

# Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

## The Yearling

by

### Marjorie Rawlings

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### Book Information

Marjorie Rawlings, The Yearling

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509 Pages

Book Level: 5.0

Interest Level: UG

A young boy living in the Florida backwoods is forced to decide the fate of a fawn he has lovingly raised as a pet.

**Award:** Pulitzer Prize

**Topics:** Animals, Deer; Family Life, Growing Up; Family Life, Parenting; Places, Farms; Popular Groupings, College Bound; Power Lessons AR, Grade 8; U.S. States/Regions, Florida

### Main Characters

Buck Forrester a fair-minded Forrester who helps on the Baxter farm after Penny is incapacitated

Doc Wilson the local doctor who drinks excessively

Fodder-wing Forrester the Forresters' youngest son, a tender-hearted and physically deformed animal lover who is Jody's closest friend

Grandma Hutto a family friend in town who provides a feminine contrast to Jody's plain mother

Jody Baxter a sensitive and adventurous boy whose dream comes true when he adopts a fawn

Lem Forrester the most malicious member of the Forrester family, who picks a fight with Oliver Hutto

Oliver Hutto Grandma's son and friend to the Baxters, whose involvement with a town girl leads to trouble

Ora Baxter Jody's practical but emotionally limited mother

Penny Baxter Jody's wise and gentle father, who understands and guides his growing son

Slewfoot a troublesome bear with one toe missing on the right paw

### Vocabulary

**alpaca** a glossy cotton and wool fabric

**cracklings** crisp pieces of pig fat that remain after roasting

**demijohn** a large, narrow-necked glass or bottle

**hammock** or "hummock," a low mound or ridge of earth

**pone** corn bread made without milk or eggs

**scrub** an area of stunted trees or shrubs

**shoat** a young pig who has just been weaned

### Synopsis

As the story opens, Jody Baxter is enjoying some time alone on a beautiful April day in the Florida scrub. He lives with his parents, who make a meager living growing crops and hunting game for food. Jody is the only one of the Baxter children to survive past infancy and, though he is close to his father, he longs for the companionship of a pet to call his own. His closest human friend is Fodder-wing Forrester, a gentle, deformed boy who is very different from the rest of his physically large, dark, raucous, and not entirely predictable family. The Baxters manage to maintain neighborly relations with the Forresters until a ruckus occurs between a friend, Oliver Hutto, and Lem Forrester. Penny and Jody's participation in the fight leads to strained relations that only a crisis could relieve.

The crisis occurs when a poisonous snake attacks Penny, and it is up to Jody to seek help from the estranged neighbors. To Jody's immense relief, the Forrester men prove willing to help, and Buck Forrester even stays to do Penny's chores for a week. In order to prolong his own life, Penny kills a doe and uses her liver to draw out some of the poison. During his recovery, he allows Jody to return to the scene of the accident, where the doe's fawn is still likely to be found.

Jody adopts the fawn, which fills an empty place in his heart. He is never so happy as when he frolics with him. Sad news is then in store for Jody, as his friend, Fodder-wing, dies. Ma Forrester tells Jody Fodder-wing thought Jody's fawn should be named "Flag," and Jody is happy to comply. Shortly thereafter, there is a devastating storm that has

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terrible consequences for all who live in the scrub, both human and animal. The storm and floods cause a plague that wipes out many of the animals on which the Baxters depend for food. The bad luck continues as a family hog is killed by a bear, and wolves carry off a prized calf.

Around Christmas, another calf is killed by old Slewfoot, a problem bear who has plagued the Baxters for a long time. The loss of this calf is enough to steel Penny's resolve--he aims to eliminate old Slewfoot once and for all. Penny embarks on a wild hunt and succeeds in killing the great bear. Penny's Christmas celebration is spoiled, however, when Oliver Hutto's mother's house is burned to the ground.

After Christmas, hunting is poor, deer are scarce, and Penny is not well enough to do much of the work on the homestead. It is up to Jody to take over as best he can. Flag, just beginning to grow antlers, gets into trouble often enough to get banned from the house. Jody, busy with chores, is unable to control him, and the fawn quickly progresses from trampling tobacco seedlings to wiping out the annual corn crop. Penny, desperate to keep his family from going hungry, tells Jody the fawn must be killed. After Jody finds himself unable to carry out his father's orders, Ora completes the deed.

Jody is distraught over Flag's death and runs away from home. He finds himself alone, hungry, and lost until he is picked up by a government mail boat bound for the town closest to his home. There was nothing for him to do but return to Baxter's Island.

When Jody returns, he understands something about hunger and the ways of the world. His father tells him he would be proud if Jody would stay with him at home, but tells him, "You're near enough growed to do your own choosin'." In the end, Jody, like his yearling fawn, has done a lot of growing up.

## Open-Ended Questions

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

### Initial Understanding

In what ways is the dialogue in *The Yearling* important to gaining an understanding of the characters and the action of the story?

*The author uses colorful regional dialects and local expressions to flesh out the characters of the Florida scrub. The use of dialects allows the reader to appreciate that these characters are rural and uneducated, but certainly do not lack wisdom about the natural world and human relations.*

### Literary Analysis

Throughout the story, it is clear that Penny is the parent who understands and appreciates Jody and provides him with emotional support. Ora Baxter, Jody's mother, is always practical, sometimes harsh, and often has trouble accepting affection from her open-hearted son. What is the probable reason for the emotional restraint in Ora's character?

*Early in the story, we learn that Ora and Penny had many children who died in infancy. Ora's life is difficult, and there is often not enough food to feed the one child she does have. After Fodder-wing Forrester dies, Ora seems unsympathetic to the Forresters. When Penny chastises her for her attitude, she admits, "Seems like bein' hard is the only way I can stand it [sorrow]."*

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#### Inferential Comprehension

When Jody asks his father to tell him what Flag would be like as a yearling, Penny replies, "He'll grow a good bit bigger. He'll be betwixt and between. He'll be like a person standin' on the state line. He'll be leavin' one and turnin' into the other." In what way could Penny's words also be describing his thirteen-year-old son?

*Like his beloved fawn, Jody is also "near growed," halfway between childhood and manhood. Early in the story, Jody's passionate attachment to the fawn fills a deep need in his heart. But, as the only child and only other male to help around the farm, Jody is called upon more and more to do a man's work, especially as Penny grows weaker. Penny teaches him the ways of the creatures and how to hunt for the family's food. By the end of the story, Jody is ready to go on without the fawn.*

#### Constructing Meaning

Do you think it was fair for Penny to tell Jody to shoot Flag? Why or why not? How do you think the author would answer that question?

*Replies will vary. Since the fawn was on his way to destroying the family's annual food supply and the Baxters walked a thin line between survival and starvation, it does seem the fawn had to be stopped. Students may remark it is cruel to expect Jody to do the killing or to not try other ways to remove Flag from Baxter's Island. The author's presentation of the scene and its aftermath is one of the most emotionally wrenching in the book. When Jody sees the fawn killed, he is physically sick and totally distraught. At the end of the story, however, the author presents a Jody who, having experienced hunger and despair, can better understand and accept his father's decision.*

### Teachable Skills

**Recognizing Setting** Readers of *The Yearling* are likely intrigued by the physical setting of the story. Author Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings lived for years in Cross Creek, Florida, and it is likely that this part of the state served as a model for Baxter's Island

and the surrounding areas. To learn more about the area in which this story is set, ask students to consult an atlas or road map to discover the location of Cross Creek, Florida. Ask students to research the physical geography of the region, along with the native plants and animals of the area. Have them assemble a scrapbook with their results.

**Understanding the Author's Craft** After reading *The Yearling*, the reader will be familiar with the peculiarities in speech and expression in Jody Baxter's "Floridy." To gain an appreciation of the craft of creating dialogue, ask students to write an additional scene for the end of the book, one in which Jody tells his father about a bear hunt he went on by himself. Let Jody adopt some of the expressions used by his father earlier in the book.

**Extending Meaning** Jody's family depends on hunting game and raising domestic animals for their very survival. Jody remarks that it is surprising how quickly he forgot the family hog and began thinking of cracklings, sausages, and ham hocks. In modern life, we are typically very much removed from the source of our meat. Have the students determine the reasons people hunt today. What influence does hunting have on our society? Why do some people oppose hunting, while others view it as a necessary part of conservation? Initiate a class discussion on their findings.

**Responding to Literature** Most readers will identify strongly with the pain and sense of betrayal Jody feels when his beloved fawn is shot. Jody feels that the killing is a terrible injustice, serious enough to make him run away from home. Ask students to consider a time when they felt they were treated unfairly. How did they react to the injustice? Looking back on it now, does the incident still seem unfair? Ask students to write two to three paragraphs on the topic.