The Sheep-Pig

Dick King-Smith

About the author

Dick King-Smith was born in Gloucestershire, England in 1922. Nowadays, he is a successful children’s writer, but he didn’t publish his first story until the relatively late age of 58. Despite getting a late start, King-Smith has published over thirty children’s stories in the past twenty years.

Before becoming a writer, King-Smith fought in World War II as a Grenadier Guard. After concluding his military service, he got married, had children and spent the next twenty years working as a farmer. He then decided to switch careers completely, becoming a teacher in a village primary school for seven years. It was during this period that he wrote his first children’s story. It was so successful that he made the decision to become a freelance writer in 1982.

The Sheep-Pig won an important Children’s Fiction Award, and in 1992, King-Smith was voted Children’s Author of the Year at the British Book Awards. King-Smith says of himself: ‘I came late to writing – after a good long time farming. Later, I taught young children (and have ten grandchildren of my own), and it is their potential enjoyment of a story that makes writing one, for me, so enjoyable.’ The author lives in a seventeenth century cottage near the house in which he was born.

Summary

The Sheep-Pig is an enchanting children’s story about a polite little pig that learns how to look after sheep. Published in 1983, The Sheep-Pig became an instant bestseller, winning a book award for children’s fiction. The captivating and highly successful film Babe, which was based on the book, was released in 1996.

Chapters 1–4

The Sheep-Pig is a farmyard adventure in which the animals have the ability to talk to each other. Farmer Hogget, the owner of the farm, wins a clever little pig in a raffle. The pig’s name is Babe. The farmer’s wife intends to prepare Babe for the family’s Christmas dinner, but Fly, a kindly sheepdog, adopts Babe and begins teaching him how to be a sheepdog.

Chapters 5–12

Babe proves himself to be a hero, protecting Farmer Hogget’s sheep from a band of thieves, and eventually he even manages to win the heart of Mrs Hogget, who gives up her plans to make him into a holiday meal. Farmer Hogget decides to train Babe to be a sheepdog – or rather, a ‘sheep-pig’ – but Babe’s methods of herding sheep are rather unusual. Instead of chasing the sheep, he makes polite requests, and the sheep are so pleased to be asked politely that they obey him. Farmer Hogget is proud of Babe, so he enters the little pig for the sheepdog trials, which he goes on to win.

About the film

The film Babe, released in 1996, was a massive success at the box office. It took the film’s producer and co-writer, George Miller, ten years to translate the story from book to screen. He describes the process as a ‘labour of love’. The film uses all the latest technological developments, employing an extraordinary blending of live animals with ‘animatronics’ (computer animated animals). It is hard to tell the difference between the two types, and the voices are excellent.

The film humorously displays every side of human nature through the animals’ behaviour. Babe’s triumph at the sheepdog trials makes audiences cheer with delight. In addition, it has been said that the film has actually inspired people to eat less pork – since it has shown the world how charming and clever pigs can be!

Background and themes

Write about what you know: Novelists are often advised, ‘If you want to succeed, write about what you know’, and this is certainly good advice in the case of Dick King-Smith and his children’s story, The Sheep-Pig. In fact, all of the author’s most successful stories involve animals or farms. He draws deeply on his own experiences working as...

The Sheep-Pig

a farmer, and his love and knowledge of animals provide his charming tales not only with warmth and humour but also authority.

Making animals seem like humans: King-Smith's talent lies mainly in making animals seem like human beings. However, just as importantly, he tells good adventure stories, which often circle around unlikely heroes who struggle and then triumph against all odds. He narrates his animal tales with an abundance of wit and tenderness, and this compassion is further revealed in the mother-baby relationships that recur throughout his stories. In addition to The Sheep-Pig, the author's most successful stories include The Mouse Butcher, The Hodgeheg, Harry's Mad, Ace and The Cuckoo Child.

Funny – not soppy: Upon publication, The Sheep-Pig was immediately recognised as a modern children's classic. Lying at the heart of the story is a series of charming 'jokes'. For example, one such joke is that the animals have the ability to talk to each other in a genuinely sweet and polite way. Fly the sheepdog is kind to Babe, and Babe is kind in turn to the sheep. However, it is very difficult to write this kind of story without coming across as soppy or overindulgent, and yet King-Smith manages to maintain the necessary balance. Another joke central to the story is that Babe unwittingly 'saves his own bacon' (saves his own life) by learning how to act like a sheepdog. King-Smith presents another joke in the story – the fact that sheep hate being ordered around by sheepdogs, and resent being thought of as stupid. They just want to be talked to politely! King-Smith also makes a joke out of the idea that a pig can compete as a sheepdog at televised sheepdog trials. What about the idea of a pig doing exercise to slim down?

Never accept your limitations: Despite his reliance on wit, charm and humour, King-Smith doesn't forget to include morals in his children's stories. For example, one of the morals in The Sheep-Pig is: 'Never accept your limitations'. He demonstrates to readers that it is important to be kind, clever and brave, and he reminds them that they can reach their goal – if only they put their minds to it. The Sheep-Pig may have been written for children, but adults can appreciate it, too!

Discussion activities

Chapters 1–4

Before reading

1 Pair work: Put students into pairs and ask them to look at the cover of The Sheep-Pig. Get them to write down the names of the animals that they can see on the cover of the book. When they have finished, some of the pairs should read out their list of animals to the rest of the class. Then write the following combinations of letters on the board – they are anagrams of the names of the animals that can be seen on the cover of the book. Finally, ask students to spell the names of the animals correctly.

   a  ogd  
   b  rheo  
   c  eheps  
   d  gpi  
   e  ovego  
   f  iemc  
   g  ocw

2 Pair work: Write the word favourite on the board and teach students what it means. Then put students into pairs and get them to ask each other what their favourite animal is and why. When they have finished, some of the pairs should re-enact their conversation in front of the class.

3 Research: Ask students to bring information about farms to class. Put a large piece of paper on the wall and then get students to attach their information to the piece of paper to make a wall display.

After reading

4 Discuss: How is Babe different from other pigs? Write this question on the board and get students to discuss it in small groups. When they have finished, some of the groups should stand at the front of the class and share their answers with their classmates.

5 Artwork: Get students to draw a picture of a farm. When they have finished, they should stand at the front of the classroom and show their picture to the rest of the class.

6 Role play: Put students into pairs and get them to think about the question that Babe asks at the end of Chapter 3: 'Why can't I learn to be a sheep-pig?' Then give each of the students in the pairs a role – Student A is Babe and Student B is Fly. Babe should ask Fly the question and Fly should give Babe as many reasons as possible to answer it. When they have finished, the pairs should role play their conversations in front of the class.
The Sheep-Pig

Chapters 5–8

Before reading

7 Guess: Ask students to predict what will happen to Babe and the other animals in Chapters 5 to 8.

8 Discuss: Ask students to think about why Chapter 5 is called Bad Men at the Farm. Why do you think the bad men are? Why do you think they are bad? Why do you think they come to the farm? What do you think they want? What do you think they are going to do at the farm?

9 Discuss: Get students to look at the picture on page 21. Where do you think Babe is in the picture? What do you think he is doing? How do you think he is feeling? Why do you think this?

After reading

10 Check: Review students’ predictions about what would happen to Babe and the other animals in Chapters 5 to 8. Check if their predictions were right or wrong.

11 Pair work: Put students into pairs and get them to write a sentence on a small piece of paper to describe what happens in Chapter 5. Then get them to do the same for Chapters 6 to 8. When they have finished, they should shuffle their four small pieces of paper and then exchange them with those of another pair of students. Finally, they should try to put the four pieces of paper into the right order.

12 Artwork: Get students to draw a picture of a scene from Chapter 5, Chapter 6, Chapter 7 or Chapter 8. Then put them into pairs and get them to exchange their pictures. They should try to guess which chapter their partner’s picture is from. When they have finished, some of the pairs should stand up and describe their partner’s picture to their classmates.

13 Read carefully: Get students to read the captions in Chapters 5 to 8 as a class. Each student should stand up and carefully read one sentence from one of the captions out loud until all the captions in the chapters have been read. Note that the captions are on pages 9, 14, 17 and 21.

Chapters 9–12

Before reading

14 Discuss: Write the word danger on the board and teach students what it means. Then get students to think about why Chapter 9 is called Babe in Danger. What kind of danger do you think Babe is in? Who do you think he is in danger from? What do you think will happen to him in the chapter?

15 Discuss: Get students to look at the picture on page 35. Who do you think the people are in the picture? Where do you think they are? Why do you think they are holding up signs with ‘100’ written on them? What do you think ‘100’ means on the signs? Why do you think this?

16 Pair work: Put students into pairs and get them to think about why Chapter 11 is called The Sheepdog Trials. Then get them to look up the word trial (noun) either in a dictionary or on the Internet. Make the exercise into a competition – the first pair of students to find the definition wins. They should stand up and read the definition out loud to the rest of the class.

After reading

17 Write: Put students into pairs and get them to look at the pictures in Chapters 9 to 12. Then get them to write a new caption for each of the pictures to describe what the characters are thinking. When they have finished, the pairs should read their new captions out loud to the rest of the class. Finally, you can take a vote to find out which captions are the class’s favourites.

18 Discuss: Put students into pairs and get them to discuss the following questions:

Who do you think is happiest at the end of the story? Why do you think this?

Who do you think is saddest at the end of the story? Why do you think this?

What do you think Babe and the other animals will do in the future? Why do you think this?

What do you think the author is trying to say in the story? Why do you think this?

Have you seen the film ‘Babe’? If so, did you like it? Why or why not?

Do you like stories about animals? Why or why not?

Vocabulary activities

For the Word List and vocabulary activities, go to www.penguinreaders.com.