

Focus **ON READING**

*When Zachary
Beaver Came
to Town*

MARY RICH

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 a before-reading **Focus Your Reading** page 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

Toby finds life in Antler, Texas, boring—until the summer of 1971. This is the summer that his mother leaves town to enter a singing contest in Nashville—and doesn't come home. It is also the summer that Zachary Beaver, billed as the fattest boy in the world, makes a stop in Antler. And it is the summer that his best friend's brother is killed in the Vietnam War.

Toby, understandably, has great difficulty in accepting the fact that his mother has left him and his father. At first, Toby fantasizes that maybe she really is going to make it big as a country singer, and that he will travel the country with her. He eventually understands that she is not coming home, and he is not going to her. His anger makes life with his father difficult for them both. But during this time, Toby learns a lot about his father. He also learns that his mother's views about people and about life were only one perspective; there are other ways of looking at things.

Toby and his best friend, Cal, befriend the enormously fat Zachary Beaver, a sideshow act who winds up staying for several weeks in Antler. Toby learns empathy and kindness from dealing with the defensive Zachary. When Toby and Cal decide to take Zachary to the drive-in movies, they endure stares and jokes alongside Zachary. They expand his narrow horizon and help him experience some of normal life.

The loss of Wayne, Cal's brother, puts a strain on their friendship, because Toby is unable to support Cal during this crisis. Toby struggles with Wayne's death, as well as the absence of his mother. He and Cal make up, and Toby comes to understand Cal as a deeper person than he had thought.

When Toby and Cal see Zedha, he get baptized—the mother's dying wish—Toby is cleansed as well. He is able to forgive his mother, and he writes his first letter

to her since she left home. By the end of the book, Toby is actually able to be happy again.

About the Author

Kimberly Willis Holt is the author of *My Louisiana Sky* and *Keeper of the Night*, as well as *When Zachary Beaver Came to Town*. She is the daughter of a military man and has lived in many places, including Louisiana, France, and Guam. She enjoys writing from the perspective of young adults and concentrates on the coming-of-age story. Ms. Holt claims that her favorite part of the writing process is rewriting. The idea for *Zachary Beaver* was born when she visited the Louisiana State Fair and paid to see “the fattest teenage boy in the world.”

When Zachary Beaver Came to Town has won much acclaim, including the National Book Award.

Historical Background

The setting of *When Zachary Beaver Came to Town* is the small town of Antler, Texas, in the summer of 1971. Numerous period references appear in the book, including some to *The Flip Wilson Show*, Tammy Wynette, the Grand Ole Opry, and, of course, the Vietnam War.

The United States was directly involved in Vietnam from 1965 to 1973. An important character in the book, Wayne, never appears in person because he is away fighting. He is killed in action and is one of 56,000 Americans who died in the conflict. The controversy surrounding the longest war in American history is evident in an anecdote a local tells about a young man who returned home from duty to spitting and insults. In his last letter home, Wayne confides that the war is unpopular in Vietnam, and the soldiers are not welcomed even by those they are supposed to be helping.

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Focus Your Knowledge

When Zachary Beaver Came to Town takes place in the small town of Antler, Texas, over the summer of 1971. It is the story of a boy who learns a lot about himself and other people through some difficult times. Friendship and communication are both important in this book.

- Look at a map of the United States and find Texas. In what region of the country is this state located?
- Now look for Nashville, Tennessee. How far is Nashville from the panhandle of Texas?
- What was going on in the world in 1971? Your parents, teacher, or other adults might have information about this.
- What do you know about the Vietnam War? What was the attitude in your town toward the war? Do you know of any veterans from your town who fought in that war?
- Zachary Beaver, a character in the book, is called “the fattest boy in the world.” People pay two dollars to walk through his trailer and stare at him. How do you think you would feel if you were Zachary? How would you feel if you saw him?
- Many people in *When Zachary Beaver Came to Town* have dreams of what they would like to do with their lives. How important do you think dreams are in life? What are your dreams? Do you think the older people you know had or have dreams? If so, what are they?
- There are many ways to communicate: by speaking, writing e-mails, reading books, writing in a journal, writing letters, leaving voice mail, and so forth. In 1971, not all of these methods of communication existed. Writing letters was more common then than now. Think about how often you write letters. How do you feel when you write a letter? How do you feel when you receive one? What are the advantages and disadvantages to letters versus other types of communication?

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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.

mutter—say in a low voice

revival—a highly emotional religious meeting

sparse—not thickly grown

vacant—empty

defies—resists; withstands

griped—complained

frantically—fast, anxiety-driven action

accelerates—speeds up

resuscitation—the act of reviving from apparent death or unconsciousness

oblivious—completely unaware

Things to Know

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

Texas is a large Southern state that borders Mexico. *When Zachary Beaver Came to Town* takes place in Texas.

Thunderbirds and **Mustangs** were popular sporty cars.

Tammy Wynette was a very popular country singer who came from humble roots. She eventually packed up her family to move to Nashville to fulfill her dream of becoming a country singer. She was elected to the Country Music Hall of Fame shortly after her death in 1998.

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The **Grand Ole Opry** is a live radio show that began in 1925 under a different name. It became so popular that it has changed venues (places) several times. It began as a studio show, but a live audience was soon invited to add excitement to the show.

The **cotton gin**, invented by Eli Whitney in 1793, separates hulls, seeds, and other unwanted material from cotton fibers. This invention greatly speeded up the processing of cotton and made the crop profitable.

A **sheriff** is an official who handles judicial duties. In *When Zachary Beaver Came to Town*, Sheriff Fetterman serves as the local policeman.

Focus Your Reading *(continued)*

Paulie Rankin acts like a **carnival barker**, someone who advertises at the entrance to a show. In this case, Zachary Beaver is the show.

Casey Kasem and **Wolfman Jack** were DJs on pop music stations.

Dry goods include clothing, fabrics, and other household items that are not hardware or groceries. A dry goods store is a general store.

Shriners are members of a men's group that supports charities.

Ebenezer **Scrooge** is the main character in Charles Dickens's novel *A Christmas Carol*. Scrooge is a miser, or someone who piles up his money and spends very little.

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. How is Toby's family different from Cal's family?
2. How are Toby's parents different from each other?
3. How does Toby feel about Antler, Texas?
4. How important are dreams in life?
5. How do people react to Zachary Beaver?

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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. “‘Fatty, fatty, two by four,’ Tara chimes . . .

‘Shut up, squirt,’ I **mutter**.”

mutter: _____

2. “. . . and when people exit the trailer, some come out all quiet like they’ve been to a **revival**. A few say things like, ‘Lord-a-mercy!’”

revival: _____

3. “Because of the breaks, it’s not as flat and **sparse** as most of the Panhandle. Most Panhandle towns don’t have trees unless someone planted them, but Antler has plenty of elms and cedars.”

sparse: _____

4. “Our town’s population has been shrinking. . . . A lot of the stores are **vacant**.”

vacant: _____

5. “. . . Mom puts so much hair spray on hers it **defies** any Panhandle wind. . . .”

defies: _____

6. “Dad always **griped** at the way Mom never kept enough groceries in the house.”

griped: _____

7. “. . . Kate failed the driving test because she can’t parallel park. Now she **frantically** looks from the rearview mirror to the side mirror, inching the car backward.”

frantically: _____

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8. “He waves again, sucks in his big gut, and **accelerates** like he’s on a Harley-Davidson.”

accelerates: _____

9. “The lifeguard got excited and yanked me out of the pool and did mouth-to-mouth **resuscitation**.”

resuscitation: _____

10. “Billy sleeps on the couch, **oblivious** to the music and the growl of the machine.”

oblivious: _____

Check Your Understanding

Multiple Choice

Circle the letter of the best answer to each question.

- Where is Toby's mother?
 - Amarillo
 - Nashville
 - Austin
- How did Cal get his black tooth?
 - from a football injury
 - from his sister hitting him
 - from a bicycle accident
- Who is Scarlett Stalling?
 - a beautiful girl who Toby likes
 - the next-door neighbor
 - a waitress at the Bowl-a-Rama
- Who is Juan?
 - the owner of the Bowl-a-Rama
 - Scarlett's boyfriend
 - Tara's babysitter
- What does Cal's brother Wayne write about in his letters from Vietnam?
 - home
 - the war
 - his girlfriend
- Why is Zachary Beaver on display?
 - He has a dog with two heads.
 - He has two heads.
 - He is the fattest boy in the world.
- What is noticeable about Zachary's trailer?
 - It is very clean.
 - It is very dirty.
 - It is painted black.
- Besides being the postmaster, what job does Toby's father do?
 - He is a cook at the Bowl-a-Rama.
 - He sells snow cones in the summer.
 - He is a worm farmer.
- What do people in town say about how Ferris got his limp?
 - that he shot himself in the leg to avoid going to war
 - that it was an accident that happened while he was cleaning his gun
 - that one of the sheriff's dogs injured him badly
- What does Toby keep track of on his calendar?
 - the days until his mother comes home
 - the days until he can release the ladybugs
 - the days until Wayne comes home

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Check Your Understanding

Short Answer

Write a short answer for each question.

1. How did Toby's mother get to Nashville?
2. Why does Scarlett come over to Toby while he waits in line at the trailer?
3. What does Cal do when he gets into Zachary Beaver's trailer and sees him?
4. How does Zachary react when he realizes that Tara has had an accident in his trailer?
5. What does Miss Myrtie Mae ask Zachary Beaver?
6. What makes Juan different from the other boys?
7. Why has the number of people in Antler dropped?
8. What is the free entertainment at the Bowl-a-Rama?
9. From your reading so far, how is Toby like his father?
10. From your reading so far, how is Toby like his mother?

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Deepen Your Understanding

Setting means the time and place of a story. The author tells the place of the setting in the very first sentence of the book. Other parts of the setting she leaves for the reader to figure out. She gives many clues.

List the time clues you find in Chapters One through Four. These may include dates, details about dress, transportation, jobs, and other things that may change over time.

Look at the clues you listed. When do you think this story takes place? How does Toby's life compare with yours?

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