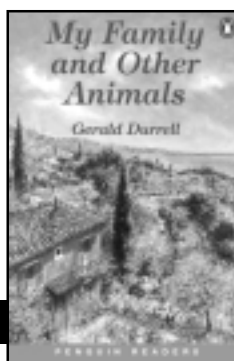


Teacher's notes

My Family and Other Animals

by Gerald Durrell



SUMMARY

One day the grey English skies are too depressing for the Durrell family and they decide to move somewhere hotter. They sell the house they have just bought and move to Corfu, an island to the west of mainland Greece. None of them speaks Greek but that does not worry them. A local taxi driver who has spent eight years in Chicago makes friends with them and looks after them. Mrs Durrell wants a villa with a bathroom and the taxi driver finds them the only one on Corfu. They settle down. They meet all sorts of people on the island, and friends come and go from England.

Gerald, the youngest member of the family, turns the family villa into a zoo, bringing in a tortoise named Achilles, scorpions, snakes, two baby magpies and a seagull named Alecko. One funny story follows another, as the rest of the family meet dangerous animals in unexpected places around the house at any time of the day or night.

ABOUT GERALD DURRELL

Gerald Durrell was born in 1925 in India, and was the youngest of four children. From the age of two he knew that he wanted to be a naturalist (somebody who studies plants and animals). His first word was 'zoo'.

Durrell never knew his father, who died when he was a baby. The family returned to England when Gerald was three, but after a few years they found the grey skies and summer rain too depressing. So they sold the family home and moved to Corfu, in Greece. For Gerald, now aged 10, this was paradise - a green and beautiful island with a very small population of humans and a very large population of animals, insects and plants. Gerald spent hours wandering over the hills and by the sea, turning over stones to look for insects and building up his collection of 'small uglies' - things like scorpions and spiders. This was the beginning of a lifetime as a naturalist.

After five wonderful years, Mrs Durrell felt that Gerald needed some serious teaching. This was 1939 and war was breaking out across Europe so the Durrells returned to England.

When the war was over, Durrell spent a year at one of England's most important zoos - Whipsnade Zoo - as a student keeper. In 1947 he used the little money he had to pay for his first expedition to collect animals from the wild.

He returned from the Cameroons in Africa with over 100 animals for British zoos. But after three trips his money ran out. His brother Larry, now himself a successful writer, suggested that Gerald write about his experiences. And so his first book came out, *The Overloaded Ark*. It received nothing but praise in both America and Britain. Other successful books followed, including *My Family and Other Animals* in 1956.

Durrell formed close relationships with the animals he brought back. He found that just when the animal had learned to trust him and to act naturally in his company, he had to give it up to a zoo. The only answer was to set up his own zoo, which he did on the British island of Jersey in 1959. The Jersey Zoo was the first in the world to breed animals in captivity to save them from extinction. Durrell dedicated his life to preserving animals in danger.

Throughout his life, Durrell travelled the world, studying and collecting animals. He and his wife made the first of many television programmes in 1962 about a trip to New Zealand. But his life was not always easy. He had to fight more traditional zoos to get them to accept his ideas about saving species. He also suffered from ill-health, from diseases that he caught during his early expeditions to Africa.

Durrell has been described as 'one of the first people to wake the world up to what was happening to the environment. His books and programmes helped a whole new generation of environmentalists come into being.' He died in 1995.

BACKGROUND AND THEMES

Gerald Durrell had a very unconventional childhood. He had a series of tutors but almost no formal schooling. However, his five years in Corfu, much of it spent with his scientist friend, Theodore, who appears in the story, provided the perfect education for a naturalist.

Corfu lies between the heel of Italy and the western coast of mainland Greece in the Ionian sea. Life there in the 1930s was very different from life today. It was very remote and the days were very quiet. People's lives were ruled by the weather and the seasons. The Durrells must have seemed a very strange and unconventional family to the local people. Corfu was one of the first islands to attract holiday-makers, who began to arrive in large

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PRE-INTERMEDIATE

MY FAMILY AND OTHER ANIMALS



Teacher's notes

numbers in the 1960s, perhaps partly encouraged by Gerald and Lawrence Durrell's enchanting descriptions of the island. Travel writing raises an interesting ethical issue - writing about a beautiful, unspoilt part of the earth always attracts people to it, and those very people begin to destroy it.

As well as being a collection of funny stories, *My Family and Other Animals* is an interesting look at a family growing up. It shows us how five very different people with very different interests can live together. Their experiences together prepare them for living in the outside world. For example, when Larry laughs at Leslie and says that anyone can shoot, the family make him prove his words. Then of course his attempts to shoot a bird end in disaster when he falls into a pool and spends the next 24 hours in bed. Families can be honest with each other in a way that friends cannot.

The most important theme in all of Gerald Durrell's writing is the relationship between humans and animals. In his book *A Zoo in my Luggage*, Durrell writes, 'To me the [destruction] of an animal species is a criminal offence, in the same way as the destruction of anything we cannot recreate or replace, such as a Rembrandt [a famous painting] or the Acropolis [in Athens].' Underlying all his life's work was the philosophy that humans must respect, understand, care for and protect all the other species on the earth.

Communicative activities

The following teacher-led activities cover the same sections of text as the exercises at the back of the reader, and supplement those exercises. For supplementary exercises covering shorter sections of the book, see the photocopiable Student's Activities pages of this Factsheet. These are primarily for use with class readers but, with the exception of discussion and pair/groupwork questions, can also be used by students working in a self-access centre.

ACTIVITIES BEFORE READING THE BOOK

Write these new words on the board. Discuss their meanings with the class.

beetle, cab, insect, matchbox, microscope, pigeon, spots, string, tortoise, villa

Divide the class into two teams. Give each student in each team a letter starting from A (A, B, C, etc). Student A from Team A gives a meaning without saying the word. Student A from Team B says the word. If both are right, both score a point. If the definition is wrong, Team B scores a point. If the answer is wrong, Team A scores a point. Student B from Team B then gives a definition. And so on.

ACTIVITIES AFTER READING A SECTION

Part 1: Chapters 1-5

Put students into pairs or groups of three. Tell them to plan a school timetable for Gerry. They decide which subjects he needs to learn and who will teach him each subject. They decide how many hours a day he needs to study and how much free time he can have. Pairs/groups then compare timetables by asking and answering

questions. Examples: *Is he doing French? Who is teaching him?*

Finish with a whole-class discussion. Have they all given him a normal week's schooling or have they been more adventurous?

Part 2: Chapters 6-9

Put students into pairs or groups of three. They imagine they are at Gerry's birthday party. Each student chooses to be someone at the party. In their pair or group they work out a short conversation at the party. It can be about anything they like. When everyone is ready, groups act their conversations in turn, one conversation following on immediately from the next.

Part 3: Chapters 10-12

Have a quiz! First, look through the book and write 20 questions. For example:

What month is it when the Durrells decide to leave England?

What colour is their first villa?

Divide the class into two teams. Ask each team a question in turn. Teams score two points if they get their own question right. They score one point if the other team can't answer a question and they can.

ACTIVITIES AFTER READING THE BOOK

Tell students something about Gerald Durrell's work as a naturalist and zoo-keeper (See *About the author and Background and themes* in this Factsheet). Then have a class debate (discussion). Divide the class into two. Write this question on the board: 'Are zoos a good idea?' One half of the class thinks zoos are a good idea. The other half thinks zoos are a bad idea. Give them time to prepare their thoughts. Help them with ideas if necessary. Then one student from each side speaks in turn. Have a vote at the end.

Glossary

It will be useful for your students to know the following new words. They are practised in the 'Before You Read' sections of exercises at the back of the book. (Definitions are based on those in the Longman Active Study Dictionary.)

Chapters 1-5

beetle (n) an insect (see below) with a hard round black back

cab (n) a taxi

insect (n) a very small animal with six legs

matchbox (n) a small box with matches in it

microscope (n) this helps you to see very small things by making them look much bigger

pigeon (n) a grey bird with short legs that is often seen in towns

spot (n) a small round red place on your skin

string (n) this is long and thin and used for tying things

tortoise (n) an animal that is covered with a very hard shell (outside) and moves very slowly

villa (n) a light pretty house

Chapters 6-9

mud (n) wet earth

scorpion (n) a small animal which hurts you with its tail; it lives in hot countries

snake (n) a very long thin animal without legs

Chapters 10-12

cage (n) a box in which birds are kept

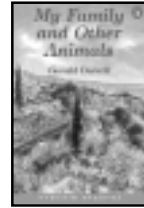
magpie (n) a black and white bird with a long tail

zoo (n) a place where different animals are kept for people to look at



Student's activities

My Family and Other Animals



Photocopiable

Students can do these exercises alone or with one or more other students. Pair/group-only activities are marked.

Activities before reading the book

- Look at these words. Put a circle round the things which are alive.
 microscope spots insect matchbox
 pigeon cab tortoise villa
 string beetle
- Read the introduction on page v of your book. Who takes what to Corfu?
 Mother books
 Leslie insects
 Margo cook books
 Larry something for spots
 Gerald guns
 Roger, the dog

Activities while reading the book

LARRY'S IDEA

- Everyone in the family has a good reason to go to Corfu. Join the beginnings and ends of these sentences.
 - Mother and I ...
 - Leslie ...
 - My sister Margo ...
 - Larry ...
 - found the rest of us difficult to live with.
 - had a problem with his ears.
 - had terrible spots.
 - had bad colds.
- Do you think they always do what Larry wants?
 Yes [] No []
- As they come near to Corfu ...
 - what do they see?
 - what do they hear?

PART 1: CHAPTERS 1-5

Chapter 1

- You are standing at the door of the Pension Suisse when the Durrells arrive outside. Describe what you see. Write four or more sentences.
- These are some of the things that Spiro says. Can you correct his English?
 - 'Why's don'ts yous have someones who can talks your own language?'
 - 'Wheres yous wants to gos?'
 - 'English always wants bathrooms ... I gets a bathrooms in my house ...'
 - 'They alls calls me Spiro Americano because I lives in America.'

Chapter 2

Imagine you are a visitor at the Durrell's villa.

- What sound will you hear in the garden?
- What will you smell in the house?

- Who will you only see at mealtimes?
- If you go for a walk in the garden, who will you fall over?
- If you want to enjoy the sun, who can you talk to?

Chapter 3

- Work with a partner. Look at page 8 where Gerald meets the Rose-beetle man. Imagine that the Rose-beetle man can speak English. Have their conversation. Start like this:
Rose-beetle man: Good morning, young man. Would you like to buy a rose-beetle?
Gerald: Good morning. Why are the beetles on strings?
- Match the animals and the descriptions.

Roger	Achilles	Quasimodo
he sat quietly while Gerry looked at insects	he ate from their hands	he practised climbing on bodies lying in the sun
he sang and danced and loved music	he ran behind them when they went for walks	he was a she
he was a perfect friend for an adventure	he came when they called his name	he/she became wild and difficult

Chapter 4

- Circle the things that Gerry's family think he needs to learn.
 singing shooting handwriting English dancing
 Greek French history drawing the natural world
- What do you think is the most important thing that George teaches Gerry?
- Look at Gerry's notes about the Corfu spider. Write in the information.

Name of animal:
Description of home:
Food:
How it gets food:

- Look at the note from Theodore on page 12. Write Gerry's note back to him.

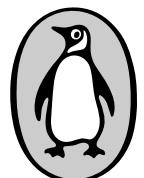
Chapter 5

Answer these questions.

- Why does Larry want his mother to hide her detective stories?
- Do you think Larry is easy or difficult to live with?
- Mother says, 'We are not going to move to another house.' What do you think they are going to do?

PRE-INTERMEDIATE

MY FAMILY AND OTHER ANIMALS



Student's activities

PART 2: CHAPTERS 6-9

Chapter 6

Look at the picture on page 17.

Put a cross (X) by the things that have happened.

Put a tick (✓) by the things that are going to happen.

- Margo screams.
- Larry feels something on his hand, looks down and screams.
- Mother agrees that the babies must not die.
- The mother scorpion climbs on Larry's hand.
- Roger bites Lugaretzia on the leg.
- Lugaretzia drops a plate.
- Gerry picks them up on a spoon and puts them back in the garden wall.
- The scorpion is angry and runs towards Leslie.
- Gerry leaves his matchbox on the sitting room table.
- Larry picks up the matches to light his cigarette.
- The babies fall off the mother as she lands on the table.
- Margo throws a glass of water at the scorpion.

Now put the sentences in the right order.

Chapter 7

- Answer these questions.
 - Why does Peter spend less time on Gerry's lessons after a few weeks?
 - What mistake does Leslie make about Gerry's birthday present?
 - What are the screams that come from the back of the house for the next two weeks?
 - Each person in the family asks ten people to Gerry's party (but they all ask Theodore). How many people do they invite (not including Spiro and Lugaretzia)?
 - Why does Lugaretzia cry all the way from the town to the villa?
 - Why is Spiro's friend important?
- Leslie gives Gerry a boat for his birthday. What do you think the others give him? Write your ideas. Show them to another student. Are they the same?

Chapter 8

- Who ...
 - wants to shoot Peter?
 - loves Peter?
 - makes sure that Peter does not secretly return to the island?
 - thinks shooting birds is easy?
 - finds that shooting birds is not easy?
 - wakes Larry up and tells him that the room is on fire?
- Why has Larry got a bad headache?
- Look at the picture of Larry's room after the fire on page 25. Describe the room and what everyone is doing.

Chapter 9

Answer these questions.

What do you think Aunt Hermione is like? Write down three things. Show them to a partner. Are your ideas the same?

PART 3: CHAPTERS 10-12

Chapter 10

- Underline the words that are wrong in these sentences. Then put them right.
 - The new villa is as red as blood.
 - Everyone in the family thinks the baby magpies are sweet.
 - The birds are welcome in any room in the house.
 - The magpies throw Mother's papers all over the floor.
 - Larry says he will kiss the magpies if Gerald doesn't do something about them.
- Larry says to his mother, 'You really are a very intelligent woman.' He means the opposite. Can you remember two other times in the story when Larry is very rude to or about his mother?

Chapter 11

The writer says, 'I was lying in the fields one day when I noticed a stranger ...'

Put the verbs in these sentences in the past simple or the past continuous.

- We (walk) down to the sea together when he (tell) me he was a prisoner.
- We (push) his boat into the sea when he (say) he killed his wife.
- I (carry) Alecko home when I (meet) Margo.
- I (show) Alecko to Mother and Margo when Larry (come) in.

Chapter 12

- Make sentences.
 - Margo, Leslie, Gerry and Mother
 - Larry
 - Gerry puts his snakes in the bath
 - The magpies
 - Leslie
 - Two of the visitors scream
 - The party
 - finds the snakes in the bath.
 - doesn't help to get ready for the party.
 - ends happily.
 - drink too much beer.
 - when they find Alecko under the table.
 - because they are too hot.
 - help to get ready for the party.
- Circle the animals that the writer talks about in this chapter.

magpies, dogs, fish, cats, scorpions, horses, snakes, sheep, chickens, tortoises, beetles

THE RETURN

Why does the passport man describe the family as 'One travelling zoo'?

Activities after reading the book

Can you imagine the life of each person in the family when they get back to England? Write a sentence about what each of them will do when they are older: Leslie, Margo, Larry, Gerald.

