What kinds of things do you think Uncle Curtis records?

He probably records his observations about the alligator. Some of his notes might include the size of its teeth and other body parts, its diet and eating habits, how it becomes agitated and how it is calmed.

Constructing Meaning

At the end of the story, Bobby decides he does not want another pet alligator. Do you think that it is a good idea to have an alligator as a pet?

Based on the clues in the story, students might respond that it is not a good idea. Some may state that alligators need to be in a warm swamp-like atmosphere and eat meat. Students may also realize that the alligator will grow to an unmanageable size.

Teachable Skills

Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors Teddy explains that Chinese names consist of two parts: one name that belongs to a generation and one that describes a characteristic such as strength or intelligence. Father's name is Blessed Strength,

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Uncle Mat's is Blessed Intelligence, and Uncle Curtis's is Blessed Charity. Ask the students to research and write a report on this custom. The report might include other names that have been used for generations and the name being used by a current generation. After the students have completed their reports, ask them to choose a Chinese name for themselves. Designate one day on which the students will call each other only by their Chinese names.

Responding to Literature Harold's favorite dish that is being prepared for the birthday party is cashew chicken. According to Teddy, some of the ingredients are water chestnuts, bamboo shoots, cashews, and chicken. After finding an entire recipe, use an electric wok to prepare the cashew chicken in the classroom. Allow the students to taste this Oriental cuisine. The students may want to try eating with chopsticks, if available.

Recognizing Details One fact pointed out in the book is that alligators live in swamp-like conditions. Ask the students to research and write a report on alligators. Reports might include alligators' habitats, food, and life expectancy. If a zoo is nearby, ask a zoo employee to visit the classroom and speak to the students about alligators.

Making Predictions At the end of the story, Mr. Wong is still checking for alligators in the walls. Ask the students to decide whether or not they think Teddy will eventually reveal Oscar's death to Mr. Wong. If the students decide that Teddy will tell him, ask them to write a dialogue in which Teddy tells Mr. Wong that Oscar has died. If students do not believe Teddy will tell Mr. Wong, ask them to write an essay in which they state reasons that Teddy chooses not to do so.