



**TEACHER GUIDE**

**GRADES 6-8**

COMPREHENSIVE CURRICULUM BASED LESSON PLANS

# **Bless the Beasts & Children**

Glendon F. Swarthout

**READ, WRITE, THINK, DISCUSS AND CONNECT**

# Bless the Beasts & Children

Glendon F. Swarthout

## TEACHER GUIDE

### NOTE:

The trade book edition of the novel used to prepare this guide is found in the Novel Units catalog and on the Novel Units website. Using other editions may have varied page references.

Please note: We have assigned Interest Levels based on our knowledge of the themes and ideas of the books included in the Novel Units sets, however, please assess the appropriateness of this novel or trade book for the age level and maturity of your students prior to reading with them. You know your students best!

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## Skills and Strategies

### Thinking

Brainstorming, research

### Comprehension

Predicting, cause-and-effect,  
comparison/contrast

### Writing

Journal, free-write, narrative,  
description, poetry,  
persuasive

### Vocabulary

Antonyms/synonyms, word  
mapping, analogies

### Listening/Speaking

Discussion, role play, drama

### Literary Elements

Flashback, suspense,  
personification, hyperbole,  
metaphor, atmosphere

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## Plot Summary

Box Canyon is a summer riding camp in Arizona to which wealthy suburban parents send their boys aged 13–16. Cotton, a sensitive and troubled 15-year-old, takes on the role of protector and leader of the younger boys in his cabin—a group of misfits who have been cruelly dubbed “the Bedwetters.” Goodenow is a self-destructive boy who wets the bed; Lally 2 sucks his thumb and retreats under his bed when feeling threatened; Lally 1, a violent boy who kills the others’ pets, is insanely jealous of his younger brother; Teft has a penchant for stealing cars and getting into trouble; Shecker is an anxious, compulsive eater with a pushy, well-known comedian father. Like the other boys, Cotton comes from a home where his parents are too busy with their own marital problems and materialistic goals to give much attention to him.

Sent to the camp for their parents’ convenience, the boys are subjected to a series of humiliations, culminating in the Camp Director’s presentation of a chamber pot to denote their group’s lack of athleticism. One night the Bedwetters decide to “borrow” a camp truck. When that doesn’t work out, they ride horses into town and there steal an old pickup. Each wearing his trademark cap, the boys set out with Teft at the wheel. Only midway through the novel does the reader discover the boys’ goal: The previous day, while returning from an overnight campout, the boys had been traumatized by witnessing a government-sanctioned buffalo slaughter. First Lally 2 and then the others resolve to free the thirty buffalo that have survived the first two days of the three day “harvest.”

The boys stop for something to eat and are harassed by some local toughs who threaten to report them to the police. Teft shocks everyone by taking out a rifle borrowed from the camp riflery range, and shooting out the locals’ tire. When the truck runs out of gas, the group quickly loses courage and starts to fall apart, but Cotton tests them by suggesting they return to camp, and they vote for going on.

They walk to the Buffalo Preserve and find that freeing the buffalo is much harder than they had imagined. Swallowing their fear, they work together and finally herd the buffalo through the gates. They commandeer another truck and lure the herd to the back of the preserve by tossing hay from the rear of the truck. There they meet a final, unexpected obstacle to their plan: a tall chain-link fence bounds the preserve.

In an exciting climax, adults give chase in their vehicles while Teft holds them off by shooting at their radiators. Everyone gets out of the truck but Cotton, who tells the boys, “I’m proud of us!” Cotton rams a hole in the fence, then chases the herd through it with the truck. The buffalo swerve around the rim of a steep drop and head off into the open spaces. For some reason, though, the truck continues straight on and crashes down into the canyon. The boys watch, horrified, as John Cotton plunges to his death and the buffalo pound on to freedom.

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## Background on the Novelist

Glendon Fred Swarthout was born in 1918 in Michigan and lives today in Scottsdale, Arizona. He earned an A.B. and A.M. at the University of Michigan and went on to get his Ph.D. from Michigan State. He married in 1940 and has one son. He has taught English at the college level and served as a sergeant in the U.S. Army during World War II, earning two battle stars. He has written several novels and several of his short stories have been published in *Cosmopolitan* and other magazines. Several of his books have been made into movies: *They Came to Cordura*, *Where the Boys Are*, *Bless the Beasts and Children*, and *The Shootist*. He is considered by many critics to be an entertaining, optimistic writer who is at his best when he tells a good adventure story. Other critics, likening *Bless the Beasts and Children* to *Lord of the Flies* and *A Separate Peace*, point out that there is a dark side to his writings—and that this, his most famous novel, is much more than an adventure story.

## Initiating Activities

Choose one or more of the following pre-reading activities to help students draw from their background knowledge about the events and themes they will meet in *Bless the Beasts and Children*.

### 1. Discussion Questions

**Of Misfits:** What is a **misfit**? What are some other words for “misfits”? What is a **scapegoat**? Under what conditions do people look for scapegoats? Who are the individuals or groups that tend to become the victims in these situations? Has anyone in the class ever experienced a personal or family situation of “scapegoating”? Why is it that some people just don’t “fit in” with others? Should you try to “fit in”? Do boys and girls need the same qualities to “fit in”? For instance, how important is being athletic for a boy who wants to be accepted? How important is it for a girl to be athletic if she is to “fit in”? Why do parents care whether their children are “accepted”? In what ways do most parents want their children to “fit in”? Why are other kids so often mean to kids who don’t “fit in”?

**Of Group Behavior:** How does your behavior change when you are in a group? What is **conformity**? Are there things you wouldn’t ordinarily do that you find yourself doing when you are part of a group? Why do kids sometimes “gang up” on one another? Can you think of any examples of “mob violence” that you

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## Chapters 4-6

### Vocabulary

chutzpah 39	pommel 40	scabrous 40	oedipal 43
ambivalence 44	phobia 44	shenanigans 43	hoosegow 44
emporiums 45	appraising 45	idiosyncrasy 46	temperamentally 47
culpable 48	fatuous 48	surmounted 52	garrulous 52
ingrate 52	misanthropy 52	implement 58	purported 58
carnage 58	hippogriff 58	smelted 59	irresolute 59
proWess 60	scarp 63	rare 63	

### Vocabulary Activity

Give students these three options for small-group work:

1. Create a crossword puzzle with the vocabulary words (using a piece of puzzle-making software, if you wish).
2. Create "Jeopardy"-like statements for each word (e.g., "This fabulous creature had the body and hind parts of a horse."—hippogriff)
3. Create a picture puzzle for each word. On one side of a card goes a drawing or cutout that represents the word. The player tries to guess the word (printed on the other side). For example, the "garrulous" card might show an Andy Capp cartoon of two men talking to each other.

Each small group gives their game to another small group to solve/play.

### Discussion Questions

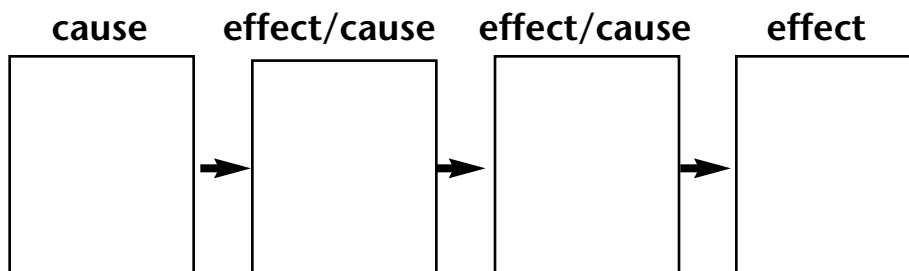
1. How do the boys feel as they ride their horses into the night? (pumped up, exhilarated) What does the author mean, "to a boy this was wine and watermelon, first kisses and fireworks, liniment and delight"? (It was all things wonderful in one experience.) Would a girl feel that way?
2. How did Sammy Shecker make "the biggest entrance" in the camp's history? (He and his comedian father came in a limousine.) What do you think the Director and the boys think of Sammy's father? (They think his routine is funny; maybe the director considers him wimpy, cocky, or rude for trying to buy the best horse for his son.) What do you suppose Sammy thinks of his father?

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3. What do you learn in flashback about Goodenow's emotional problems and family background? (He is a school phobic, overly dependent on his mother, wets the bed; his stepfather is unsympathetic, punishes him harshly.) Have you ever known anyone like him? What do you think his mother and stepfather should have done for him?
  4. What happens when the boys aren't successful right away at getting a car? (They get anxious, fall apart, criticize Teft.) How can you tell that these boys don't have much self-confidence? What is "bump time"? (Heads together, they touch faces, bump cheeks.) How does it help the boys? (They calm down, gather strength from one another.)
  5. Why do the boys reject the first few cars they see? How do they finally settle on a particular car? (Cars outside the bar are empty, but the bar is closing soon so the theft would be discovered; the owner has just gotten out of the car at the motel, but he will be returning to unload; cars in the used car lot are plentiful and empty, but locked, and a police cruiser goes through; the pickup beside the body shop is empty and unlocked.)
  6. What are your impressions of Teft? What words would you use to describe him? (tall, culpable, street-smart, sarcastic, rule-breaker) Why does he hate their counselor so much? (Teft hates any authority-figure.) How did he get Wheaties to leave Teft and the others in the cabin alone? (Teft put a lizard in the counselor's sleeping bag, then threatened to tell the director about the alcohol, cigarettes, and sex magazines in Wheaties' trunk unless he let the campers run their cabin.)
  7. What do you "see" as you read about the boys' ride up and down Mingus Mountain? (open range, moonlight, windmills, cattle, Verde River, cottonwoods, scarred strip-mined mountainside) What do you imagine the narrator's tone of voice to be as he describes the veterans from the VA hospital who often sit on the plaza benches (p. 52) and the the mountain that has been extensively mined (p. 58)? (ironic, bitter)
  8. How does Cotton feel as he looks at the boys sleeping in the back of the truck (p. 59)? (affectionate, protective) What chain of events had resulted in his becoming their leader—beginning with their attempt to steal the buffalo head? (When they tried to steal the Apaches' trophy, Shecker's radio gave them away. They were dragged outdoors and given a chamber pot "prize;" the boys cried as

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the Apaches urinated in the pot; Cotton told them they'd made a mess of the raid and needed a leader—him.)

Use the following graphic on the board to illustrate the relationship of causes and effects, filling in the answers above as you elicit them from students.



9. Why do you think the boys were willing to accept Cotton as their leader? (He understood them, was firm with them, gave them hope, and treated them with respect.) What are some reasons he had for wanting to be their leader? (He wanted to help them, wanted to feel in charge, wanted to overcome humiliation, and liked playing at being a military commander.)

