

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

The Wild Kid

by
Harry Mazer

Book Information

Harry Mazer, The Wild Kid
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Twelve-year-old Sammy, who is mildly retarded, runs away from home and becomes a prisoner of Kevin, a wild kid living in the woods.

Award: Horn Book Fanfare; SLJ Best Book; State Award

Topics: Adventure, Runaway; Disabilities, Disabled; English in a Flash Recommended List, Library 3, Chapter 11, 90%; Natural Environments, Forests; READNOW - Demco Media Turtleback Books, Demco Media - Read Now Grades 1-3; READNOW - Perma-Bound, Perma-Bound - Read Now Grades 4-6; READNOW - Perma-Bound, Perma-Bound - Read Now Grades 6-8; READNOW - Renaissance Learning, RLI - Grades 4-6 (Theme: Friends and Family); Recommended Reading, Children's Literature Choice

Main Characters

Bethan Ritchie Sammy's younger sister

Carl Torres (Uncle Carl) Sammy's mother's easygoing boyfriend, who plays and wrestles with Sammy

Kevin a tough runaway who lives and hides out in the woods to avoid going to a juvenile detention facility

Mrs. Ritchie Sammy's mother, who wants Sammy to learn proper adult behavior and, consequently, often becomes frustrated with him

Samuel Ernest Ritchie (Sammy) the main character of the story; an almost thirteen-year-old, mildly retarded boy with Down syndrome, who forms a special friendship with Kevin after becoming lost in the woods

Vocabulary

apologize to express sorrow for a wrongdoing
hypocrite someone who condemns something as wrong, yet does the wrong thing
ravine a steep, narrow depression in the terrain
syndrome the symptoms or traits that characterize a disease or developmental problem
venture to expose to risk

Synopsis

Sammy is a boy with Down syndrome and has been treated like a cute pup all his life, but he is almost thirteen now, and his mother is trying to teach him to be respectful. When Sammy says a distasteful word to Carl, Sammy's mother's boyfriend, she takes Sammy outside until he is willing to apologize. Sammy becomes stubborn and refuses, and decides he will never come back home.

He rides his bike to a store to buy a candy bar, and while he is there, his bike is stolen. He sees someone riding it on the far side of the parking lot and decides to chase him. He loses him, but follows the bike tracks along the side of the road. When he becomes tired, he sneaks onto the back of a truck going in the same direction. When the truck driver discovers Sammy, he chases him with a stick. Sammy leaves the road and tumbles down a steep ravine. He gets lost in the woods and falls asleep. The next day he stumbles onto a cave-like home and a wild-looking kid takes him as a prisoner.

The kid, Kevin, has run away from authorities and is afraid that if he lets Sammy go, he will be found and have to go to a juvenile detention facility. He ties Sammy up when he has to go anywhere. Sammy is hungry and frightened.

Kevin is a tough kid who has suffered abuse. At first he is cruel to Sammy, calling him dumb and an idiot and feeding him as if he were an animal in a zoo, but over the course of days, Sammy endears himself to Kevin, and Kevin rises to the challenge of caring for Sammy. He takes Sammy to a pond

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where Kevin washes his own clothes, and Sammy, who has won medals in the Special Olympics for swimming, saves Kevin from drowning. A few days later, Kevin wants to treat Sammy to a good meal, so he takes him to a mall where a lady recognizes Sammy as the missing boy whose picture is in the paper. Kevin and Sammy escape before a security guard is called, and they head back to the woods. Kevin is content, but Sammy still misses his family. He wants Kevin to come home with him, but Kevin refuses, feeling that Sammy is naive to think his mother would embrace the idea. Sammy realizes now that Kevin does not intend to let him go, so he sneaks away one night, intending to follow the power lines to a road. He ends up instead at the base of a steep cliff. He climbs it and winds up in a tree below the road, unable to go any higher. Kevin finds him later that day but is unable to get him down. Kevin wrestles with what to do but finally gets help. Sammy is rescued, and Kevin disappears.

No one understands how Sammy survived for thirteen days in the wilderness. Even though he talks about the wild boy named Kevin, no trace of anyone was found in the area and psychologists speculate that he was imaginary, someone Sammy made up to help him feel safer. Sammy insists he is real and says that Kevin taught him to tie his shoelaces, light a fire and do a lot of other things. Sammy is loving toward his mother, but he no longer wants to be babied. When she criticizes Kevin, Sammy defends him by saying people can do bad things but still be good. Sammy has a cot placed in his bedroom and waits for Kevin to come.

Open-Ended Questions

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

Initial Understanding

What are some moments in the story that show that Kevin's attitude has changed toward Sammy and that he is beginning to think of him as a buddy?

In Chapter 13, Kevin begins telling Sammy a bit about his home life. He teaches Sammy to tie his shoelaces and calls him buddy. He starts fooling around with Sammy, allowing him to punch him and faking that Sammy knocks him out. He allows Sammy to help him, rather than just watch when it comes to making the shelter bigger. They begin to play games together. Kevin doesn't like it when Sammy ignores him and surprises him with a trip to the pond so that Sammy will talk with him again. Although Kevin won't admit it, he gains great respect for Sammy after Sammy brings him to safety after he swallows water. Kevin tries to treat Sammy to a great meal at the mall to make him happy and defends him when kids make fun of him. When he finds Sammy in the tree and can't help him, he calls people who are able to rescue him. These moments illustrate things that friends do. They include one another in activities, they goof around together, they try to make the other person happy, and they help one another when they are in trouble.

Literary Analysis

How does the story show the idea that you should not judge others based on your first impression of them?

Sammy seems "slow" and immature. His peers might think he would not be a fun friend or have much to offer. However, Kevin finds that Sammy is smart, has many skills, and is a good companion. Kevin seems thoroughly uncivilized, and many people might think it hopeless that he could become a useful member of society. But he softens under Sammy's influence. He ends up showing kindness and good judgment.

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Inferential Comprehension

What do you think happened to Kevin?

Answers will vary. It is possible that Kevin gathered what he could carry in a knapsack and moved to a different part of the state. He probably would have left the area because if he was caught, he could have been prosecuted for kidnapping along with his other transgressions. No matter where he went, his encounter with Sammy changed him. He was finally able to think and care about someone other than himself, and he did the right thing in order to save Sammy's life.

Constructing Meaning

How do students at school treat other students that have mental or physical disabilities? Has reading this book changed your attitude toward those with handicaps? In what way?

Students' exposure to those with physical and mental disabilities may differ depending on whether these students are mainstreamed into regular classrooms or placed in separate classes or separate schools. Some students go out of their way to be kind to these students, but others ridicule them. This book may encourage some students to befriend a student with a disability. They may find, as Kevin did, that they can learn a lot from such a person.

Teachable Skills

Differentiating Fact and Opinion Sammy has Down syndrome. Ask the students to find out the causes of Down syndrome, the physical markers of the syndrome, and some strategies that are employed in teaching children with Down. Have them compare the facts to the opinions about Sammy that are stated and implied in the story.

Recognizing Setting Wilderness survival is tough. While Kevin wants to remain hidden, he also has to make a shelter and protect himself from the weather, insects, and other animals, as well as find food. Divide the students into groups and ask each group to choose one aspect of wilderness survival appropriate to their area of

the country. They might focus on mountains, desert, woods, prairie or tundra. Survival skills include constructing a shelter, trapping for animals, identifying edible plants and berries, making a fire, first aid, etc. Then have the groups give a demonstration to the class on the chosen skill. If possible, a field trip could be arranged to a nearby natural area and the demonstrations given there.

Responding to Literature Abuse and neglect are sensitive and difficult areas to examine. Unfortunately, it is a reality for some children. Invite a social worker from a child welfare agency or the school counselor to come to the class to talk about these issues. Have the person explain what happens to children when parents are unable to care for them properly. Encourage the students to ask questions and talk about their fears and concerns about this issue.

Recognizing Details Kevin was physically described at a number of points in the story. Ask the students to find these descriptions and draw pictures of Kevin as they think he appears at various times. Students could explain their illustrations and note any changes in Kevin's facial expression as the story progresses. The pictures can then be displayed in the classroom.