

Focus **ON READING**

*The Midwife's
Apprentice*

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This is a sample not intended for classroom use.



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Introduction/Classroom Management

WELCOME TO *FOCUS ON READING*

Focus on Reading literature study guides are designed to help all students comprehend and analyze their reading. Many teachers have grappled with the question of how to make quality literature accessible to all students. Students who are already avid readers of quality literature are motivated to read and are familiar with prereading and reading strategies. However, struggling readers frequently lack basic reading skills and are not equipped with the prior knowledge and reading strategies to thoroughly engage in the classroom literature experience.

Focus on Reading is designed to make teachers' and students' lives easier! How? By providing materials that allow all students to take part in reading quality literature. Each *Focus on Reading* study guide contains activities that focus on vocabulary and comprehension skills that students need to get the most from their reading. In addition, each section within the guide contains before-reading **Focus Your Reading** pages containing tools to ensure success: **Vocabulary Words to Know**, **Things to Know**, and **Questions to Think About**. These study aids will help students who may not have the prior knowledge they need to truly comprehend the reading.

USING *FOCUS ON READING*

Focus on Reading is designed to make it easy for you to meet the individual needs of students who require additional reading skills support. Each *Focus on Reading* study guide contains teacher and student support materials, reproducible student activity sheets, an end-of-book test, and an answer key.

- **Focus on the Book**, a convenient reference section for the teacher, provides a brief overview of the entire book including a synopsis, information about the setting, author data, and historical background.
- **Focus Your Knowledge**, a reference page for students, is a whole-book, prereading activity designed to activate prior knowledge and immerse students in the topic.

The study guide divides the novel into 6 manageable sections to make it easy to plan classroom time. Five activities are devoted to each section of the novel.

Before Reading

- **Focus Your Reading** consists of 3 prereading sections:

Vocabulary Words to Know lists and defines 10 vocabulary words students will encounter in their reading. Students will not have to interrupt their reading to look up, ask for, or spend a lot of time figuring out the meaning of unfamiliar words. These words are later studied in-depth within the lesson.

Things to Know identifies terms or concepts that are integral to the reading but that may not be familiar to today's students. This section is intended to "level the playing field" for those students who may not have much prior knowledge about the time period, culture, or theme of the book. It also gets students involved with the book, increasing interest before they begin reading.

Questions to Think About helps students focus on the main ideas and important details they should be looking for as they read. This activity helps give students a *purpose* for reading. The goal of these guiding questions is to build knowledge, confidence, and comfort with the topics in the reading.

During Reading

- **Build Your Vocabulary** presents the 10 unit focus words in the exact context of the book. Students are then asked to write their own definitions and sentences for the words.
- **Check Your Understanding: Multiple Choice** offers 10 multiple-choice, literal comprehension questions for each section.

Check Your Understanding: Short Answer contains 10 short-answer questions based on the reading.

After Reading

- **Deepen Your Understanding** is a writing activity that extends appreciation and analysis of the book. This activity focuses on critical-thinking skills and literary analysis.
- **End-of-Book Test** contains 20 multiple-choice items covering the book. These items ask questions that require students to synthesize the information in the book and make inferences in their answers.

CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT

Focus on Reading is very flexible. It can be used by the whole class, by small groups, or by individuals. Each study guide divides the novel into 6 manageable units of study.

This literature comprehension program is simple to use. Just photocopy the lessons and distribute them at the appropriate time as students read the novel.

You may want to reproduce and discuss the **Focus Your Knowledge** page before distributing the paperbacks. This page develops and activates prior knowledge to ensure that students have a grounding in the book before beginning reading. After reading this whole-book prereading page, students are ready to dive into the book.

The **Focus Your Reading** prereading activities are the keystone of this program. They prepare students for what they are going to read, providing focus for the complex task of reading. These pages should be distributed before students actually begin reading the corresponding section of the novel. There are no questions to be answered on these pages; these are for reference and support during reading. Students may choose to take notes on these pages as they read. This will also give students a study tool for review before the **End-of-Book Test**.

The **Focus Your Reading** pages also provide an excellent bridge to home. Parents, mentors, tutors, or

other involved adults can review vocabulary words with students, offer their own insights about the historical and cultural background outlined, and become familiar with the ideas students will be reading about. This can help families talk to students in a meaningful way about their reading, and it gives the adults something concrete to ask about to be sure that students are reading and understanding.

The **Build Your Vocabulary** and **Check Your Understanding: Multiple Choice** and **Short Answer** activities should be distributed when students begin reading the corresponding section of the novel. These literature guide pages are intended to help students comprehend and retain what they read; they should be available for students to refer to at any time during the reading.

Deepen Your Understanding is an optional extension activity that goes beyond literal questions about the book, asking students for their own ideas and opinions—and the reasons behind them. These postreading activities generally focus on literary analysis.

As reflected in its title, the **End-of-Book Test** is a postreading comprehension test to be completed after the entire novel has been read.

For your convenience, a clear **Answer Key** simplifies the scoring process.

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Focus on the Book

Synopsis

On a cold winter morning in a thirteenth-century English village, the local midwife discovers a girl asleep in a dung heap. The girl, who is known only as Brat, is about twelve or thirteen and has no home or family. Jane the Midwife shrewdly decides to take in the girl and make her a midwife's apprentice, thereby obtaining a source of cheap labor for her bustling business. Now renamed Beetle, the girl spends the next year in the village, learning many of the skills and secrets of the midwife's trade. As she gains self-confidence and maturity, Beetle begins to forge her first friendships and makes keen observations about life in her new home. In her growing quest for self-identity, she even decides to choose her own name—Alyce. A major setback occurs, however, when Alyce is unable to deliver a villager's baby alone. She feels that she is an utter failure and does what she has always done in moments of crisis—run. Alyce flees the village, finding shelter and employment in a small inn several miles away. She passes the winter in despair, taking interest only in a kindly teacher who is staying at the inn and who teaches her the rudiments of reading and writing. As winter turns to spring, Alyce's hope and faith in herself are reborn. Realizing that her "place in the world" is back in the village, working as a midwife's apprentice, she decides to accept her own limitations and move beyond them. As summer begins, Alyce returns to the village with a new sense of purpose and joy in what the future holds.

About the Author

Karen Cushman was born into what she calls "an ethnic working-class Chinese family" in 1941. When she was eleven, her family moved to Los Angeles, California, where she spent her adolescence. Cushman attended Stanford University, graduating in 1963 with a joint degree in English and Greek. Although originally she had thought about becoming an archaeologist, Cushman ended up working at a series of jobs in California, then marrying and moving to Oregon with her husband, Philip. The couple later moved back to California with their daughter, Leah. There they both earned master's degrees—Karen in counseling, Philip in human behavior. Philip went on to earn a doctorate in psychology; since that time he has worked as a

psychotherapist. Karen earned a second master's degree in museum studies. She then joined the graduate department at John F. Kennedy University, where she has taught, edited the museum studies journal, and, for more than a decade, has mentored graduate students through their programs.

Cushman's first book was born, in her words, "from my interest in children and history." *Catherine, Called Birdy* was published in 1994, winning a Newbery Honor and numerous other awards. This success was quickly followed by *The Midwife's Apprentice*, published in 1995; it, too, won great acclaim, including the Newbery Medal. These first two books, meticulously researched, were set in the Middle Ages. Cushman chose to set her third book, *The Ballad of Lucy Whipple* (1996), during the American Gold Rush. All three books feature strong young female protagonists, vivid descriptive passages, an appreciation for the natural world, and humor and compassion for everyday people.

Cushman now spends considerable time visiting schools and talking with students who have read and enjoyed her work. She derives great pleasure from meeting the many children all over the country for whom reading "is a real passion."

Historical Background

Although there is no specific beginning date for the historic period known as the Middle Ages, this era is generally considered to have lasted from the cataclysmic fall of the Roman Empire in the fourth and fifth centuries C.E. until the late fifteenth century, when the Renaissance is officially considered to have begun. During the medieval period, Western Europe slowly moved out of a "dark age" into a period of great economic expansion and cultural rebirth.

The twelfth and thirteenth centuries marked the height of the Middle Ages. During this time (largely as a result of the Crusades), trade routes expanded throughout Europe as well as to North Africa and many parts of the Byzantine Empire. This brought about an influx of new trade goods to Europe—for example, silks, spices, sugar, and dyes from Asia. At this same time, villages were evolving into towns, a fledgling middle class was born, the feudal system was in decline, and a new interest in both scientific and scholarly learning was awakened. In England, the growth of

(continued)

Focus on the Book (continued)

towns led to the development of crafts and the creation of the guild system. The rise of a merchant class meant that there were larger concentrations of people with wealth and a desire for more education. This resulted in the foundation of schools and universities, especially in cathedral towns like Salisbury (which is mentioned in *The Midwife's Apprentice*).

The inhabitants of the small village described in *The Midwife's Apprentice* probably lived in simple houses of one or two rooms with mud-plastered log walls, thatched roofs, and hard-pounded dirt floors. Windows were crude openings in the walls; they were either stuffed with straw or covered by wooden shutters in the cold weather. Most houses had a central fireplace for both heating and cooking. Since there were no chimneys, people's homes tended to be very smoky. Furniture was wooden and of the simplest variety: an unadorned table, a bed or two, some benches, and possibly a storage chest.

The typical diet for a medieval villager consisted of coarse brown bread made from rye or barley, root vegetables, cheese, pottage (a kind of thick soup made

from oats), and ale or beer to drink. Villagers sometimes ate meat (such as mutton or poultry) from animals they raised themselves; they were not allowed to hunt for game, since nearly all of the surrounding land belonged to the nobility.

By the twelfth century, some important agricultural inventions had helped to increase food production—the water mill, the windmill, heavier plows, the collar harness, and horseshoes. Nevertheless, when their crops failed, the peasants and poor villagers starved.

The time during which *The Midwife's Apprentice* is set can be fixed quite accurately. There is a reference in the text to the king, who is called Edward Longshanks; this was a nickname of King Edward I, the oldest son of Henry III. Edward Longshanks (so named because of his extremely long legs) ruled England from 1272 until his death in 1307 C.E. Thus the novel must be set near the end of the High Middle Ages—a period of stability and opportunity that preceded Western Europe's downward spiral into such disasters as the bubonic plague, widespread famine, peasant rebellions, and the Hundred Years' War.

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SAMPLE

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Focus Your Knowledge

The **Middle Ages** spanned many centuries, lasting from about 500 to about 1450 C.E. This era in history arose from the chaos following the fall of the Roman Empire. It ended with the “rebirth” of Western European culture known as the Renaissance.

- Look at a map of the world. Find England. Observe the location of England in relation to continental Europe.
- Now consider the limitations of transportation and communication in the Middle Ages. There were poor roads, crude vehicles powered only by horse or oxen, ships powered only by sail or oars, and no established postal system. How do you think all of these factors might have affected life in medieval England? What impact might these factors have had on trade and communication with other parts of Europe?

The **Crusades** were a series of military expeditions conducted by European Christians to capture the Holy Land in the Middle East from its Muslim occupants. The Crusades took place between the eleventh and the thirteenth centuries, exposing the people of medieval Europe to distant regions and unfamiliar cultures.

- Look again at your world map. How might the Crusades have affected trade and communication routes in Western Europe? What differences could this have made to the lives of everyday people?

Scientific knowledge in the Middle Ages was still very limited. Medieval science was a combination of natural observation, folk wisdom, and superstition. It was still generally believed that all of the other planets revolved around the earth, and that the position of the stars and planets might predict the future. There was no accurate understanding of world geography and most people assumed that the earth was flat. The voyages of discovery made by Columbus, Magellan, and other European explorers had not yet occurred. The existence of the North American continent was still unsuspected. In terms of health, there was no knowledge of germs. People believed that illness was a punishment from God. Treatments for illness tended to consist of herbal remedies, superstitious rituals, and bleeding.

- How do you think the state of scientific knowledge during the Middle Ages would have influenced people of the ruling classes? The newly emerging middle class? The skilled and unskilled laborers? The peasants?

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*Focus Your Reading**Vocabulary Words to Know*

Study the following words and definitions. You will meet these words in your reading. Be sure to jot down in your word journal any other unknown words from the reading.

heedless—careless; not paying attention

unnourished—unfed; lacking the right foods for health and growth

rank—having a very strong, unpleasant odor

wimple—a cloth used to cover a woman’s head in the Middle Ages, leaving only the face exposed

midwife—a woman who specializes in helping women in childbirth

apprentice—someone who is learning a particular craft or skill from an experienced practitioner

cockeyed—crooked; tilted to one side

lest—in case; fearing that

embers—the still-hot remains of a fire; glowing pieces of coal or wood

stanching—stopping the flow of a liquid, often blood or tears

Things to Know

Here is some background information about this section of the book.

Midwives were important members of the medieval community. Especially in smaller towns and villages where other medical help was not available, the midwife was in great demand as the local childbirth “expert.” She provided mothers-to-be with advice and herbal treatments during their pregnancies. She gave comfort and professional help during labor and delivery.

Apprentices served an important function in the medieval economy. An apprentice was a trainee who served under a master craftsman or merchant. The training period could last two to seven years. The apprentice then became a journeyman until he or she was accepted into a guild.

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Hygiene in the Middle Ages was limited. Many local water supplies were polluted by sewage from nearby towns and villages, making clean water scarce. Bathing was also rare, since many people believed that it could expose them to illness.

Ale (and beer) were commonly drunk by people of all ages in medieval times. Because of their chemical makeup, these beverages were actually safer to drink than untreated water. Ale tended to have a relatively low alcohol content, so it was consumed even by young children.

Fleabane was a powdery substance that came from a wildflower (*Erigeron*). People in the Middle Ages believed that it drove away fleas, which were a serious nuisance in most households.

Focus Your Reading

Questions to Think About

The following questions will help you understand the meaning of what you read. You do not have to write out the answers to these questions. Instead, look at them before you begin reading, and think about them while you are reading.

1. The *setting* is the time and place of a book. What clues in the text help you form an idea about the setting?

2. What are living conditions like for the main characters?

3. As the story unfolds, how does the author show that Brat/Beetle is quite intelligent?

4. What role does the cat play in Beetle's first weeks in the village?

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5. What role does the midwife play both in Beetle's life and in the life of the village as a whole?

Build Your Vocabulary

Read the sentences below. On the line, write your definition of the word in bold type. Then, on another sheet of paper, use that word in a new sentence of your own.

1. “But the girl noticed and, on that frosty night, burrowed deep into the warm, rotting muck, **heedless** of the smell.”

heedless: _____

2. “In any event, the dung heap probably smelled little worse than everything else in her life—the food scraps scavenged from kitchen yards, the stables and sties she slept in when she could, and her own unwashed, **unnourished**, unloved, and unlovely body.”

unnourished: _____

3. “. . .dearly would she have loved to eat a turnip without the mud of the field still on it or sleep in a barn fragrant with new hay and not the **rank** smell of pigs who fart when they eat too much.”

rank: _____

4. “An important-looking woman, with a sharp nose . . . and a **wimple** starched into sharp pleats.”

wimple: _____

5. “And there was more work, . . . washing her linen in the stream and carrying her bundles to those cottages where a new baby was expected, for the sharp lady was a **midwife**.”

midwife: _____

6. “Beetle soon acquired a new name, the midwife’s **apprentice**, and a place to sleep that smelled much better than the dung heap, though it was much less warm.”

apprentice: _____

7. “. . .his whiskers were **cockeyed**, going up on one side and down on the other, giving him a frisky, cheerful look.”

cockeyed: _____

8. “She . . . suffered their pinching and poking and spitting in silence, **lest** her resistance inspire them to greater torments.”

lest: _____

9. “Each morning Beetle started the fire, blowing on the night’s **embers** to encourage them to light the new day’s scraps.”

embers: _____

10. “Beetle carried the basket with the clean linen, ragwort and columbine seeds to speed the birth, cobwebs for **stanching** blood, . . . and mistletoe and elder leaves against witches.”

stanching: _____

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Check Your Understanding

Multiple Choice

Circle the letter of the best answer to each question.

1. In the beginning of this story, approximately how old is Brat?
 - a. ten or eleven
 - b. eleven or twelve
 - c. twelve or thirteen
2. What memories does Brat have of her early childhood?
 - a. She has no memories at all.
 - b. She remembers her mother's singing.
 - c. She remembers a warm cottage but no mother.
3. What does Beetle do when she goes with the midwife to a birth?
 - a. She waits outside the house.
 - b. She helps the midwife give herbs and medicines to the laboring woman.
 - c. She discusses the midwife's price.
4. How does Brat think the woman in the starched wimple looks when she first meets her?
 - a. cruel
 - b. important
 - c. kind
5. Why does the midwife change Brat's name to Beetle?
 - a. because Brat reminds her of a burrowing dung beetle
 - b. because Brat scurries across the barn just like a beetle
 - c. because she is as tough as a dung beetle's shell
6. Why doesn't Beetle leave bread and cheese for the cat more often?
 - a. because the cat is not in the neighborhood very often
 - b. because the cat's owner doesn't want other people feeding him
 - c. because Beetle rarely has enough food even for herself
7. What do the village boys do to the cat?
 - a. They make him race across the river with an eel to see who can swim faster.
 - b. They put him into a sack with an eel and throw them into the river.
 - c. They put him into a sack with Beetle and throw them into the river.
8. What does Beetle do on Lady Day?
 - a. She must work as she does every day.
 - b. She is allowed to rest, and she gets extra bread and cheese.
 - c. She goes to the fair with the midwife.
9. What are two reasons for Jane's having chosen to become a midwife?
 - a. She was an apprentice in her youth, and she has given birth to six children.
 - b. She goes to Mass every Sunday, and the village is willing to pay for her training.
 - c. She has strong hands, and she has clean fingernails.
10. What two things "curse her life" and keep Brat moving on?
 - a. hunger and cold
 - b. hunger and the teasing boys
 - c. the need for a job and a good bath

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Check Your Understanding

Short Answer

Write a short answer for each question.

1. How does the dung heap smell to Brat on the frosty night when the story begins?
2. How has Brat existed up to the time the story begins?
3. What kind of boys pick on Brat, and why?
4. What does the midwife first think about Brat when she meets her?
5. What does Brat do with the nest of frozen baby mice she finds?
6. How does Brat rescue the cat after the boys throw him into the river?
7. How does Jane the midwife perform her job?
8. What chores does Beetle have to do each morning?
9. What does Beetle begin to think about why the midwife won't let her stay inside when a baby is born?
10. How do the villagers feel about Jane?

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Deepen Your Understanding

Description is how an author creates pictures with words to tell readers about the people, places, and events in a story. Carefully chosen adjectives, nouns, and verbs can help readers form detailed images in their minds about the story.

In the first three chapters of *The Midwife's Apprentice*, how does the author create detailed pictures—sometimes with only one sentence—of key characters like Beetle, the midwife, the village boys, and even the cat? How does she evoke the sights and smells of village life? Give specific examples of description from the book.

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