



Teacher's Guide for *Danger at the Zoo: A Kit Mystery*

By Kathleen Ernst

(American Girl, 2005)
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Synopsis

In 1935, Kit lands a summer job writing a children's column for her local newspaper. She looks for story ideas at the Cincinnati Zoo, where her friend Stirling works as a guide and her old friend Will, the hobo, has a job cleaning cages. As Kit noses around, she stumbles into some strange activities in the monkey house. Meanwhile, Kit begins to notice small things missing at home, too. It's not long before Will looks like the logical suspect in both places. Can Kit clear her friend--and get a good story in the bargain? Fireworks fly as Kit's mystery is solved at the zoo's grand Fourth of July spectacular.

Activity Suggestions

Note: Ohio (OH) Academic Content Standards refer to 4th grade benchmarks; Wisconsin (WI) Model Academic Standards refer to 4th grade curriculum; National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) Curriculum Standards refer to primary grades; International Reading Association/National Council of Teachers of English (IRA/NCTE) Standards refer to the general standards for English Language Arts.

1. During the Great Depression, zoo managers such as Superintendent Stephan had difficult choices to make. Keepers were beginning to understand the importance of moving animals from concrete-and-bars cages to more natural environments. At the same time, zoo employees were struggling to take care of their families. Lead a discussion, or ask students to make oral presentations, highlighting both sides of the issue. How many students would postpone improvements for the animals in order to pay higher wages? How many believe the money should be spread evenly among animals and people?
 - OH Standards for English Language Arts: 10A, 10E, 10F
 - OH Standards for Social Studies: 4A, 7D
 - WI Standards for Language Arts: C.4.1, C.4.2, C.4.3
 - WI Standards for Social Studies: D.4.1, D.4.2
 - NCSS Standards for Social Studies: 3g, 6h, 8c, 9e,

2. *Danger at the Zoo* is set in 1935, in the middle of the Great Depression. Help students brainstorm different methods historians and authors might use to learn about this time period.

While working on *Danger at the Zoo*, Kathleen Ernst used books, websites, newspapers preserved on microfilm, photographs, postcards and guidebooks from the Cincinnati Zoo, architecture, visits to zoos to learn about animal behavior, and visits to historical museums. Allow students to view the old newspaper clippings and photographs posted at *Danger at the Zoo: The Story Behind the Story*. Follow the link at <http://www.distaff.net/kedanger.htm>.

Then, lead a discussion about how information and ideas from specific newspaper articles and photographs made their way into the novel. How many examples can the students identify?

- OH Standard for English Language Arts: 4C
 - OH Standards for Social Studies: 7A, 7B
 - WI Standard for Language Arts: F.4.1
 - WI Standard for Social Studies: B.4.1
 - IRA/NCTE Standard: 8
3. Follow the brainstorming session in #1 by guiding students through their own exploration of a variety of resources to learn more about the Great Depression. (For online resources, see “For Further Exploration,” below.)

To strengthen the connection between this activity and *Danger at the Zoo*, guide students through the production of a classroom newspaper. Ask each student to choose a topic, research the subject, then write an article about it, just as Kit did in the story. Students might choose kid-focused stories, or they might prefer to look for a serious investigative report.

- OH Standards for English Language Arts: 6A–I, 7D, 8A–D, 9A, 9B
 - OH Standards for Social Studies: 7A, 7B
 - WI Standards for Language Arts: B.4.1, B.4.2, B.4.3, E.4.3, E.4.5, F.4.1
 - NCSS Standard for Social Studies: 5g
 - IRA/NCTE Standards: 1, 3, 4, 5, 7, 8
4. During the Great Depression, hobos like Will served as migrant workers. They traveled the country in search of work, most often finding seasonal jobs on farms. Invite a modern migrant worker to talk with the class, or share a book about today’s migrants with your students. Lead a discussion: what is different about the lives of historical and contemporary migrant workers? What is the same? Ask students to map the journey of migrant workers who visit their area.
- OH Standards for Social Studies: 2A, 3A
 - WI Standards for Social Studies: B.4.3, B.4.4, A.4.4., A.4.5, A.4.7, D.4.3

5. Discuss examples of cooperation and interdependence among individuals and groups found within *Danger at the Zoo*. How did the Great Depression encourage cooperation between people? (Answers might include the need for Kit's family to take in boarders, or the system hobos used to communicate with each other.) How did the economic hardships discourage cooperation? (Answers might include some hobos' distrust of people they met along the way, or that some people with very little money might be less inclined to help others.)
 - OH Standard for Social Studies: 6A
 - WI Standards for Social Studies: B.4.9, E.4.7, E.4.15
 - NCSS Standards for Social Studies: 5d, 6f, 9b

6. *In Danger at the Zoo*, Mr. Barta's inability to communicate effectively made it almost impossible to be understood. In the end, his recognition of Hungarian baked treats called *kiflis* helped Kit guess his ethnic identity. Besides food, what other ways do people express and celebrate their cultural identity? (Examples might include language, stories, folk tales, music, artwork, dance.)
 - OH Standard for Social Studies: 2A
 - WI Standards for Social Studies: E.4.11, E.4.14
 - NCSS Standards for Social Studies: 1c, 9a

7. Lead a discussion: What role did setting play in the novel? How can descriptions of setting be controlled by an author to establish different moods? You may wish to review several passages of the Cincinnati Zoo, such as p. 32, p. 136, pp. 138-139.

The zoo was one of the most important community places in Depression-era Cincinnati. It was a place not only to see animals, but also to listen to opera, go skating, enjoy band and dance performances, and enjoy picnics. What important places for community members exist in your area? Ask students to identify a favorite public place, and write a poem or article or story about it. They may write from their own perspective, or you can ask them to interview others to gain broader perspectives. Or, ask them to describe a place from two different perspectives, using language that is suggestive of two different moods or experiences.

- OH Standards for English Language Arts: 5B, 5G, 6A-I, 8A-D
 - WI Standards Social Studies: A.4.4, A.4.8
 - WI Standards for Language Arts: B.4.1, B.4.2, B.4.3
 - NCSS Standards for Social Studies: 4b, 5c
 - IRA/NCTE Standards 4, 5, 6
8. At the end of *Danger at the Zoo*, Mrs. Dalrymple presented Kit's mother with a quilt. The original pattern, popular during the 1930s, was called "Grandmother's Flower Garden," but Mrs. Dalrymple renamed the quilt "Mrs. Kittredge's Flower Garden" to personalize her gift. Provide students with hexagonal graph paper and let them color and design their own flower garden quilt. Or, ask them to design an original quilt pattern as a gift for someone special in their lives, or to commemorate a special event. Create a paper quilt on a bulletin board by posting the students' work.

For Further Exploration

A factual and colorful exploration of many of these themes can be found in *Welcome to Kit's World, 1934: Growing Up During America's Great Depression*, by Harriet Brown (Pleasant Company Publications: Middleton, WI, 2002).

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www.cincyzoology.org

The zoo's website offers information about their programs and educational offerings.

Library of Congress/American Memory – Farm Security Administration

<http://rs6.loc.gov/ammem/fsahtml/fahome.html>

The photographs of the Farm Security Administration show Americans at home, at work, and at play, with an emphasis on rural and small-town life and the adverse effects of the Great Depression, the Dust Bowl, and increasing farm mechanization. This rich collection provides many opportunities for online study, and inspiration for creative writing projects. It also includes a link to "The Learning Page - Collection Connections," designed to help educators integrate the collection into cross-curricular projects.

The New Deal Network

<http://newdeal.feri.org/default.cfm>

The New Deal Network, an educational guide to the Great Depression, is sponsored by the Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt Institute. Development of the NDN was funded in part by a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities. The site includes lesson plans, photographs, examples of student projects, discussion lists, and other resources.

Author Presentations

Kathleen Ernst offers a variety of programs and presentations for student audiences. Information can be found on her website, www.kathleernerst.com.