

# Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

## The Voyages of Doctor Dolittle

by  
Hugh Lofting

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### Book Information

Hugh Lofting, The Voyages of Doctor Dolittle

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355 Pages

Book Level: 5.7

Interest Level: MG

This fictional classic presents the story of the good doctor who learned the language of animals and made adventurous voyages.

**Award:** Newbery Medal

**Topics:** Adventure, Travel; Animals, Misc./Other;  
Fantasy/Imagination, Misc./Other

### Main Characters

Bumpo a crown prince studying at Oxford who accompanies Doctor Dolittle on his voyage

Chee-Chee a homesick monkey who journeys from Africa to rejoin Doctor Dolittle

Dab-Dab Doctor Dolittle's pet duck, who works as his housekeeper

Doctor John Dolittle the main character, an English naturalist famous for his way with animals and his ability to communicate with them

Jip Doctor Dolittle's trusted dog, who accompanies him on his voyage

Long Arrow the "world's greatest naturalist," who disappears and is rescued by Doctor Dolittle on an island

Miranda a purple bird of paradise who helps Doctor Dolittle on Spider Monkey Island

Polynesia an English-speaking parrot who teaches Tommy the animals' languages and watches over the Doctor

the Bag-jagderags a warring tribe of natives on Spider Monkey Island defeated by Doctor Dolittle

the Popsipetels a tribe of Indians on Spider Monkey Island whom the Englishmen help defend in a war

Tommy Stubbins the story's narrator who, as a young boy, travels on an ocean voyage as Dr. Dolittle's assistant

### Vocabulary

**bedizened** dressed with showy finery

**cockney** dialect of persons born or living in the eastern section of London

**copses** groves of small trees, bushes, or shrubs

**salt fen** a salt marsh or wetland

**scullery** a small room where the dirty, rough work of a kitchen is done

**treacle** molasses

### Synopsis

Doctor John Dolittle is one of the world's greatest naturalists, who has devoted his life to studying and understanding animals. He has developed the ability to communicate with many animals in their own language. His greatest desire is to learn the language of the shellfish because he believes this ancient species can teach him much about how the world was a long time ago.

Along with some of his special friends, old and new, which include Tommy Stubbins, Polynesia, Chee-Chee, and Bumpo, the Doctor sets out on a sea voyage for Spider Monkey Island, last located near Brazil. This voyage includes a narrow escape from angry Spaniards after a bull "taming" incident, and a harrowing shipwreck which they all manage to survive.

The entourage eventually finds its destination and, after proving they have peaceful intentions by rescuing lost naturalist, Long Arrow, a tribe of island natives welcomes Doctor Dolittle to their land. The Doctor, with his friends and Long Arrow, then defeat a rival tribe. Both tribes marvel at Doctor Dolittle's strength and courage and decide to elect him king of the island. The Doctor tries to refuse, but then realizes it is his duty and accepts the position.

Doctor Dolittle spends almost a year governing his people and modernizing the island to improve the natives' lives. Although he misses his naturalist work, he refuses to leave because he thinks his people need him so much.

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In the end, his faithful friend Polynesia convinces the Doctor to leave when a giant snail appears at the island and offers to take the group back to England over the bottom of the ocean. Doctor Dolittle can't refuse such an opportunity and sadly leaves the island. The story ends as the adventurers once again return to their comfortable home in Puddleby-on-the-Marsh, England.

## Open-Ended Questions

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

### Initial Understanding

Polynesia, Doctor Dolittle's parrot, cared for her beloved master and was critical of the many diversions that kept him from his work as a naturalist. Why did Polynesia push to get the Doctor off Spider Monkey Island and back to England? Explain your answer.

*Polynesia understood that Doctor Dolittle was more valuable to the world as a scientist than as king of several tribes on a small tropical island.*

### Literary Analysis

In *The Voyages of Doctor Dolittle*, Miranda, a purple bird of paradise, says, "Being pretty is dangerous, 'cause humans want to shoot you." What does Miranda mean by this statement, and do you agree with her? Give reasons for your answer.

*Many people wish to obtain beautiful animals to stuff and display in their homes. It brings them pleasure to see that beauty on a daily basis. Others want objects such as hats, furs, etc. made from parts of wild animals. Unfortunately, for those animals, it means a death sentence.*

### Inferential Comprehension

Imagine you are planning an ocean voyage on a small ship. What kind of supplies would you want to take along, and what items would you include in case an emergency would occur? What would help determine your choices?

*The kind of supplies and emergency items to be included would depend largely on what part of the earth the voyage would cover. If it occurs in a cold climate, heavy clothing and other items to warm travelers would be essential. If the trip occurs in warmer climates, items to keep the travelers cool would be important. In either case, adequate food and water would be necessary, and emergency gear would include something such as a still, to provide drinkable, desalinated water.*

### Constructing Meaning

Because this story is a fantasy, the author presents the reader with a variety of very interesting animals that do things real animals cannot. Which of the creatures in this book do you find most interesting? Tell why you think so.

*Answers will vary, but may include the great glass sea snail whose transparent shell allows Doctor Dolittle and his fellow travelers to view the depths of the ocean, or the purple bird of paradise who is most beautiful and comes to the aid of the Englishmen in the nick of time.*

## Teachable Skills

**Recognizing Plot** Miranda, the beautiful bird of paradise, complains of the way beautiful animals are pursued and even killed because of their beauty. The beauty of an animal also has a positive and very important role in nature. Have your students research the role the attractiveness of an animal plays in nature. They should write a short report on their findings.

**Understanding Characterization** *The Voyages of Doctor Dolittle* includes many fantastic characters with extraordinary abilities. Have your students choose a scene from the book and write a short skit for it. Then have them design and

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create costumes or perhaps just headpieces for each character. Then ask them to practice and then perform their scene.

**Understanding Hist/Cultural Factors** In this story, Doctor Dolittle and his friends sail to Spider Monkey Island. It is a typical island in many ways except that it floats. Have your students invent their own island that has features they find desirable. Then have them tell who inhabits it, what they look like and do, and where the island is located. They could also be asked to draw a travel poster for their special island.

**Understanding Dialog** Bumpo is an African friend of Doctor Dolittle who takes time off from his studies at Oxford to join the Doctor's crew. Although he is an intelligent young man, he often substitutes the wrong words for things such as sediment for sentiment, and consententious for conscientious. Have your students make a list of their own "substitute" words and the real word each replaces. Students can vote on the best set of words.