

Take 5: Ideas for Independent/Home Learning

The Midnight Fox by Betsy Byars (Faber & Faber)



1. Explore it

Read the extract from the book below, thinking about what is happening and the characters you meet:

The evening before I went to the farm, my friend Petie came over and we sat on the steps without saying anything. Usually we talked all the time, but that evening we just sat there and watched an ant on Petie's sneaker. Petie was transferring the ant from one sneaker to the other, crossing his legs all kinds of different ways, so that no matter which way the ant ran he was always on a sneaker. This ant must have thought, Wow! There are one thousand boys in sneakers lined up here and I will never get to the end of them.

Well, Petie got tired and let the ant get off his sneaker and run into the grass. I could just see that ant running home and his wife saying, 'Why, you must have had a terrible day. You look awful!'

And this ant says crossly, 'Well, you wouldn't look so good either if you had run across one thousand boys!'

Then Petie said, 'I wish I could go to the farm.'
'You don't either, Petie Burkis.'

'Well, I wish I could go to the same farm you're going to. It's not going to be so much fun here by myself, you know.'

'It'll be more fun than at the farm.'

'I guess, I saw this TV show about a farm one time,'
Petie said, 'and this city kid comes to the farm for a visit and gets lost.'

'So what happened?'

'Well, fortunately for this city kid, Lassie lived on this farm, so somebody said, "Go find him, Lassie, go find the little lost city kid."'

'And did she find him?'

'Well, I turned to something else myself, but I think it's a pretty safe guess that she did.'

We sat in silence for a few minutes and then I said, 'I'll probably get lost on the farm.'

'You probably will.'

'Only there won't be any Lassie to come find me.'

'Yeah, but there'll probably be some other kind of animal, like a real smart horse —'

'Or a pig,' I said disgustedly.

'Yeah, there'll be a real smart little pig, and somebody will say, "Go find him, Piggie, go find the city kid," and Piggie will find you and the next day there'll be headlines all over the world: BOY RESCUED FROM DEATH BY PIGGIE.' Petie was going to be a reporter when he grows up, so he was good at doing headlines.

'Hey,' Petie said now, 'maybe you'll get to be on I've Got a Secret and your secret will be —'

'I was rescued by a piggie,' we said together.

'They'd guess it right away though. But you could still sell your story to Life.'

'Yeah.'

We didn't say anything then, because for a minute it had been like old times and we had forgotten that I had to go to the farm. Now we remembered and were quiet. Finally Petie said, 'Well, I have to go.'

What do you think is happening in this extract? Who are the central characters? Can you summarise what you've read in a couple of sentences?

Think about the narrator Tom and his friend Petie. What do you think you know about them, their friendship, the circumstances of this meeting, and what is about to happen in the story? What can you tell about Tom's life? How would you describe him? How do you think he feels about going to the farm? Where and when do you think this story might be set? What clues do you find in the text?

Re-read the extract and think about how this story opening makes you feel. What do you like or dislike about it? Does it remind you of anything you know from stories or real life? How? Think about how it is written. Do any parts really stick in your mind? Which words and phrases do you like best? What do you like about them? Do they look or sound interesting? Do they help you make a picture in your mind?

2. Illustrate it

Re-read the passage, or ask someone to read it to you, or maybe record it for yourself so you can play it over again. After you have read the extract a few times, think about what you can see in your imagination, whatever stood out most to you. Then take a pen or pencil and a bit of scrap paper. You can use the back of an old envelope, letter or cereal packet; whatever is to hand if you don't have paper. Draw what you see in your mind's eye; anything that captures the place and the mood of this extract. Did you draw the boys talking; Tom's imagined rescue by Lassie or the pig; a sketch of the newspaper front page; or maybe you drew the sneakers from the ant's eye-view? Remember, everyone has their own ideas and imagines things their own way. This is a good thing! Add any words and phrases that have helped you make your picture, which might come from the passage or from your own imagination.

3. Talk about it

- Think about this sentence: **'Usually we talked all the time, but that evening we just sat there and watched an ant on Petie's sneaker.'** What does this tell us about the boys' relationship and how they feel about what is about to happen?
- How do you think Tom feels about his parents sending him to stay on the farm? Why do you think he feels this way?
- Do you know who or what **'Lassie'** is? Read the first paragraph of this description if you or no-one in your family has heard of Lassie before: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lassie_\(1954_TV_series\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lassie_(1954_TV_series)) Why do you think Petie shares this story with Tom? What do you think he might be trying to say to his friend?

4. Imagine it

Tom and Petie were looking forward to spending the summer holidays together, and now discover they are about to spend them apart. How do you think they were hoping to spend the summer? What kind of things do you think they normally spend their free time doing?

Have you ever been separated from a friend, perhaps during the summer holidays or for some other reason? How did it make you feel? What do you miss most about your friends when you don't see them? Do you have a particular friend you especially enjoy being with? Why? Think about your own friends and times you have been separated from them: what do you most enjoy doing together? What do you miss most when they are not there?

5. Create it

As the boys observe the ant, Tom imagines things from the insect's perspective, but gives it the ability to experience and voice human emotions. Find an area in your home or garden, if you have one, and imagine you are a tiny creature — an ant, spider, or fly — navigating the enormous obstacles a human home includes: it could be the bathroom, with wide areas of glistening white porcelain, the living room with a deep, impenetrable forest of carpet, or the duvet in your bedroom, a soft undulating landscape spreading as far as the eye can see. What do you think it would be like to travel across these landscapes? What might be the challenges and dangers, and what the rewards? What do you think it might be like to explore a human home? Write about your travels from this different perspective, for someone else to read. You may choose to do this in drawing and writing, or on the computer if you have access to one.