

# Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

## The Magic Finger

by  
Roald Dahl

### Book Information

Roald Dahl, The Magic Finger  
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Interest Level: LG

A duck-hunting family learns a lesson when an eight-year-old girl turns her magic finger on them.

**Topics:** Animals, Ducks; Mysteries, Magic;  
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1-3; Sports/Recreation, Hunting

### Main Characters

Jim Cooper and his family neighbors of the Greggs who love to hunt

Mr. Gregg the farmer who is persuaded that hunting is wrong

Mrs. Gregg Mr. Gregg's wife, who tries to convince the ducks not to shoot her children

Mrs. Winter the teacher who called the little girl stupid; the little girl responded by using her Magic Finger to transform the woman into a catlike creature

Philip and William Gregg Mr. Gregg's sons, who like to hunt with him; they sometimes play with the little girl

the four ducks the mysterious ducks who grow to human size and take over the Gregg house; they agree not to shoot the Greggs after Mr. Gregg promises to stop hunting

the little girl the eight-year-old narrator of the story who uses her Magic Finger to punish the Greggs for hunting wild animals

### Vocabulary

**barley** a type of grain grown as food

**beastly** horrible; nasty

**congratulate** to praise a person for an accomplishment

**cross** in a bad temper

**enormous** very large

**mince** to cut into very small pieces

### Synopsis

An eight-year-old girl tells the story of what happens to her neighbors, the Greggs, when they make her angry because they will not stop hunting. One day she sees Mr. Gregg and his two sons, Philip and William, carrying a dead deer out of the woods. When the little girl yells at them, the boys laugh and Mr. Gregg tells her to mind her own business. Before she can stop herself, the little girl uses her Magic Finger on the whole family, including Mrs. Gregg who is not present.

The little girl explains that the last time she used her Magic Finger was in school. Her teacher, Mrs. Winter, called her stupid because she misspelled the word "cat." When the little girl objected, Mrs. Winter told her to stand in the corner. The little girl became angry and put the Magic Finger on the teacher. Mrs. Winter immediately began growing whiskers and a long bushy tail. The little girl explains that because Mrs. Winter has not recovered from this episode, the little girl has been leery of using the Magic Finger since then.

After the little girl uses the Magic Finger on the Greggs, she runs home and things begin to happen to the family, as she later learns from William and Philip. That afternoon Mr. Gregg and his sons go hunting at the lake. They shoot sixteen ducks before four strange ducks fly over them. Even though the ducks are close, the Greggs miss all of them. The ducks fly over again, and again the Greggs miss them. Frustrated, Mr. Gregg takes his sons home. The four ducks fly around them as they walk.

Late that night Mr. Gregg is outside getting wood when he sees the four ducks again. Frightened, he runs into the house and goes to bed. Mr. Gregg wakes up in the morning with a bird-sized body and wings for arms. Mrs. Gregg and the boys are also transformed. The boys, delighted that they can fly, sail out the window, and their parents fly after them. The family is enjoying flying when Philip notices

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someone in the garden below. Dismayed, the family watches as four ducks, as big as men, walk in and take over their house.

When Mrs. Gregg and the boys begin to cry, Mr. Gregg suggests building a nest. The family works together and soon creates a nest at the top of a tall tree. Hungry, they try to sneak into the house to get food, but find that the windows and doors are shut. They try to eat apples from the trees but are not able to eat much. During this time the little girl phones the house, but hears only a duck quacking on the other end of the line. The girl begins to feel guilty for the trouble her Magic Finger has caused. That night a severe rainstorm pours down on the Gregg family in their nest.

To make matters worse, in the morning the Greggs see three of the four ducks aiming guns at them. Mr. and Mrs. Gregg beg them not to shoot. However, the duck without a gun notes that the Greggs are always shooting ducks. Mr. Gregg explains that people have given themselves permission to shoot ducks. In response, the duck replies that they are going to allow themselves to shoot the Greggs. Mrs. Gregg begs the ducks not to shoot her children. The duck replies that the previous day Mr. Gregg shot the ducks' children. Mr. Gregg finally promises to stop shooting animals and vows to destroy his guns. The duck agrees not to shoot the Greggs, allowing them to come down from the tree. The Greggs return to their normal size.

When the little girl checks on the Greggs, she finds Mr. Gregg smashing his guns. Mrs. Gregg is planting flowers over the graves of the sixteen ducks that had been shot the day before. Philip and William are throwing barley to a huge flock of birds. Mr. Gregg tells the little girl that he has changed his family's name to Egg to honor his feathered friends. Philip and William tell her everything that happened. Just after they finish, a gunshot is heard in the distance. Mr. Egg identifies the hunters as Jim Cooper and his boys, a neighboring family that loves to hunt. The little girl feels her Magic Finger tingling and runs off to find the Coopers.

### Open-Ended Questions

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

#### Initial Understanding

How do the ducks feel about the Gregg family?

*The ducks are angry that the Greggs are shooting them. They do not think the Greggs' behavior is justified, and they think the Greggs deserve to be shot if they do not stop. Although the ducks are angry, they do show some respect toward the Greggs. For instance, one duck expresses admiration for the nest Mr. Gregg built. The ducks also trust Mr. Gregg to keep his word, since they release the family after he promises to change his ways.*

#### Literary Analysis

What kind of person is Mr. Gregg?

*Mr. Gregg has both weaknesses and strengths. On the one hand, he is cruel and thoughtless toward the ducks in the beginning of the story. He also stubbornly refuses to listen to the pleading of the neighbor girl. However, he does have some positive qualities. For example, he spends time with his children. He takes care of his family and shows them how to be resourceful in emergency situations, helping his family make a nest and showing his children how to get apples from the trees. He also is willing to make major life changes once he is convinced it is wrong to hunt. He changes his name, destroys his guns, and lets the boys feed his best barley to the birds.*

#### Inferential Comprehension

Why does Mr. Gregg pay so little attention to the girl's opinions at the beginning of the story?

*Mr. Gregg apparently lives in a male-dominated society in which a father expects to have unquestioned obedience and respect. Therefore, he does not think a young girl's opinion has value.*

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### Constructing Meaning

How can the reader tell that the little girl does not really want bad things to happen to the Greggs?

*First, she expresses remorse for using the Magic Finger on her teacher the last time she became angry. Because she had promised herself that she would not let it happen again, she truly seems to regret using the Magic Finger on the Greggs as soon as she does it. She even runs away because she knows bad things are about to happen. The next day she calls the Greggs to see if they are all right and is worried when a quacking duck answers. The following day she comes to see how the Greggs are doing and expects the worst. When the Greggs seem to be acting strange, she fears they are crazy. After they tell her how they have changed, she is less hesitant to use the Magic Finger on other people.*

read books about ducks so they will gain greater insight into these wild birds. Then contact the Audubon Society, Ducks Unlimited, or another wildlife society to learn how students can participate in promoting wildlife conservation.

### Teachable Skills

**Identifying Persuasive Language** The little girl and the Greggs have very different opinions about whether people should hunt. Have the class research the arguments on this issue and then divide the class into pro-hunting and anti-hunting groups. Have them debate whether people should hunt wild animals.

**Understanding Literary Features** In this story, the author clearly shows an unfavorable attitude toward hunting animals. Yet he uses humor to convey a serious message. Have the students choose an issue about which they feel strongly. Assign students to create a poster or television ad that uses humor to persuade others to agree with their view on the issue.

**Describing Actions or Events** In this story, several strange and magical events occur. Have the students choose one of these events and create collages depicting the event. Have the students combine the details given in the book with details they imagine might have been part of the event.

**Responding to Literature** Have the students