

# BEATRIX POTTER

& THE UNFORTUNATE TALE  
OF A BORROWED GUINEA PIG



DEBORAH HOPKINSON AND CHARLOTTE VOAKE

## About This Book

Deborah Hopkinson, master of the historical fiction picture book, takes readers back to Victorian England and the home of budding young artist and animal lover Beatrix Potter, creator of *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* and many other classic children's books.



A lot of pets can mean a lot of problems, even if you are Beatrix Potter. It doesn't matter how many hedgehogs, newts, snakes, and other animals you own. If you do borrow a guinea pig, make sure you keep an eye on it every second until you return it alive and healthy to its owner. Failing that, make sure you apologize with a piece of original art!

## Beatrix Potter and the Unfortunate Tale of a Borrowed Guinea Pig

Deborah Hopkinson • Illustrated by Charlotte Voake

Ages: 4–8 years • Grades: Preschool–3

HC: 978-0-385-37325-8 • EL: 978-0-385-37327-2

GLB: 978-0-385-37326-5

This guide is aligned with the Common Core Curriculum Standards. Educators can easily find grade-specific standards at [www.corestandards.org](http://www.corestandards.org), which is where the following anchor standards are found.

### Key Ideas and Details:

#### CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.1

Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.

#### CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.2

Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas.

#### CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.3

Analyze how and why individuals, events, or ideas develop and interact over the course of a text.

### Craft and Structure:

#### CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.4

Interpret words and phrases as they are used in a text, including determining technical, connotative, and figurative meanings, and analyze how specific word choices shape meaning or tone.

#### CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.5

Analyze the structure of texts, including how specific sentences, paragraphs, and larger portions of the text (e.g., a section, chapter, scene, or stanza) relate to each other and the whole.

#### CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.6

Assess how point of view or purpose shapes the content and style of a text.

### Integration of Knowledge and Ideas:

#### CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.7

Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse media and formats, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words.

#### CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.8

Delineate and evaluate the argument and specific claims in a text, including the validity of the reasoning as well as the relevance and sufficiency of the evidence.

#### CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.9

Analyze how two or more texts address similar themes or topics in order to build knowledge or to compare the approaches the authors take.

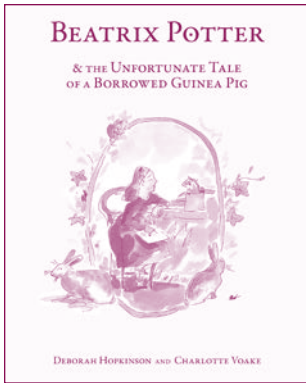
### Range of Reading and Level of Text Complexity:

#### CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.10

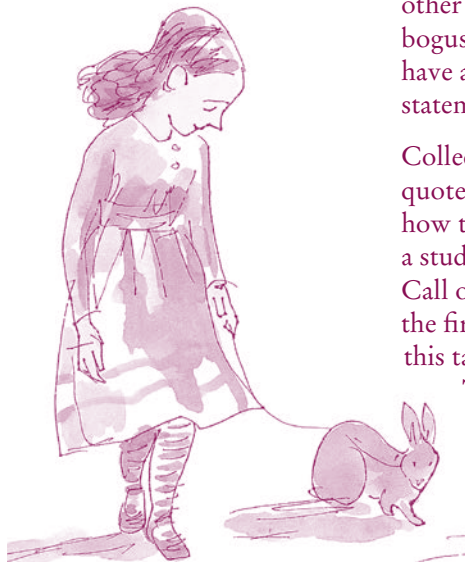
Read and comprehend complex literary and informational texts independently and proficiently.

In addition, many of the Common Core writing standards are supported in these activities described (as well as social studies and science standards). You can find the third grade writing standards here: <http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/W/3/>.

This guide was prepared by Ed Spicer, who teaches first grade in Allegan, MI. Ed has served on numerous book evaluation committees, including the Caldecott Committee, the Printz Committee, Notable Children's Books, and Best Books for Young Adults.



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## Pre-Reading Thoughts and Ideas

Beatrix Potter was a real person whose work is known to millions. This book is a work of fiction, but it is a work that uses primary sources and easily verified facts to tell its story. The author's note explains where Hopkinson changes the facts and when she uses facts to speculate on likely outcomes that cannot be substantiated. Have students explore primary and secondary sources and make sure they can define the differences. This is a great activity to do with your school or public librarians.

Before reading this book with your students, make up some false statements about various famous people. Collect some obscure facts about these same folks. Read your list aloud. Then ask your students how they would go about discovering which statements are true and which are the product of your imagination. If time permits, have students document the true facts. After verifying the facts, have students use them to make predictions about how these people feel or what they might do next. Students should be able to defend their predictions based on the discovered facts. The goal is to use facts to make inferences.

In small groups, have students create a list of three facts about themselves, along with a fourth, made-up statement. Have other students try to guess which is the bogus statement. Make sure students have a reason for deciding which statement is not true.

Collect a series of biographies, and pull quotes from these books that indicate how the subject was feeling. Then have a student perform some random task. Call on another student to explain how the first student felt while performing this task—no communicating allowed.

The point of this exercise is to call attention to the difficulty of attributing emotion to action in a biography. Read the quotes after

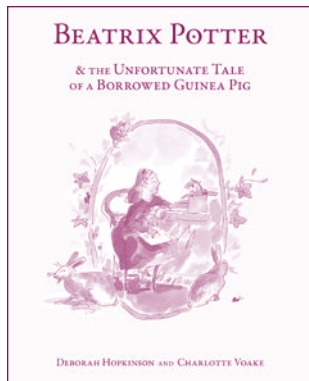
having a few students misread the emotion of the student doing the task. Lead a discussion or break into groups to decide how a biographer would accurately report feelings. The guiding questions could be: *Does the way I feel about an event dictate accurately how the subject of a biography would feel? Does the way most people feel in any given situation provide any more confidence in reporting the way a subject feels about the events in her life?*

This story deals with the deaths of various pets, a subject that may be difficult for some students. Keep this in mind. It may be useful to have students share stories and feelings about deceased pets. Make sure to keep your tone respectful and informational. Move things along, but do not cut off students who may need a bit more time. Do not force students to participate. Depending on the dispositions of your students, you may wish to discuss bad experiences lending items to others. Invite your librarian into the class to discuss the difficulties of lending books (and why they still lend books anyway).

Create a graph of all pets ever owned by class members. Create other graphs—for example, favorite pets, pets that we have never owned but would love to own, pet sizes.

Beatrix Potter's neighbor is angry with Beatrix, according to the book. Share with the class an appropriate situation in which you disappointed someone close to you. Have students write a quick letter of apology, with a picture, on your behalf that would help the aggrieved person forgive you.

Read and look at the art in as many Beatrix Potter books as you have time for. Perhaps divide the class into groups so that the class examines all 23 of her main works of fiction.



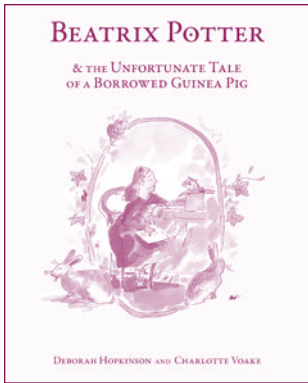
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## Discussion/Activity Guide:

- Locate a copy of Beatrix Potter's *Apple Dapple's Nursery Rhymes* and read the last rhyme about a very friendly guinea pig. Read and examine the artwork in other Potter books (Project Gutenberg has many of Potter's books online with artwork). Compare Potter's artwork with the artwork by Voake. How are they similar and how are they different? Have students discuss the ways in which the artwork enhances the story or limits the story.
- Use stuffed animals or animal toys as models and have students try to draw or sculpt them. Then have students write descriptions of the models. Ask the students to monitor their descriptions to make sure that they appeal to all five senses, if possible. How does it feel? If it were in its environment (real or make-believe), how would it smell?
- Before the title page, there is a letter to "My Dear Reader" with illustrations hinting at the action to come. Most books do not have this structure. Have students pick another book and write a short note, with a drawing, that summarizes the chosen book. Have a discussion with the class about the differences between spoilers and phrases that tease the reader into wanting to read a book. Ask the students for their impression of the ellipsis at the end of the letter.
- For students not familiar with Beatrix Potter, have them look carefully at the first full-page spread after the title page. Ask them to examine all of the items in the room and guess what year it is. Students should have a justification for their answer. If you need to, remind students to consider things not seen in the picture to help formulate a prediction. Don't provide the answer. Continue refining predictions as students work through the text. You may wish to fast-forward to the dinner-party spread and have students examine the lighting.
- The text explains that although Potter loved animals, she did not have very good luck with them. It also states that her favorite animals were rabbits, which she trained to walk on a leash with her. Look at the pictures of the animals Potter had in her third-floor space and predict which animals would have the most difficult time. Divide the class into groups and have them become a consulting firm that will provide Potter with a plan for turning her luck around with the animals under her care. What is she doing wrong, and what does she need to do to improve things for the animals in her home? Make sure the plan references pictures or text.
- We read that "*Beatrix spent long hours sketching her animals. She like to sketch them doing ordinary, everyday things, like reading the newspaper, working in the garden, or taking tea.*" If students today were sketching animals doing ordinary, everyday things, what would we see in their artwork? Have students draw or make collages or use stuffed animals or toys to depict a more modern take on "everyday" events.
- Beatrix Potter lived in a different country at a different time than students today in this country. Examining the artwork and vocabulary closely should give students enough evidence to make predictions about her family and her neighborhood. What is Potter's family like? What do they do for a living? What kind of neighborhood do they live in? Who lives there? Who does not? Use the resources in your library to research terms such as "*larder*," "*parlor*," "*blotting paper*," and "*throttle me*."
- Hopkinson does an excellent job of using language to convey the time period of the story. Have students go through the book and copy phrases that indicate an earlier time. Then have them rewrite these phrases in dialogue they would use today.
- When Beatrix returns to the guinea pig after dinner, she puts the animal back into its cage. We are then addressed by the author. The author addresses us again at the end of the book. Have students find a page to annotate with a letter to the author with advice on how she is doing, suggestions for improvement, or compliments on an especially pleasing page. Have them do the same thing for the illustrator.
- Potter loved to draw animals and spent hours drawing them reading and with clothes on. Have your class make a list of favorite animals. Look at the small picture of the guinea pig in the author's note. Draw or create a collage of one or more of these animals dressed for dinner at your house. What would these animals look like if they were going to dinner at the White House? A party in your neighborhood? Your school? A church in your area? Collect some of this work and create a play, musical, or other performance piece that tells about daily life in your area.
- This book is about a dead guinea pig, yet it has a lot of humor. Look through the book and pick out passages and paintings that lighten the tone, especially those passages that made classmates laugh and smile. How does the humor in this book function? Or, if you do not think it works, what went wrong? Is it possible to see humor in serious subjects?
- Have the class give examples of situations that, although serious, have very humorous elements to them. Pick one or more appropriate situations and have the students write short stories, fables, or one-act plays that other class members can act out or set to music.
- The illustrator and the book designers have very good reasons for the mix of black-and-white drawings and full-color drawings. We know that part of the reason is because Potter kept a diary. Research Beatrix Potter online and find other reasons that the book features both types of drawings.
- Have the class assess how well Voake captured the essence of Potter's art while creating her own unique paintings. Where does it work best? Where is the art not as effective?
- Look at a number of different artists and have students discuss what makes each artist unique. If time permits, have students re-create the guinea pig in the style of, say, Andy Warhol or Picasso or Van Gogh.
- Perhaps for some students the thought of going over to a neighbor's house and confessing to the fact that her pet guinea pig died while in their care is terrifying. Have students create a number of scenarios for how this scene might have played out. Have the students act these out. Make sure the skits include reactions to the fact that Potter tried to make the situation better by giving Miss Paget a painting. Then have the class come to a consensus for what is the most likely scenario, based on details from the book or from nonfiction biographies of Potter's life.
- What would have happened if Miss Paget took Potter to court? Turn this into a court trial with attorneys, judges, witnesses (which could be animals), and a jury. For added social studies and history content, students could research the legal system in London in the early 1900s and adjust the trial activity accordingly.







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In the early 1900s, our attitudes toward animals and pets and how to care for them were very different. Beatrix Potter's journal is filled with many pet disasters.

**Instructions:** Fill in the chart to help Beatrix Potter take better care of her animals. Assign students individual animals and have them present a more detailed description of how to take care of Potter's pets, making sure to cite their sources. (Example: *Dogs: feed meat-based diet and drinking water daily. Shelter in dry dog house to protect from the elements, or with humans. Needs space to exercise. Other needs vary by breed, but all dogs thrive on frequent human attention. ASPCA website: <https://www.asPCA.org/>*).



### Beatrix Potter Healthy Pet Chart

Beatrix's Pet	Food & Water Needs/ Frequency	Habitat Requirements (Dry/wet, temperature, plants needed, etc.?)	Special Considerations and Sources
Bunnies			
Canaries			
Ducks			
Frogs			
Salamanders			
Lizards			
Hedgehogs			
Newts			
Snakes			
Tortoises			
Jays/Kestrels			
Slugs			
Guinea Pigs			