



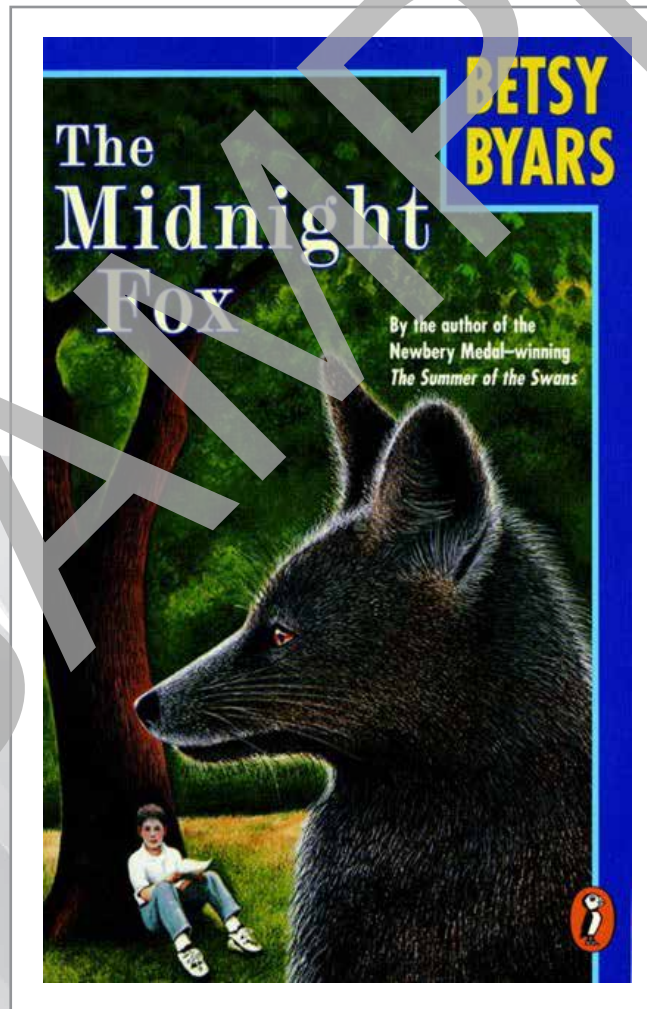
**TEACHER GUIDE**

**GRADES 3-5**

COMPREHENSIVE CURRICULUM BASED LESSON PLANS

# The Midnight Fox

Betsy Byars



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

# The Midnight Fox

Betsy Byars

## 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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**ISBN 978-1-50203-990-3**

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3901 Union Blvd., Suite 155

St. Louis, MO 63115

[sales@novelunits.com](mailto:sales@novelunits.com)

[novelunits.com](http://novelunits.com)

## Table of Contents

Summary .....	3
Background on the Novelist.....	3
Initiating Activities.....	4
Nineteen Chapters.....	8
Chapters contain: Vocabulary Words and Activities, Discussion Questions, Predictions, Supplementary Activities	
Post Reading Extension Activities .....	26
Assessment.....	35

## Skills and Strategies

### Vocabulary

Word mapping, synonyms,  
antonyms

### Listening/Speaking

Drama, discussion,  
role play

### Literary Elements

Mood, setting, point-of-view,  
foreshadowing

### Thinking

Brainstorming, research

### Comprehension

Predicting, inference

### Writing

Expository, narrative, letters,  
dialogue, description,  
persuasive, poetry

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## Plot Summary

The narrator, Tom, describes the memorable summer he spent on a farm five years earlier, when he was almost ten. Tom wasn't happy when his mother and father—a teacher and a high school coach—left him with his Aunt Millie and Uncle Fred while they went on a biking trip through Europe. He would rather have stayed home making models and playing with his best friend, Petie Burkis, a boy who was always concocting hilarious newspaper headlines.

Although Aunt Millie and Uncle Fred were kind to him, Tom was miserable for a few days. Then, while sitting in a field writing to Petie, he saw something wonderful that was to change his life—a black fox. He told no one about seeing the fox at first, but asked his teenaged cousin, Hazeline, all sorts of questions about foxes and their behavior. He found the den where the fox lived with her baby, and he spent much of the rest of the summer following her, putting a notch on his suitcase for each sighting.

One terrible day, Aunt Millie announced that a fox had killed her turkey and Uncle Fred promised to “take care of it.” Although Tom had by this time confided in Hazeline about the fox, she was too upset about an argument she had had with her boyfriend to be of any help. With a horrified Tom in tow, Uncle Fred tracked the fox to her den, captured the baby fox, and put the baby in a cage as a lure for the mother. That night, Tom sneaked out of his window in the middle of a thunder storm, climbed down a nearby tree, and released the baby, who ran off with its mother into the woods, never to be seen again. When he admitted what he had done, Tom was surprised to find that Aunt Millie and Uncle Fred understood how he felt.

A week later Tom's parents arrived—with Petie—to pick Tom up. As the years passed, Tom began to feel as if the events of that summer had happened to someone else, but he knew that the memory of the midnight fox would never leave him.

## Background on the Novelist

Betsy Byars was born in Charlotte, NC, in 1928. She describes her childhood as a happy one, with her family spending some of the time in Charlotte and the rest in the country. Her parents read to her a lot when she was a child, but she did very little writing then and never had a teacher tell her she ought to become a writer. When she entered college (Furman University, then Queens College), she intended to major in math, but switched to English. After graduation, she married a professor of engineering and had four children.

She began writing children's books in the 1960s, often getting ideas for her stories from experiences she had in her own life—often with her own children—or incidents she read about in the newspaper. Her Newbery Award winner, *The Summer of the*

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**Vocabulary • Discussion Questions**  
**Writing Ideas • Activities**

**Chapters 1-2**

**Vocabulary**

cellophane 10  
 capacity 17  
 Kewpie doll 24

stampeded 12  
 sarcastic 18

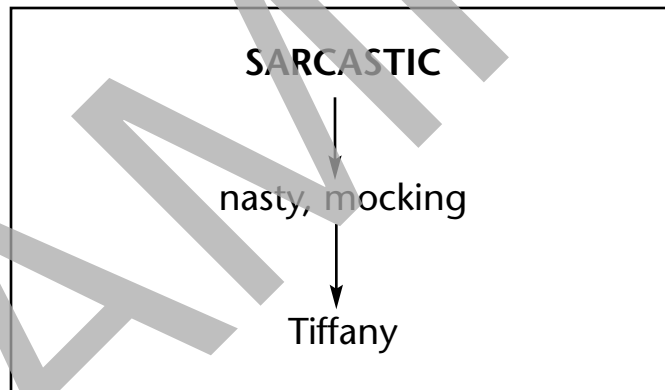
loathe 14  
 disgustedly 21

attitude 16  
 galvanized 22

**Vocabulary Activity**

Have students make up individual vocabulary cards that connect the target word and its definition with something or someone from the student’s personal experience or observation.

For example, if “sarcastic” happens to describe the tone a student’s older sister typically uses, the student’s card might look like this:



**Discussion Questions**

1. Who is telling this story? (Tom) What is he like? How can you tell? (From what he says of himself, we gather that he likes to make models, can be negative, has a sense of humor, isn’t very athletic, is imaginative; his mother says he doesn’t like to try new things; his teacher says he doesn’t work up to capacity.) Would he be a friend of yours?
  
2. How much time has passed since Tom first went to the farm? (five years) Do you think his memories of that time are mostly good ones or mostly bad ones?

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3. Why do Tom's parents want him to go away? (They want to go on a biking trip through Europe.) Do you think they are being unfair to send him somewhere he doesn't want to go? Have you ever been in a situation like that?
  4. According to Tom, why doesn't he want to go to the farm? (He likes the familiarity of home, thinks animals don't like him.) Do you think he is being honest? Would you want to go away to a farm for two months?
  5. How do Tom's parents try to get him to stop complaining about going to the farm? (Each parent tries to convince him that it will be fun, then tries pulling a guilt trip, pointing out that he should allow his parents to have a good time.) Does it work? (He swallows the truth and says that he wants to go.) Do you think they really believe he will have fun? Do they understand how he feels? What should he do?
  6. What are Tom's parents like? (His mother is a teacher, his father a coach; both are athletic and adventuresome.) How is Tom different from them? (He isn't very athletic and doesn't like to try new things.) In what ways would they like him to change? Are you surprised that these parents would have a son like Tom?
  7. How was Tom's model Cessna ruined? (He was happily anticipating work on it when his mother broke the bad news about the farm, spoiling the pleasure.)
  8. Who is Petie? (Tom's best friend) How can you tell that he has a sense of humor? (He makes up a silly headline about how Tom will have to be rescued by a pig.) How can you tell that both Petie's and Tom's imaginations are fed by what they watch on TV and at the movies? (Petie's speculation about what the farm will be like is based on the TV show, *Lassie*, and Tom's fantasy is based on movie westerns.)
  9. Why do you suppose Tom's mother can't pick out "decent" models for Tom? What are some of the things Tom is going to miss by going to the farm? (observing the hornet nest, seeing the house with the secret room, playing with Petie—hiding the Kewpie doll, etc.) Why do you think he passes the time thinking about these depressing things instead of trying to think of things to cheer himself up? Do you ever do that?
  10. **Prediction:** Will Tom have a good time on the farm? How will his aunt and uncle treat him? Will he have a lot of chores?

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### Writing Activities

- a) Describe a time when you just knew ahead of time that you were going to have a rotten time. (Why were you so sure? Did you turn out to be right?)
- b) Tom and Petie have a special friendship. Sometimes their best times together are when they do things that they haven't planned. Describe two or three of your happiest memories of everyday times spent with your best friend.

### Research

Say to students—How can you tell that this story was written during the 1960's and not the 1990's? Find out what "I've Got a Secret" and *Life* (p. 21) were. Use an almanac or other reference tool to make a list of TV programs and magazines that Petie and Tom might have watched during the 1960's.

## Chapters 3-4

### Vocabulary

souvenirs 26  
hilarious 33

dismal 27  
spared 35

sullen 28

control 31

### Vocabulary Activity

1. Have students read the words in context (the sentences in which the words are found and perhaps the ones before and after them).
2. Provide students with questions and statements (incorporating the vocabulary words) that require them to use information from personal experience or observation. For example: "What kinds of **souvenirs** did you think about buying on your last trip?" "If someone told you it was **dismal** outside, what would you expect to see when you looked out the window?" "When is the last time you had a **sullen** expression on your face?" "When do you have a hard time with **control**?" "Write down the most **hilarious** thing you can think of." "Describe a time you were **spared**."
3. Have students pair up, discuss the questions, and respond in writing.

### Discussion Questions

1. How can you tell that Tom's father is trying to cheer him up, on the way to the farm? (He offers to buy him something.) Would you say that Tom is sulking? (He sits in the car with his eyes closed most of the way.)