Literature Guide for

Owls in the Family

by Robin M. Huntley
Inspired by true events in author Farley Mowat's childhood in northern Canada, *Owls in the Family* is charming, humorous, and full of adventures involving creatures of all kinds. As the title suggests, two of the story's main characters are Great Horned Owls who have been adopted by a human family. Set in rural Saskatchewan, the story revolves around the owls, Weeps and Wol, and Billy, their rescuer, and follows the trio through a series of adventures.

Weeps and Wol, both saved from grim fates, are the stars of Billy's pet collection. The owls share the spotlight with snakes, gophers, and other small creatures common to the plains of western Canada. Each chapter of the book features a different story of adventure involving Billy, his friends, and either Weeps or Wol (or both, often). Readers follow Billy through the training of the owls, a community pet parade, days swimming on the banks of a river, trips to school with owls in tow, and a move to the big city of Toronto, among other things.

Throughout the story, readers are drawn close to the natural world surrounding Billy, and learn about the Saskatchewan landscape as Billy narrates trips out into the grasslands surrounding his small town. *Owls in the Family* is much more than just an animal story – while young readers may be initially drawn to the animalian theme of the story, the book also challenges readers to think about their own connection to the natural world surrounding them and to question the relationship that humans have with wild animals. The vignette-style structure of the book makes the book more about the theme of the natural world than anything else – it is the common thread that pulls the story together.

**Critical Thinking Questions**

Designed for use with readers who have just begun to dig into chapter books, these critical thinking questions can be used to support readers in explaining their understanding of the story and in beginning to think critically about long stories. The questions can be asked throughout the story or after readers have completed the book.
Why do you think Billy's family let him keep the first owl that he brought home?

What do you think Billy's Boy Scout knife meant to him? Why do you think he was willing to trade it for an owl?

How would you have reacted to the surprise pet at the pet parade?

Billy mentions that Weeps and Wol don't immediately realize that they can fly. How do you think owls must learn in the wild?

Weeps and Wol love to follow Billy everywhere. Why do you think they do this? What do you think they get out of it?

Billy has a lot of freedom to explore at will. What must the place where he lives be like if he is allowed this freedom?

What part of the story do you think portrayed the owls acting in the least owl-like manner? Explain.

Mini-Lesson

The following mini-lesson focuses on using descriptive language to create a mental image.

Visualization is an important part of reading comprehension, as readers who cannot visualize a story have a much more difficult time understanding what they read. In this mini-lesson, readers will be asked to slowly work their way through a passage from the book and to share the mental image that the passage's descriptive language sparks. Readers who struggle with visualization can use the black-and-white illustrations in the story to support the development of mental images, but should challenge themselves to create a mental image of a place or space not illustrated within the book.

This mini-lesson is especially useful for this particular book because of the age group to which the story appeals. 8- to 10-year-old readers are working to master the complexity of chapter books, and *Owls in the Family* provides the perfect mix of textual complexity and appealing length (it is short
enough that it isn't intimidating at all). Readers at this age need lots of support in strengthening visualization skills, so as to ensure that they continue to succeed in their pursuit of chapter books., and this mini-lesson will do just that!

*Mental Images for Comprehension*

1. Choose a passage from the story where the author describes a place that is new to the reader. Some possible passages include the description of the finding of the owls' nest, the owls' home, Billy's cave, the center of town (during the pet parade), or the farm where the owls to go live.

2. Ask readers to gather in a common space. Explain to them that they will be working on creating mental images from descriptive language within a text, and that they will be using art materials to share their mental image when the exercise has finished.

3. Tell readers what portion of the story you'll be reading to them, and ask them to share anything that they remember about that place or space from their own reading. Discuss (briefly) the similarities and differences between the mental images of each reader.

4. Read the chosen passage aloud, asking readers to keep their eyes closed and focus on imagining the place being described. Place special emphasis on adjectives and sentences filled with juicy description, so as to alert readers to their importance. Explain any vocabulary that may be unfamiliar to readers.

5. Ask readers to share the mental image that the passage helped them to create. This can be done as a group or in pairs. If some readers are struggling to imagine the place or space described, read the passage again and allow them to use other readers' mental images (or what they have shared of them) to fill in their own understanding of the passage.

6. Allow readers to create a piece of art that shows the mental image that the passage created for them. Be sure to provide a variety of high-quality materials so as to encourage readers to be creative and to show them that their work is meaningful.
7. (Optional) Allow readers to share their completed artwork with each other, explaining each portion of the image and relating it back to the story. This step could be most useful for older readers, who will likely fill in their mental image with details gathered through life experience.

Extension Activities

Created with readers ages 8-11 in mind, these extension activities are suggestions for further learning using Owls in the Family as a catalyst for inquiry and exploration. Each activity can be adapted to fit individual needs and interests, and each activity can be leveled in order to fit the needs of a wide range of readers.

Mapping Saskatchewan

Billy shares a lot of information about the place where he lives. Throughout the story, readers learn about neighborhoods in his town, his favorite swim spot, the owl habitats he has found, and other special places in and around town. Make a list of the important locations in the story, and re-visit the description of each place within the text in order to gather information about what the place looks like and where it is located. Then, create a map of Billy's home and the places and spaces he explores. Begin by choosing a location for Billy's home, then add locations to the map as they are in relation to it. Readers can practice visualizing the story's setting using the descriptions provided, and will use their own mental images of each place and space to create images on their map.

Owls in Your Family

The book teaches readers a bit about Great Horned Owls, but there's a whole lot more about the species to learn – not to mention all that there is to learn about owls in general! Starting with what readers know about Great Horned Owls from the story, begin a self-guided study of owls of all kinds. A self-guided study can lead anywhere, but possible focus points include owls native to your local
landscape, owl habitat, and owls species throughout the world. Readers can learn all about this specific branch of ornithology!

*Animal Protection*

Today, it is against the law to keep Great Horned Owls and most other large birds as pets. Owls, hawks, and eagles (and their feathers, bones, and other body parts) may only be kept with a special license and certain affiliations. This contrasts starkly with the laws in place during the time period when the story takes place. Readers can learn about animal protection, poaching, and the commodification of birds and their body parts by researching the federal laws regarding possession of birds of prey. Readers can also learn about why these laws exist, opening them up to the history of the treatment of wild animals in the United States. Readers will learn about conservation and protection, and can learn to appreciate and respect the species of large birds who are protected by such rules.

*Argument Essay*

After researching the laws regarding possession of large birds (or after sharing some background about these laws with readers), ask readers to form their own opinions on whether or not birds such as owls should be kept as pets. Support readers in articulating the information supporting their opinion, and challenge them to come up with strong arguments, rather than just focusing on the fun and excitement that a pet owl could bring. Ask readers to think not only about their own potential enjoyment, but the experience that the owl would have as a pet (versus the wild experiences it could have if not kept as a pet). When readers have formed strong opinions, ask them to write a a short argument essay that shares their opinion, gives supporting details that further argue this point, and acknowledges counterclaims.

*There's a______________ in my House!*
Imagine you could have any wild animal as a pet. What would it be? Ask readers what kind of wild animal (native to their local landscape) they would like to have as a pet if they were able to acquire pets like Billy does. Readers can then choose a scene from the book and re-imagine it with their creature of choice and their own family featured, rather than Weeps, Wol, and Billy's family and friends.

*Care and Keeping of Creatures*

Visit a local wildlife rehabilitation center (or similar center where wild animals are given short-term care) to learn about the care and keeping of true wild animals. Compare Billy's owl-care to the care given to their wild animals you see. There may be similarities, but more than likely, the overwhelming majority of your observations will be of differences between the care you see at the center and the care you read about in the story. Readers can use what they learn through this visit to further support the forming of an opinion about keeping wild animals as pets at home – if they can't receive adequate care, should they be kept?
Hilltown Families.org

Community-Based Education Network