My Family and Other Animals

Gerald Durrell

About the author

Gerald Durrell was born in 1925 in India. He was the youngest of four children. From the age of two, he knew that he wanted to be a naturalist (someone who studies plants and animals). It should come as no surprise that zoo was the first word that he ever spoke.

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 rains too depressing, so they sold the family home and moved to Corfu in Greece. For Durrell (now ten years old), Corfu was a paradise – a green and beautiful island with a very small population of humans and a very large population of animals, insects and plants. He spent hours wandering over the hills and next to the sea, turning over stones to look for insects and building up his collection of ‘small uglies’ – i.e. scorpions and spiders. It was the beginning of his lifetime as a naturalist.

After five wonderful years, Mrs Durrell felt that her son needed some serious teaching. It 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 prominent zoos – Whipsnade Zoo – as a student keeper. In 1947, he used the little money that he had managed to save to pay for his first expedition to collect animals from the wild.

He returned from the Cameroons (in Africa) with more than one hundred different animals for British zoos. However, after three trips, his money ran out. His brother Larry, who was already a successful writer, suggested that Durrell write about his experiences with animals in the wild. Durrell followed his brother’s advice, and soon, his first book came out, The Overloaded Ark. It received high 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 that he brought back from the wild. He found that just when an animal had learned to trust him and to act naturally in his company, he had to give it up to a zoo. His answer was to set up his own zoo on the British island of Jersey in 1959. The Jersey Zoo was the first zoo in the world to breed animals in captivity in order to save them from extinction.

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. However, his life wasn’t always easy. For example, he had to fight traditional zoos in order to get them to accept his ideas about saving species. He also suffered from poor health – from diseases that he had caught during his early expeditions to Africa. He has been described as one of the first people to wake the world up to environmental issues. His books and programmes have helped to create generations of environmentalists. He died in 1995.

Summary

At the start of My Family and Other Animals, a memoir of Gerald Durrell’s childhood, the grey English skies become too depressing for the Durrell family. Making the decision to move somewhere hotter, they sell the house that they have just bought and relocate to Corfu, an island to the west of mainland Greece. Nobody in the family speaks Greek, but that doesn’t worry them. A local taxi driver, who has spent eight years living in Chicago, makes friends with the family and looks after them. Mrs Durrell tells the taxi driver that she wants a villa with a bathroom, so he 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.

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

Background and themes

Travel writing: Corfu lies between the heel of Italy and the western coast of mainland Greece in the Ionian Sea.
My Family and Other Animals

Life in Corfu in the 1930s was very different from life on the island today. It was remote and quiet. People's lives were ruled by the weather and the seasons. The Durrells must have seemed very strange to the local people. Corfu was one of the first Greek islands to attract holiday-goers, who began to arrive in large numbers in the 1960s, perhaps partly encouraged by Durrell's enchanting descriptions of the island. Travel writing raises an interesting ethical issue, because writing about a beautiful, unspoilt part of the planet always attracts people to that place – and it is those people who begin to destroy it.

Family: *My Family and Other Animals* is an interesting look at a family growing up. It demonstrates how five very different people with very different interests can live together in harmony. The family members’ 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 makes him back up his words. However, his attempts to shoot a bird end in disaster when he falls into a pool and spends the next twenty-four hours in bed. The scene demonstrates how families can be honest with each other.

Humans and animals: Durrell's writing focuses on the relationship between humans and animals. In *A Zoo in My Luggage*, he 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 his life's work is the philosophy that humans must try to understand, respect, protect and care for all the other species on the earth.

Discussion activities

*Larry's Idea and Chapters 1–5, pages 1–14*

1 Discuss: Ask students to look at the picture on the cover of the book. *What can you see? What are the people and animals doing in the picture? What do you think happens in the story?*

2 Discuss: Write the following words on the board and discuss their meanings as a class: *beetle, cab, insect, matchbox, microscope, pigeon, spots, string, tortoise* and *villa*. Divide the class into two teams. Give each student on each team a letter (A, B, C, etc.). Student A from the first team should give a meaning of one of the words without saying the word. Student A from the second team should guess which word the other student is referring to. Award one point for giving the correct meaning and one point for guessing the correct word. For the next round, Student B from the second team should give a definition of another word, and then Student B from the first team should guess the word (and so on). After all the words have been defined and guessed correctly, total up the points for each team – the team with the most points wins.

3 Research: Ask students to bring information about Corfu 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 Pair work: Put students into pairs and get them to plan a school timetable for Gerry. They should decide which subjects he needs to learn and who should teach him each subject. They should also decide how many hours a day he should study and how much free time he should be allowed to have. When they have finished, they should compare their timetables with those of their classmates by asking and answering questions. *Does Gerry need to learn French? Who should teach French to him?* Finish with a class discussion. Find out if the pairs have all given Gerry a regular week of schooling, or if they have given him more time to be adventurous.

5 Artwork: Get students to draw a picture of the pink villa. When they have finished, they should stand at the front of the class and explain what they have drawn and why they have drawn it.

6 Role play: Put students into pairs and get them to role play the scene in Chapter 5. When they have finished, some of the pairs should role play the scene in front of the class.

7 Write: *Would you like to have Larry as a brother? Why or why not?* Get students to write a sentence to answer these questions.

Chapters 6–9, pages 15–25

Before reading

8 Guess: Ask students to predict what will happen to Gerry and his family in Part 2. *Will they stay in Corfu? Or will they return to England? Will Larry have another idea?*

9 Artwork: Write the word *scorpion* on the board. Then put students into pairs and get them to draw a picture of a scorpion. When they have finished, some of the pairs should show their pictures to the rest of the class.

After reading

10 Check: Review students’ predictions about what would happen to Gerry and his family in Part 2. Check if their predictions were right or wrong.

11 Artwork: Get students to draw a picture of the yellow villa. When they have finished, they should stand at the front of the class and explain what they have drawn and why they have drawn it.
12 Discuss: Get students to look at the picture on page 17. How do you think Larry is feeling? Why do you think this? How do you think Leslie is feeling? Why do you think this? How do you think Mother is feeling? Why do you think this? How do you think Gerry is feeling? Why do you think this?

13 Role play: Put students into groups of three and get them to imagine that they are at Gerry’s birthday party. Each student should choose to be someone different at the party. As a group, they should work out a short conversation that they can have at the party (the conversation can be about anything). When they have finished working out their conversations, the groups should role play their conversations in front of the class.

Chapters 10–12 and The Return, pages 26–35

Before reading

14 Discuss: Ask students to think about why the last chapter is called The Return. Who do you think returns? Where do you think they return to? Where do you think they return from? Why do you think they return?

15 Pair work: Put students into pairs and get them to look at the picture on page 28. They should ask each other questions about how the characters are feeling in the picture. How do you think Larry is feeling? Why do you think this? How do you think Mother is feeling? Why do you think this? How do you think Gerry is feeling? Why do you think this?

After reading

16 Write: Put students into small groups and get them to look through the book and write down twenty questions regarding the characters, story, setting, etc. (What month is it when the Durrells leave England? What colour is the Durrells’ first villa in Corfu?) Note that the questions should be able to be answered with one word. When the groups have finished writing down their questions, they should match up with another group and ask the students their questions. Then they should answer the other group’s questions. The group that gets the most questions right wins the round and moves on to the next round. They should compete against another group (and so on). The group that makes it to the end wins the competition.

17 Debate: Point out to students that the author spent many years working as a zookeeper. Then divide the class into two groups and write the following statement on the board: ‘Zoos are a good idea.’ Get one group to argue for the statement and the other group to argue against it. Give them time to prepare their arguments – help them to come up with ideas if necessary. Then get one student from each group to present one aspect of the group’s argument. When both groups are finished presenting their arguments, choose the group that made the best argument as the winner of the debate.

Vocabulary activities

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