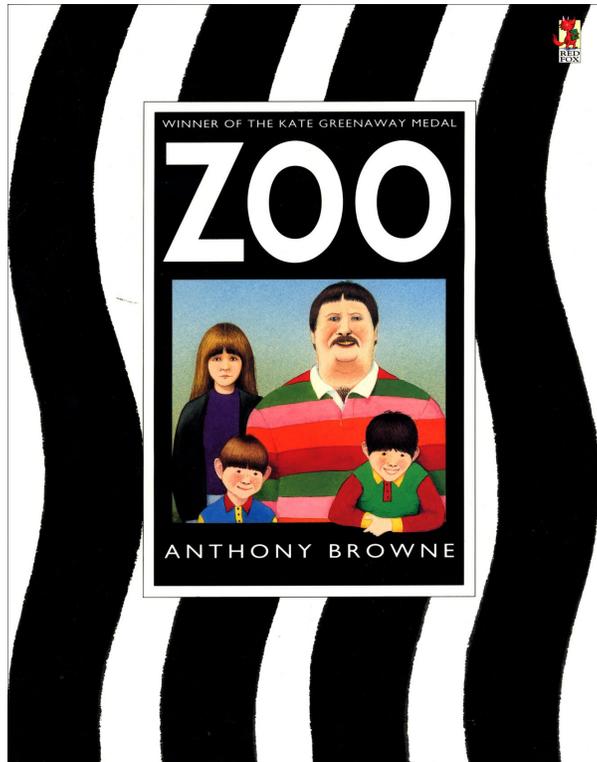


Literary Guide for Anthony Browne's

Zoo



by Robin M. Huntley

Summary

A family outing to the zoo serves as a catalyst for deep thought in this 25-year-old work of children's literature. Author and illustrator Anthony Browne, known as one of late 20th century England's best children's writers, has transformed a quintessential (and perhaps stereotypical) family adventure into a thought-provoking examination of humans' regard for the natural world. Within the book's pages, illustrations in which humans seem to be animals and animals seem almost human haunt a text dripping with the narrator's disdain for the lackluster creatures found within the concrete confines of the zoo.

The story is extraordinarily extraordinary without presenting as such: what was (and still is) a very common family experience reveals itself to be something that is conceptually much greater, and experientially (for the characters) much less. The family of four featured in the cover illustration argue their way through traffic and pay exorbitant prices in order to gain the privilege of interacting with nature, the absence of which is subtly included in the first few pages' illustrations. Though seemingly excited about their destination, the family engages only passively with their surroundings, failing to get a map and looking at some "boring" animals before searching for their favorites. Creature after creature is met with criticism from the narrator and his kin, while the creatures themselves are depicted as disengaged from reality within their unnatural surroundings. Even the creatures that promised excitement (tigers, for example) leave much to be desired, and by the end of the day, the family favorites are the cafeteria and the gift shop.

Carefully woven into the plot is Browne's examination of the zoo as entertainment: while the family sets out to enjoy a day learning about nature, they end up interacting with everything *but* real, true nature. Every experience that they have has been created for them by humans, from the road they drive on and the monkey hats they buy in the gift shop to the brick enclosures for the giraffes and the metal fences keeping tigers contained. They're bored, and rightly so. There is little to learn or authentically experience, and the animals at the zoo know it, too.

While not actively anti-zoo, the story conveys the message that zoos like the one depicted are not in anyone's best interest – including the animals that they contain. Share the story with older readers to spark discussion of ethical treatment of animals, human interaction with nature, and the ways in which humans and animals perceive one another.

Critical Thinking Questions

Created to support readers in deepening their understanding of the story, the critical thinking questions below are best suited for readers ages 9-12. The questions can be asked while the book is being read, or can be saved for use during discussion following close reading of the text. Readers can use the questions to help them grasp the story's themes, and to connect themselves and their own experiences to the story.

- Is the family in the story at all like animals?
- Does it seem like the narrator is surprised by any of the events that take place during the outing? Explain.
- How much value does the family seem to place on the animals at the zoo?
- Do the animals seem at home at the zoo?
- What do you think the family expected to gain from their visit to the zoo?
- Look closely at the animals in the illustrations. Do any of the creatures seem like they're paying any attention to the humans visiting the zoo? Why do you think this is?
- What parts of the outing does the narrator seem most excited about?
- Was it actually necessary for the family to visit the zoo in order to enjoy the things that they enjoyed? Explain your thinking.
- Who seems more wild: the humans or the animals?

Mini-Lesson

The mini-lesson outlined here is designed to encourage readers to engage with the story content creatively and in a very sophisticated way. Readers will be asked to re-tell the story in their own words, but with the perspective flipped so that the narrator is a creature viewed at the zoo, rather than a human. Readers will need to use clues from both the text and its accompanying illustrations in order to craft their own words to match the preexisting storyline and illustrations. This activity will be easiest for older readers (ages 9-12) to engage with, as they are able to think more abstractly and with more depth than younger readers can.

Shifting Perspective

1. Explain to readers that it will be their job to re-tell the story from another character's perspective. Explain that all of the moments in the story must remain, but that the way in which they are told can be completely different. Discuss the difference between changing perspective and changing the events in the storyline, making sure that readers are able to see the story as both a series of moments (without the narrator's perspective included) and an experience (a series of moments, the telling of which is influenced by the narrator's perspective).
2. Look through the book's illustrations to closely examine each animal portrait. Ask readers to consider which creature they might like to have narrate their version of the story, and why. Look for visual clues that can help readers gain perspective on the animals' understanding of (and perhaps opinion of) humans.
3. When readers have chosen the creature that they would like to narrate as, ask them to deconstruct the story by creating a step-by-step version of the tale. They can work together to create this, and should work hard to extract the narrator's opinions and emotions from the events included in the narrative.

4. Re-visit the text, this time with animal narrators in mind. Work together to use visual clues to develop a personality for the chosen creatures. What do they think of the zoo? What do they think of humans? How might they view the family in the story? Piece together as much information as possible (some might be invented, but it shouldn't be too far from the visible reality) about each future narrator before beginning to write.
5. Allow readers to work on their own to re-construct the storyline from a different perspective. This may take a long time, and could be done over the course of a few days. Support readers in making the story their own by adding interesting details, the narrator's thoughts, etc.
6. When readers have created their own version of the story, they should share their writing!

Extension Activities

The extension activities loosely outlined below can be used to continue the learning that happens as a result of reading the story. Each activity can be easily adapted to fit a specific audience, and can be expanded into something much larger than a single activity or learning experience.

The Local Zoo

In the story, the family has to drive to the zoo in order to interact with nature (or at least they feel like they have to!). In reality, there are creatures living all around us no matter where we live. In celebration of the authentic interactions with nature that our surroundings can provide (and perhaps in protest of the way humans view animals in zoos), create your own “zoo” in your own backyard. Explore the space thoroughly to see what can be easily found and observed, and create a map of the space that reflects what you've found. Add details to the map that teach potential visitors about each of the species that can be found there, and note special traits or characteristics that should be observed. If possible, include information about how the creatures reacted to your presence (scattering, freezing, hiding, etc.) so as to allow visitors to your “zoo” to have the best viewing experience possible. Try this

project in a shared outdoor space like a park, trail, or preserve so as to have a greater impact.

Animal Behavior

As the family makes its way through the zoo, the father and children mirror some of the stereotypical behaviors of the animals that they see. Some of the behaviors that they mirror are accurate, and some are not. Research the animals in the story to learn about their behavior in their natural surroundings. Then, compare and contrast this information to the ways in which these creatures behave in captivity. Explore the impact that captivity has on wild animals, and discuss human influence on animal behavior as an ethical concept. How does keeping animals in captivity effect our understanding of them as being “wild?” How does viewing animals from a safe and comfortable location change our understanding of what we see? Are zoos realistic?

Zoo History

Just like all other aspects of modern society that involve non-consenting creatures, zoos have evolved over time. Delve into the history of zoos and the changes that have been made in the ways in which humans treat, handle, and study the animals that live within them. Modern zoos in the United States are generally designed to teach visitors about each creature in as realistic a way as possible, but was this always the case? How has the way that we see zoos changed? Have laws or cultural practices influenced the structure of our zoos?



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