

Birds, Beasts, and Relatives Study Guide

Birds, Beasts, and Relatives by Gerald Durrell

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Contents

Birds, Beasts, and Relatives Study Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Plot Summary.....	3
Conversations and Chapter One.....	4
Chapter Two.....	6
Chapter Three.....	8
Chapter Four.....	10
Chapter Five.....	11
Interlude for Spirits.....	13
Chapter Six.....	14
Chapter Seven.....	15
Chapter Eight.....	16
Chapter Nine.....	17
Chapter Ten, Epilogue.....	18
Characters.....	19
Objects/Places.....	23
Themes.....	25
Style.....	27
Quotes.....	29
Topics for Discussion.....	31



Plot Summary

The story opens with a prelude called "Conversations" that occurs during a reunion of Gerald Darrell, his siblings and his mother in which he announces his intention to write a sequel to his first book, "My Family and Other Animals." His mother initially tells Gerald's brothers that she can't stop the project, but when he proposes to include a particular story about his mother, she joins in the objections. Gerald notes that, considering the number and intensity of the arguments against the project, there's only one thing to do: Sit down to write.

The book is a coming of age story about a ten-year-old boy who spends an idyllic year on the island of Cofru with his widowed mother, his older sister Margo, and his older brothers, Leslie and Larry. All have their quirks and each tolerates Gerald's love of natural science in a different way - some with objections that are overridden by Gerald's mother. Over the course of time, he finds a great number of things to be interested in, including the array of aquatic life that is brought up from the depths of the nearby bay in the nets of fishermen. Those that can be carted home are. Others are kept in a rock pool built by Gerald so that he can further study the ocean creatures that won't survive in his makeshift aquariums.

Through his search for the best animals and insects, and in his quest for information, he meets an array of people. Among those is Dr. Theodore Stephanides. Gerald is fascinated with the wealth of information Theo has available but despairs of the opportunity to spend more time together after an initial meeting arranged by Gerald's tutor, George. He needn't have worried because Theo not only spends time with the family, he occasionally spends the most of a day with Gerald in the pursuit of some particular specimen of animal, insect or aquatic life.

Gerald's menagerie includes a faithful dog named Roger and two who are less so named Puke and Widdle. There's a donkey, a birthday gift from Gerald's mother, named Sally. The spade-footed toad given to him by the olive press overseer becomes known as Augustus Ticklebummy, named for his love of having his tummy rubbed. There are owls, hedgehogs (including four that die of overeating at the hands of Gerald's sister Margo), and seahorses. When Gerald encounters a gypsy with a dancing bear, he makes friends with the bear and wants desperately to have the animal for his own. The gypsy refuses to sell the bear and Gerald has trouble explaining to his family how it is that the bear happened to follow him home. He points out that, for once, he isn't to blame but it's difficult to make his family believe in his innocence.

As the wine season draws to a close, Gerald thinks ahead to the coming spring, but spring in Corfu is a dream that is cut short by a declaration of war that sends the family back to England.



Conversations and Chapter One

Conversations and Chapter One Summary and Analysis

The story opens with a prelude called "Conversations" that occurs during a reunion of Gerald Darrell, his siblings and his mother in which he announces his intention to write a sequel to his first book, "My Family and Other Animals." His mother initially tells Gerald's brothers that she can't stop the project but when he proposes to include a particular story about his mother, she joins in the objections. Gerald notes that, considering the number and intensity of the arguments against the project, there's only one thing to do: Sit down to write.

Chapter one, titled "The Christening," begins with a description of the Greek island where the family, Gerald, his mother, brothers Leslie and Larry, and sister Margo, goes to escape the dreary weather of England. They soon make friends with a taxi driver named Spiro who can find anything the family needs. This begins with his locating an acceptable villa: one with indoor plumbing. Gerald says that their arrival in the paradise has a different effect on each of the family members. Larry mumbles poetry which his mother ignores; Leslie discovers that he can purchase weapons without a permit and sets out to build an arsenal, testing each of the weapons he brings home; and Margo, hoping the rays of the sun will clear up her acne, spends all her time sunbathing so that she's soon burned. For his part, Gerald spends all his time in the garden, observing the various kinds of insect life, including dung beetles. When he spends an entire afternoon watching them to discover what they use the dung for, he is annoyed that they roll it into a hole underground. When Gerald tells of the beetles, his brother Larry says that Gerald should study the writings of the naturalist, Fabre. When the book arrives, Gerald is enthralled and spends a day reading.

Gerald is soon being tutored by a young man named George. Gerald declares that everything other than natural history is worthless. George soon discovers the idea of associating other subjects with natural history. It's George who introduces Gerald to Dr. Theodore Stephanides. Trained in astronomy, biology, poetry and medicine, he is also an avid naturalist and George takes Gerald to meet Theo in order to learn about the trap-door spiders that Gerald had just discovered. Gerald admits that he doesn't expect to see Theo again but the next day, ten-year-old Gerald is invited to Theo's flat where he spends an engaging afternoon.

Gerald's mother is spending most of her time in the kitchen, aided by a maid named Maria. His mother has little control of the language and mistakenly tells Maria to pour out a tureen of soup she'd just cooked. When Gerald asks if he can invite Theo for tea, his mother's first question is related to the language and, assured Theo speaks perfect English, proffers the invitation. Theo's visit is entertaining for the entire family and becomes an important person in their lives during their time in Greece.

The family dynamics are introduced in the prologue, titled "Conversation," but are explained to a greater degree in the first chapter. What is notable is that there are gaps in the story and that it seems likely that the family, having been introduced in Gerald's first book, is not detailed as thoroughly during the opening of the second book.

Gerald notes that he and the other members of the family are soon making friends around the area but feel they've been fully accepted when they are invited to the elaborate parties of a Greek wedding. Gerald says that as they go home that evening, walking through a grove of trees, he feels as if this event has fully ensconced them into the culture and society of the island. He compares it to a christening.



Chapter Two

Chapter Two Summary and Analysis

Gerald explains in great detail how he spends his days. George comes up with the idea that Gerald is more receptive if they have their lessons outdoors and they spend many happy hours at the bay, sometimes using rocks to create a map of the globe and sometimes reenacting historical events with the aid of natural land formations and even an unsuspecting animal or insect. When he isn't studying, Gerald spends a great deal of time at the bay with his dog, Roger. There, each goes about his own pursuits with Roger often chasing fish that shimmer in the shallows. Gerald finds in the place a wonderland full of surprises. He describes the various life forms in some depth, including shells, sponges and anemone. One day he spots a spider-crab. He sees it but then can't locate it again until the crab makes a slight movement. Having discovered that it is a crab, Gerald carries it carefully to a pool he's constructed which is designed to take the place of an aquarium for holding the specimens he captures. He puts the little spider-crab into the pool and settles down to wait. The crab skitters away a short distance and grows still, apparently recovering from the capture. Gerald says that what had amazed him about the crab is the fact that it had seaweeds apparently growing from its shell. As he watches, the crab carefully moves to where a bit of seaweed is growing, plucks up a bit and chews on the end of it, then sticks it to his shell.

Intrigued beyond all measure, Gerald catches another and, armed with Larry's nail brush, scrubs every bit of the seaweed from the creature's back. Then he places the crab into a pool that has been very carefully constructed to have no seaweed available and drops in an array of items, including broken glass that had been polished by the sea and a couple of anemones. When he drops the crab into the pool, it skitters away a short distance and feels all over its back, apparently hoping that Gerald's unwelcome scrubbing had missed at least some of the seaweed. However, that wasn't the case and Gerald waits to see what the crab would do. It did nothing before it was time for Gerald to go home for dinner, but the next morning he arrives to find that the crab had made do with the items Gerald had provided, including even the anemones. While the initial reaction is that the costume is garish, Gerald admits that the create blend right in with his surroundings.

A small island off the bay called Mouse Island becomes a favored place of Gerald and Margo who swim over to it. An elderly monk lives there alone and Gerald notes that his only apparent job is to ring the bell on the tiny church there and to row over to a nunnery where three nuns live every evening, returning home at dusk. When Margo and Gerald arrive at the island, the old monk races at them, yelling at them to go away. The pair soon begin bringing him cigarettes. While he still meets them yelling for their departure, after a few minutes he sits down for a leisurely smoke.

Gerald talks at length about a section of reefs between the bay where he spends so much time and Mouse Island, and though he can easily make the swim, he can't



manage to get there with his net and specimen jars. He then meets a man named Taki Thanatos who has a boat and invites Gerald fishing with him that night. In order to gain his mother's approval, Gerald hurries home and slips quietly into bed. He wakes to find the family having tea on the veranda and joins them, telling his mother that he isn't sick but had wanted to take a siesta so that he could go fishing with his newfound friend in order to collect specimens off the reef. She agrees when he says he'll leave at ten and should be back in an hour or so. When he returns, it is half past two and he hopes he can placate his mother with the gift of a scorpion fish caught by Taki.

When Gerald first meets Taki he notes that the people of the region ask all sorts of questions that could be considered nosy, but that they in turn give every intimate detail of their own lives. It's for this reason that when Taki guesses Gerald is from the family that lives in the rented villa and then asks about the rest of the family, Gerald explains. Here, the reader learns that Gerald's father is dead.

Gerald spends a great deal of time talking about the various species of fish, insects and plant life he discovers. When he learns that Taki will allow him to go along on the fishing trip, he's elated. Then Taki agrees that after fishing for awhile, he'll take Gerald to the reef where he can search for specimens. Toward that end, Gerald leaves home armed with his net and an array of jars and tins for transporting the marine life he captures. Taki seems very patient with him while he does so and even takes Gerald back by way of the little bay so that Gerald can dump his finds into the rock pool he built in the place of an aquarium.



Chapter Three

Chapter Three Summary and Analysis

Gerald describes the abundance of life he finds in a nearby myrtle thicket. He describes the mantis with its front legs lifted in a "hypocritical prayer," and of one that almost caught a swallowtail butterfly but managed only to tear off a section of wing, which it ate. He notes that the flat centipedes are fast and that they are "creepy." He describes the tarantula spiders and says he seldom gets near enough to watch one. On a particular day he finds one so absorbed in something that Gerald gets very near. The spider then drops to the ground and runs unerringly to a lark's nest. Before Gerald can act, the spider bites the single hatched baby bird and when it is dead, carries it away.

After an afternoon thunderstorm, Gerald stops by the myrtle grove to look for new creatures that might normally stay in during the heat of the day and discovers two snails. He watches as they pull alongside each other and believes they've mated. When he asks Theodore about it, Theo says that snails are both male and female. Larry, usually bored with natural science, wonders why humans couldn't have the benefits of both sensations and Theo points out that if that were the case, humans would also have to sit on eggs. Larry points out that the need to go home and sit on ones eggs could be a great way to get out of unwanted invitations to cocktail parties. Theo says that the snails don't sit on eggs, but bury them to which Gerald's mother says that she would have appreciated the opportunity to do that.

Gerald, having seen many donkeys on the island, has decided he wants one of his own and he begs his mother for one, saying it could be both Christmas and birthday gifts and that he would require no other presents. He's denied at Christmas but receives a donkey for his birthday which he names Sally, saying that he selected the name for no reason at all. On the first day, Larry teaches him how to ride though Sally indignantly bucks him off at first. Next, Larry teaches Gerald about caring for the animal but doesn't realize that donkeys, unlike horses, don't have shoes. When Larry uses a knife to clean out a crevice on the donkey's feet, Sally jerks away and kicks him in the stomach. Larry is angry and Gerald, fearing for Sally, goes off for the rest of the day.

Gerald has been told that he should thank Katerina, the young woman whose wedding the family attended, for the donkey. Reasoning that Katerina is expecting a baby and that he should thank her prior to the arrival of the child when she'll be too busy to talk with him, Gerald goes the following day only to find Katerina's house flooded with relatives. He pushes his way through the throng to what appears to be the center just in time to witness the birth. He then thanks Katerina who urges him to go outside and have some wine, but Gerald watches instead the binding of the baby boy by the midwife who explains that the child's bones are delicate and without binding, the baby's arms and legs won't grow straight.

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Gerald has all sorts of clues regarding the donkey on the day before his birthday but fails to put them together. His mother has a small bamboo hut built by Costas, the brother of the Durrell's maid, Maria. When Gerald asks the purpose, his mother is vague, saying she believes it will come in handy. He then overhears his brother and Spiros discussing how to get the animal back with his brother saying that they must be certain that it doesn't get a leg broken. Gerald seems surprised, though it also seems that he's generally indulged and probably shouldn't have been overly surprised at being granted a gift he'd pleaded for so earnestly.

When Gerald witnesses the birth of Katerina's son, he isn't horrified as most eleven-year-old boys would be. Instead, he's amazed that the child has such a perfect form and later likens it to having seen a "brown, prickly husk of a chestnut" being broken open to find the "lovely gleaming trophy inside."



Chapter Four

Chapter Four Summary and Analysis

Gerald and Theodore sometimes spend most of a day together on what Theo calls "an excursion." Gerald notes that the weather is almost always wonderful, but that Theo typically has to point out that it's a good day for their outing. They take a lunch and travel three or four miles to a pond where they collect specimens. On one of these days they find "elvers," which Theo explains are groups of baby eels writhing their way across almost-dry ground to reach the pond where their parents had been. Theo points out the incredible homing instinct and that the journey is treacherous. As he's saying this, a number of eels fall victim to predators, including birds. The two would then share a lunch brought from Gerald's villa, explore the "other side" of the pond for awhile and go home as the sun was sinking.

One day, Gerald goes to the pond alone and finds there a water spider which he brings home. He creates an aquarium for the spider and watches as it busily begins to construct a new home - a "bell" filled with air collected from the air bubbles clinging to the spider's legs and anchored by web to submerged twigs. There, the spider could live for some time without returning to the surface. The air in the "bell" would be replenished by the weeds in the water. This water spider soon builds a "nursery" and a great many spiders hatch. Gerald discovers that the mother spider is feeding off her young so he moves them to another aquarium where they begin feeding off each other so that he chooses "two of the more intelligent-looking ones" to keep and releases the rest.

Then the family is visited by one of Larry's friends, Sven Olson, who plays the accordion poorly but endears himself to Gerald's mother by his love of cooking. One day Sven spots Gerald's menagerie and the two then spend every morning in the olive groves, looking at the living things there in their natural habitat. After Sven leaves, Larry reveals that he is a homosexual. Gerald's mother's immediate reaction is anger, which gains momentum when she learns of the time Gerald and Sven spent together. Sven leaves reluctantly with a tearful farewell.

Gerald notes that the family is living in a very spacious villa, so much so that he has been granted the use of a room in addition to his bedroom. He calls this his "study," and says it's where he keeps his "menagerie." It's here that Gerald tells about two dogs he received as birthday gifts. Known for their "undisciplined behavior," the two are called Widdle and Puke. An interesting point here is that Gerald doesn't explain who is cleaning up after these animals. These are among the details left to the reader to decide, but the fact that the family has a maid, hires outside help and is living in the rented villa with no outside source of income seems to indicate some sort of trust or other fund used to pay the expenses.



Chapter Five

Chapter Five Summary and Analysis

On a typical day, Gerald kicks the dogs off the bed where they have crept during the night and are taking up more than their share of space, then looks out the window toward the sea. If there are fishermen, he hurriedly joins them because their nets bring up treasures from deeper than Gerald is able to dive. One day he finds seahorses and keeps them for a time in an aquarium. Though it requires a tremendous amount of work to keep them in fresh water, he's soon glad he did so because one of the sea horses produces a group of twenty microscopic babies. Theo explains that it's the father that carried the babies, which amazes Gerald.

One of the fishermen Gerald is partial to is Kokino, which Gerald says means "red." One day Gerald goes fishing with Kokino who says he's fishing "with love." He ties a cuttlefish to a string and waits for a male cuttlefish to become enamored with the female on the string, then pulls them both in and repeats the process, which amazes Gerald. He notes that many fishermen don't believe his story.

One day Gerald finds a turtle floating on the water and after carefully sneaking up on it, "catches" it only to discover that it's dead. Noting that a "dead turtle is better than no turtle at all," he takes it home and begins dissecting it on the veranda. The smelly creature is female and has eggs inside. When Gerald cuts open the stomach to see what the turtle's last meal had been, the stench is so powerful that it rouses Leslie who is ill and inside. Gerald's mother returns home just then and tells him to clean off the veranda. He buries most of the turtle on the hill, leaving the shell with the hope that the ants will pick it clean, and is preparing to clean off the veranda when a man appears and claims Roger killed five of his turkeys. When Leslie asks him to produce the bodies before they pay for the birds, the man claims that Roger ate all five turkeys and that the event was that morning - the same time Gerald was catching the dead turtle with Roger along. There's an argument and the turkey man sues Leslie while Lucretia, the family's cook, looks on. Spiros takes Leslie to town, tells him that the judge collects stamps and instructs Leslie to offer the judge some stamps. Fearing the repercussions of bribing a judge but trusting Spiro, Leslie does so and on the date of the trial the judge, citing the fact that Lucretia, who had been called as the turkey man's witness, disputes his version of the story, declares Leslie innocent.

The reaction of Gerald's mother upon returning home to find the smelly turtle on the veranda speaks volumes about her temperament and her willingness to indulge Gerald's curiosity. While she does insist that Gerald clean off the veranda, she does so gently, asking him to perform the task rather than demanding, and making no threats of punishment at all. In fact, Gerald's mother seems calm and gentle in everything she does, to the point of being ineffectual. Gerald had previously noted that Larry tends to

invite friends home unannounced and that he expects his mother to simply welcome them as guests. For her part, she seems to do so.



Interlude for Spirits

Interlude for Spirits Summary and Analysis

Margo, who has been fighting an apparently severe case of acne throughout the story, Now she's suddenly gaining weight at an alarming weight and when the family physician can't find anything else wrong, he suggests it might be "glandular" and suggests a London physician. Margo is desperate, and her desperation is fed by the cruel remarks of Leslie and Larry who wonder aloud if there's a boat big enough to carry Margo and if she can fit through a certain door. Though Gerald's mother is worried about "young girls in big towns," she sends Margo to stay with relatives, Cousin Prue and Aunt Fran.

After some time, Gerald's mother learns that Margo is spending time with someone Cousin Prue doesn't approve of and Gerald and his mother head to London, she fearing to leave him behind in the care of his brothers. There, Gerald describes Cousin Prue as a woman afraid of everything, Prue's mother, Aunt Fran, is described as a self-absorbed woman who can't ever keep up with a conversation because she can't hear, meaning the rest of the inhabitants of a room will be talking about Margo and Aunt Fran will interject some inappropriate comment about having a littler of Bedlingtons for sale.

When Margo puts in an appearance, she announces that she has a spiritual guide, Mawake, who has instructed her to forgo the injections she'd been getting from the doctor and to wrap her face in cabbage leaves at night to cure the acne. When Gerald's mother points out that Margo doesn't seem to have lost any weight, she objects, saying she's lost three ounces. Gerald's mother agrees to go to one séance held by the medium Mrs. Haddock, and there declares the woman a hoax and takes Margo and Gerald back to Corfu.

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This chapter is not numbered "six" as the reader might expect. Instead, it's called "Interlude for Spirits," and the following chapter is chapter six. The play on words here is humorous and is typical of the author's style. The very opening section entitled "Conversations" in which Gerald was threatened by his siblings if he opted to write another book, the subject of the "Interlude for Spirits" was mentioned specifically with Margo expressing that she would be very upset if he were to write about the incident.

It's in this chapter that the reader first learns that Gerald's mother's name is Louise, Gerald having always referred to her simply as "mother." While he doesn't elaborate on the comment, he does say that Cousin Prue and Aunt Fran are two of the few relatives with whom his immediate family is on speaking terms. It seems likely that this is an exaggeration as are many of Gerald's stories.



Chapter Six

Chapter Six Summary and Analysis

Gerald describes a querulous old man named Papa Demetrios who runs the olive press so vital to the local olive industry, who has somehow taken a liking to Gerald. They sometimes share some food such as popped corn Papa makes over a fire. On a particular day, Papa tells about a man named Andreas who has been hospitalized after having blown off his own hand while fishing with dynamite. Papa then presents Gerald with a gift - a spade foot toad that Gerald says smells very much like garlic and who has an extraordinary personality. Gerald names the toad Angus and upon learning that the toad loves to have its tummy rubbed, adds "Tickletummy" as Angus's surname. Gerald says that everyone who visits is given an opportunity to watch Angus gobble up a worm.

One night Gerald hears a racket coming down the road and rises to see a horse-drawn taxi that seems to be on fire. He soon discovers that there are two men in the taxi - Donald and Max - and that they are carrying a lit candelabra. They are friends of Larry and, though they've awakened the house at two in the morning, are offered refreshments before being sent back to town. As they prepare to leave, the taxi driver is nowhere to be found and the two race off in the taxi with the driver chasing them.

It's in this chapter that it's revealed that Larry is apparently a writer - a fact that's borne out in another chapter though details such as his level of success or genre are not. The family dynamics continues to be a source of humor. Gerald's mother does not seem to be overly concerned about decorum, but she does go out of her way to avoid being rude. For example, when the two drunks, Max and Donald, appear at the house in the early hours of the morning, Mother isn't happy but doesn't make a scene. She is also the peacemaker and is often the one standing between Gerald and his older siblings who are unhappy about some venture he's undertaken or some new pet he's taken in.



Chapter Seven

Chapter Seven Summary and Analysis

One day Gerald receives an invitation from Countess Mavrodaki who lives on the island. She lives a very solitary life but knows Theo who is her doctor. The invitation indicates that she knows of Gerald's love of nature and of his desire to have specimens of his own, and that she has a barn owl she'd like to give him. The owl has a broken wing and Gerald eagerly accepts the invitation. He dresses carefully but Sally dumps him off in a muddy ditch so that he arrives with mud on his clothes. The Countess welcomes him anyway and feeds him a great deal of food before presenting him with the owl. She tells him that she hopes he'll come for another visit someday and he pledges that if he does so, he'll fast for three days so that he has room for all the food she believes a "growing boy" should eat. On the way home from that first visit with his owl safely in a box for carrying, Gerald stops and is "flamboyantly sick."

At home Gerald binds the owl's wing though the owl fights back and brings blood several times. When the wing is finally set to Gerald's satisfaction, he puts the bird in a room in the attic where he feeds it a plate of meat. Later, Gerald takes a dead mouse to the bird and notes that the owl has perked up nicely. In the middle of the night, Gerald is awakened by Larry's raised voice, saying that there is a ghost in the attic and that his mother and sister, being the two interested in spiritualism, probably attracted the ghost and should therefore get rid of it. Gerald rushes to check on the owl and finds that the bird had tried to get a small piece of dried meat off the plate and had become stuck.

The Countess is a bit of an enigma. She has a manservant living with her and the two of them get into what appears to be a serious fight soon after Gerald arrives, but he soon discovers that it's playing to them and that there was nothing serious in her threat to fire him. The Countess talks at length about her husband, Henri, and his tendency to collect things though most of the conversation is about how she went about making him stop.

There are additional pieces of information about the family dynamics revealed here in the disdain Larry shows for everyone. When Gerald is invited for lunch with the Countess, he offers to ask if Larry could come for a visit in order to see the library, which is reported to be extensive. Larry's reaction when Gerald makes the offer to do so is less-than-charitable. He predicts that Gerald won't make the kind of impression that lends itself to asking favors. Larry's attitudes toward his siblings have been seen at other moments, including his crude jokes at Margo's weight gain.



Chapter Eight

Chapter Eight Summary and Analysis

In the spring, Gerald and his family move to a new villa, very near the first. There is a nearby area Gerald calls "the fields" that were once salt flats and now, after having been flooded from the hills for ages, provide rich land for farming. There one day an old woman who is cultivating calls to Gerald that she has something for him and he hurries, as much as possible through the maze of ditches, to find that she has uncovered four little hedgehogs. He takes them home, noting that he already has two but that they have never been adequately tamed. He convinces his mother to buy him a doll that has an array of accessories, including a bottle which he keeps, and he gives the remainder of the set to a girl he likes. He carefully tends the hedgehogs and learns that they will continue to eat as long as milk is offered, so that he has to feed them only a little at a time, several times each day. When Gerald and his mother are invited to visit the other side of the island, he finally agrees to allow Margo to tend the hedgehogs. When he returns home, she tells him that a half bottle at a feeding wasn't sufficient to salve their hunger and he finds that they are swollen hugely. All four die that night and Gerald refuses to speak to Margo for four days.

It's about this time that a derelict named Captain Creech, retired from the sea, stops in at Larry's invitation. He is crude, mentions the first time he had gonorrhoea and has an endless supply of bawdy songs and limericks. He settles nearby and is a frequent guest. One day Larry, Donald and Max plan to sail on a yacht owned by Donald and Max with Captain Creech directing. They arrange to meet Mother, Gerald, Theo and the rest of the family at a specific cove. There, Gerald and the family watch as the yacht comes in, crashes onto a reef and tips over. Later, Mother receives a letter from Captain Creech asking that she marry him.

Both the incident involving Larry and the sailing venture and that of Mother's proposal were specifically mentioned during the initial "Conversation," with Larry and Mother each saying that the stories couldn't be included in a book. There are several interesting facts revealed in this chapter. When Mother and Gerald see Captain Creech on their porch for the first time, Mother fears that he is from the bank in England to see about some "overdrafts." This isn't explained further and the reader is left to wonder about the significance. Another interesting point here is that when Gerald is preparing to leave the hedgehogs in Margo's care, Larry types out a list of instructions for him. Gerald notes that he had to catch Larry in the right mood to do this, but it seems that this is an indication that Larry wasn't always too busy to have anything to do with his younger sibling. It's also Larry who teases his mother after the proposal, saying that "what we children want is a father."



Chapter Nine

Chapter Nine Summary and Analysis

One day Gerald is headed home when he encounters a gypsy with a young bear. The man invites Gerald to pet the bear, named Pavlo, and Gerald feeds Pavlo some chocolate while trying to come up with a way to get the man to sell him the bear. The gypsy explains that he has a traveling show and that the bear and "a talking head" are how he makes a living, and Gerald heads home. When Gerald goes into the house, the entire family is gathered for tea and they all take one look at him and begin screaming. Gerald turns to see that Pavlo is behind him. He feeds the bear a piece of cake and uses another to lure Pavlo out of the house where they find Pavlo's owner searching for him.

Every day, Gerald goes to the home of his tutor, Richard Kralefsky. On the day after having met Pavlo, Gerald is less inclined than usual toward math and after awhile Kralefsky agrees that they should take a break. When Gerald tells about the gypsy with the bear and the talking head and Kralefsky agrees that they can take a walk to see if they can find the gypsy. They do and Kralefsky is amazed by the dancing bear. Gerald then gets to see "the talking head," which is a young gypsy boy of about seven. The head is seen atop a table but Gerald crawls under the table and believes the body is not concealed there.

The trick of the talking head is never revealed. Gerald notes that his family immediately believes that he has brought Pavlo home with him on purpose. He admits that he is often the person creating an uproar in the family and that it takes some explaining before he convinces them that he isn't at fault in this case. Gerald portrays each of the family members in their particular light during this scene with Margo screaming and defending her right to do so, Larry demanding that Gerald take the animal away and adamant that he cannot keep a bear in the house, Leslie expressing anger that the bear is between him and his guns, and Mother quietly admonishing Gerald while equally quietly worrying that Gerald might be in danger.

Gerald has referred to Kralefsky before, saying that he wanted to go to London during the "Interlude for Spirits" at least partly to escape his lessons with Kralefsky. Kralefsky claims to have jumped into the ring at a circus once and taken over the lions when the lion tamer was injured, a feat Gerald praises. When the two encounter Pavlo, Gerald notes that Kralefsky quickly steps back and that it seems an unusual reaction in one who had handled the lions.



Chapter Ten, Epilogue

Chapter Ten, Epilogue Summary and Analysis

The family is invited to the villa of Mr. Stavrodakis for the end of the wine season. The invitation indicates that they are to bring friends but Mother insists that they not impose a large group without bringing food. They set out with the five members of the immediate family, Theodore, Kralefsky, Sven with his accordion, Donald and Max, and Spiro and his family. There they look over the wine process, including watching a "treader" who had grown inebriated from the fumes and a tour of the cellar where the fermenting wine makes noise in the barrels. Back at the beach, Gerald's family and friends spend an enjoyable time eating a lamb and fish cooked over open charcoal fires and then alternately nap, talk and swim the afternoon away. That evening their host presents wine as a gift and they head home. Gerald knows that the season is quickly drawing to a close and that it will soon be spring again on Corfu. He watches the sea life around him as the boat takes them toward home and he notes that he dreamed of things on that trip that "were not to be."

The final section is an "Epilogue," in which there are a series of five letters from various people to Gerald's mother. The first is from Theodore, warning that war is imminent and advising that she leave Corfu. The second and third are from Larry and Leslie, each telling of their current whereabouts. The fourth is from Margo who says that she plans to be in England "in about three weeks" and that she's enclosing a letter from Spiro. Spiro's letter is brief, "This is to tell you that war has been declared. Don't tell a soul."

The various personalities are presented well during the trip and it's interesting to see these people who have come to be important to the Durrell family all in one place as the book draws to a close. Gerald captures personalities through an array of methods, including speech. Donald calls Gerald's mother "Muzzer," referring back to their first meeting when he was drunk and slurred the word accidentally. Theo has a halting speech, interspersed with hesitations. Kralefsky tells the story of having had a premonition of disaster in another wine cellar that prompted him to pull a young woman to safety in the nick of time.

Gerald's final statement, that he spends the trip home dreaming of days that would not come to pass, is a reference to the fact that war is declared sometime soon after this trip and that the family leaves Corfu.



Characters

Gerald Durrells

Gerald is a ten-year-old boy when the family arrives in Corfu in their attempt to escape the dreary weather of England. Gerald is naturally curious about everything related to nature and happily spends hours engaged in learning about animals, insects and aquatic life. He says that Corfu is an incredible place for his pursuits, where he is able to find a huge array of specimens for his collections and to observe many living things in their natural habitats. It's noted that Gerald tends to have an array of creatures living at the family's rented villa at any given time, and that these sometimes cause quite a stir with the family. Once, when Gerald makes friends with a trained bear that then follows Gerald home, the family uproar is misguided because the incident truly wasn't Gerald's fault. That seems to be one of the few times this can be said.

Gerald is an indulged child, the youngest of a family of four children, and is able to make room for himself and his interests amid the lives of the rest of the family. His story is often humorous and his recollection of detail focuses largely on the information that interests him most - the natural world.

Mrs. Louis Durrells

Gerald's mother, she is a widow who is somewhat ineffective in the area of discipline and who maintains what control she has by imploring those around her to do what's necessary. She tends to try to avoid conflict at all costs. Gerald portrays her as one who has the safety of her children at heart above everything else, and who shows it in a very calm, distracted sort of way as can be seen when the bear follows Gerald home. While the rest of the family is yelling for Gerald to get rid of the bear and obviously believe that Gerald brought it home on purpose, his mother expresses her own belief that Gerald did bring home the bear and her admonition is not to get rid of it, but to be careful.

Mrs. Durrells' tendency to indulge Gerald is seen again and again. For example, she is much less angry about the dissection of the turtle on the veranda than the other members of the family, but does tell Gerald to clean it up. She does seem to indulge the other children to a great degree as well, as is seen when she allows Margo to go to London on her own and in constantly entertaining Larry's uninvited guests.

Margo

The author's sister, Margo complains that after Gerald's first book people asked her with of the "other animals" she was. Margo is dealing with acne as the family arrives in Corfu and tries an array of nature's cures, including sunbathing and swimming. When she gains weight, she takes a great deal of cruel teasing from her older brothers. As the only



girl, she is sometimes seen helping her mother, as is the case when the family goes on the picnic at the end of the wine season.

Lawrence

The elder of Gerald's brothers, Lawrence is bitterly complaining about the weather during the opening of the book when Gerald announces that he plans to write a sequel to his first book. It's Lawrence, usually called "Larry," who says he'd have sued Gerald for using a particular story. Larry is a writer himself and tends to issue invitations to people he finds interesting. It's through Larry that the family meets a great many interesting characters. While the role is downplayed by Gerald, it seems that Larry serves as head of the family.

Leslie

The younger of Gerald's brothers, Leslie is interested in guns and boats. When Leslie discovers that the purchase requirements are lax in Corfu, he buys a great array of guns and tries them all so near the house that the entire family becomes jumpy from the constant firing of weapons.

Spiros

The man who, according to Gerald, can get anything. He helps them arrange for a particular type of villa during their stay in Greece and then becomes "guide, philosopher and friend." Spiro runs an array of errands, such as gathering all the things the family needs for a picnic and helping arrange for the transportation of a donkey for Gerald's birthday.

George

The friend of Larry's who is Gerald's tutor for a period of time. George introduces Gerald to Theodore.

Dr. Theodore Stephanides

Gerald describes him as having blond hair and the looks of a "Greek god." Among his achievements are his ability to explain many pieces of information about natural history but he is also trained in astronomy, medicine, biology, poet and translator. Theo becomes a family friend and often visits, though he and Gerald sometimes take a day to gather specimens together at a particular pond.



Sven Olson

A sculptor who is a friend of Larry's and who comes to stay with Gerald's family while they are in Greece. Sven plays the accordion, though apparently not very well. Given the opportunity to play, he typically continues to play for some time. On their first meeting, Sven plays for Gerald and his mother for an hour and only stops then when Larry and the others return from town. After Sven leaves, Larry tells his mother that Sven is a homosexual. His mother isn't quite certain whether Larry is teasing but comes to believe it to be true.

Lucretia

The cook for Gerald's family, it's Lucretia who witnesses the argument between Leslie and the man asking for payment for five turkeys allegedly killed by Roger. Lucretia, called as a witness for the "turkey man," initially refuses to go but is told that's not an option. She testifies effusively to the kindness of her employers, especially Leslie, and then to the fact that Roger would never have killed the turkeys, and finally to the fact that a dog couldn't possibly eat five turkeys at once.

Papa Demetrios

The man who oversees the operation of the olive press. He's described as bald with an "enormous mustache" that Gerald notes is said to be the largest mustache in all of Corfu. Though he has apparently few kind words for anyone and is generally bad-tempered, he somehow comes to like Gerald and allows him into the press - a place typically forbidden. Gerald admits that Papa Demetrios is actually quite lonely and that he enjoys spending time with Gerald because Gerald is able to share information about any array of families. Papa presents Gerald with gifts, including a "spade footed toad" that Gerald names Augustus Ticklebummy.

Donald and Max

Friends of Larry's, the two arrive at the house very late one night, obviously drunk. They wake the family but were so obviously trying to be polite that they seem to endear themselves to the family. Donald and Max have a yacht and it's in this vessel that they, along with Larry and Captain Creech, attempt to sail around the island and hit a reef, capsizing the boat.

Captain Creech

A reprobate who, having met Larry and been invited for tea, takes a liking to Mrs. Durrell and becomes a frequent visitor. He is retired from the sea and has an endless list of



bawdy songs and limericks. He eventually sends a letter to Mrs. Durrell, proposing, which earns Mrs. Durrell a great deal of teasing.

Richard Kralesky

Gerald's tutor for the majority of his time on Corfu. Kralesky is constantly weaving tales about his life in which he is invariably the hero and saves a young lady from some calamity. Kralesky's relationship seems deeper than just tutor because he is among those who spend the afternoon picnicking with the family just before they leave Corfu.



Objects/Places

Corfu

The Greek island where Gerald and his family spend a season to escape the dreary weather of England.

Roger

Gerald's dog.

Sally

The donkey Gerald receives as a birthday gift.

The Bay

A place where Gerald spends many hours, including time with his tutor, Gerald, and his dog, Roger.

Mouse Island

The small, triangular island where the old monk lives.

The Pond

A pond some three or four miles from Gerald's villa where he and Theodore often go collecting samples of marine life.

Benitses

Where Taki Thanatos lives.

The Bootle-bumtrinket

The name given the boat Leslie makes for Gerald.



Balaklaya Mansions

The name of the hotel where Gerald and his mother stay while in London.

Mr. Stavrodakis's Villa

Where the family spends the day at the end of the wine season, touring Mr. Stavrodakis's wine operation and picnicking on the beach.



Themes

A Love of Nature

Gerald's love of nature and natural history are at the heart of almost every endeavor and escapade in which he's involved. This love of nature is so complete that Gerald spends hours seeking out answers on his own and is most interested in those adults who can further his education on this point. For example, Gerald spends hours watching the dung beetles he finds in the garden of their rented villa. The dedication required for a ten-year-old boy to spend hours patiently waiting for a pair of beetles to complete their journey is incredible in itself, but Gerald's reaction when he discovers that the beetles take the ball of dung underground is also an indication of his dedication to learning. He poses the question of how he's supposed to learn about these insects if they go underground where he can't watch. Though it's a rhetorical question, he is serious in his need to find answers from some source.

Gerald's love of nature prompts him to spend hours observing but also makes him willing to go to great lengths to make observation possible. Because he doesn't have large aquariums at home, he constructs rock pools near the bay so that he can keep examples of aquatic life alive in order to observe habits. It should also be noted that he takes the initiative to set up experiments to discover the answers to questions, such as what will a crab do when there's no seaweed with which to camouflage itself.

The Importance of Family

Though Gerald greatly downplays the importance of his family, there are many clues that indicate the close family bond that exists in the Durrell family. One of these is that the family is staying together in the villa on Corfu, though it seems that the older boys - Larry and Leslie - may be old enough to be on their own. There is no mention of anyone having a tutor other than ten-year-old Gerald, which could mean that the other three children are past school age. It should be noted that there are many details of the family's lives that are omitted, so the fact that Gerald doesn't speak of tutors or schooling for the older three siblings doesn't mean it doesn't occur. Larry is a writer, and as such may be at least part of the family's source of income.

Another aspect of this theme is that Gerald's mother is willing to indulge her children in their various pursuits and the children, in turn, seem to care for their mother. This is seen when Mrs. Durrell, who has a cold, has gone to bed early on the night Donald and Max put in their appearance. Margo rushes down to intercept the two with the hope that she can keep them from waking their mother. Donald and Max are hushed repeatedly as the children try to keep the noise down so that their mother can sleep. It's also noted that Leslie makes a boat for Gerald, an indication that the older children are not indifferent to Gerald's desires.



Coming of Age

The book is a typical coming of age story in some ways, though it should be noted that Gerald's journey does not truly begin or end within this story. That said, it should be noted that the story contains some typical coming-of-age scenes. One of those can be seen when Gerald is invited to visit the Countess Mavrodaki. As he is preparing to go, he realizes the need to look his best and to be on his best behavior. This is a very advanced train of thought for a boy of Gerald's age and shows a budding maturity.

This attitude is seen in Gerald's actions and interactions with others as well. While it could be put down simply to his good manners, Gerald is very polite to adults. For example, Gerald's tutor Richard Kralefsky apparently tells a number of stories about his own exploits, usually with him taking some heroic action. Gerald notes that in one of these, Kralefsky tells of spending time with circus performers and, when a crisis occurs, of jumping into the ring with lions. When Kralefsky and Gerald go to see the performing bear, Kralefsky takes a step away from the animal and Gerald notes that this doesn't seem an appropriate action for someone who had spent time with the circus animals as Kralefsky had claimed, but Gerald doesn't make mention of this which is a mature attitude for a boy of his age.



Style

Perspective

The book is written in first person from a limited perspective, which is appropriate for the situation and story being related. The limitations are more than might normally be expected in a story of this type. Specifically, Gerald offers great details about some things while offering a very limited view of what he knows. For example, Gerald reveals the fact that his father is dead when someone asks about his family. The reader will likely have a great many questions, such as how long his father has been dead and how the family lives, but the limited details about the family does not stretch to these kinds of information.

The personal information offered by Gerald is colored by his humor. For example, when Captain Creech is waiting on the veranda of the house, Gerald's mother's immediate reaction is that it might be their banker from England. Mother has, according to Gerald, recently worried that the banker would come to talk about the "overdrafts." Gerald doesn't elaborate and this could be taken to mean that the family's financial situation is not good. However, it could also be an exaggeration on the part of the author.

Tone

The book is written in a straight-forward manner with a light, often humorous tone. The humor sometimes takes the form of sarcasm and is often seen in the descriptions of the author's family members and family friends. For example, Gerald portrays his mother as being an ineffectual widow who never quite maintains control. Larry's role as the oldest male in the family is also never mentioned. However, the family arrives in Corfu without advance plans of a place to stay. This would have been a tremendous undertaking for a widow with four children, even with one who is able to help as is apparently the case with Larry. This indicates that Gerald's mother is not nearly as incapable as Gerald makes her seem.

There are extensive descriptions of the wildlife, insects, plants and aquatics that hold Gerald's interest so completely. While many of these descriptions are lengthy, they are also generally interesting and interspersed with humor so that most readers will find them entertaining. These stories are also informational

Structure

The book is divided into three parts, titled "Perama," "Kontokali," and "Criseda." There is no explanation of these terms. Each of the parts is divided into additional chapters. Parts one and three have three chapters and part two has five. In part two, four of the chapters are numbered but there is also a chapter that is not numbered, but is named "Interlude for Spirits." This is the only chapter that is not set on Corfu and, falling in the



middle of the book as it does, it seems to be a play on words. The "interlude" is an apparent reference to a break, as would be the case if this were a play. An intermission would typically include an opportunity for refreshment, but the "spirits" in this case are ghosts rather than refreshment.

The chapters range in length from about nineteen to twenty-five pages. Chapters generally cover one or two events. For example, one chapter covers Gerald's meeting of the Countess and his return home with the owl as a pet. The chapter ends with the owl's banging around in the attic creating an uproar because Larry believes it to be a ghost in the attic. In another chapter, Gerald details the events in which he finds the baby hedgehogs and how they die, but that chapter also includes the story of Captain Creech's arrival and the sinking of the yacht. Each chapter has a title that offers some insight into the contents of that chapter.

Chapter titles include "The Christening," in which Gerald and the family are officially "christened" as members of the island; "The Bay of Olives" describing a nearby bay and how Gerald spends his time there; "They Myrtle Forests" describing a nearby forest populated with myrtle trees and the abundant wildlife to be found there; "The Pygmy Jungle" in which Gerald describes "excursions" shared with Theo; "Cuttlefish and Crabs" in which Gerald describes the marine life and his dissection of a dead, smelly sea turtle; "Interlude for Spirits" in which Gerald describes Margo's fascination with a medium in London; "The Olive Merry-Go-Round," which offers details of the old man who runs an olive press and his gift of a spade-footed toad; "Owls and Aristocracy," which is the story of Gerald's invitation to visit the countess and her gift of an owl; "Hedgehogs and Sea-Dogs," which details the failed attempt to raise hedgehogs and introduces a reprobate sea captain who proposes to Gerald's mother; "The Talking Head," in which Gerald meets a traveling gypsy with a trained bear and a "magic" talking, disembodied head; and "The Angry Barrels," which is the story of a family outing at a winery and the discovery that fermenting wine makes noise inside the storage barrels.



Quotes

"After a considerable length of time spent in pushing and pulling, the ball slowly disappeared into the depths of the earth and the beetles with it. This annoyed me. After all, they were obviously going to do something with the ball of dung, but if they did it under ground, how could I be expected to see what they did?" Gerald, having watched a pair of dung beetles, Chapter 1, Page 13

"We were now, under the quiet, bland eye of the moon, christened Corfiotes. The night was beautiful and tomorrow, we knew, another tiger-golden day lay ahead of us. It was as though England had never really existed." Chapter 1, Page 27

"They would sway through the myrtle branches on their slender legs, their wickedly barbed front arms held up in an attitude of hypocritical prayer, their little pointed faces with their bulbous straw-coloured eyes turning this way and that, missing nothing, like angular, embittered spinsters at a cocktail party." Chapter 3, Page 48

"They stayed rapturously side by side for some fifteen minutes and then, without so much as a nod or a thank you, they glided away in opposite directions, neither one displaying any signs of darts or ropes, or indeed any sign of enthusiasm at having culminated their love affair so successfully." - On watching two snails mate, Chapter 3, Page 54

"I jerked on the reins and dug my heels into Sally's ribs. It was unfortunate that my fall was broken by a large and exceptionally luxuriant bramble bush. Sally peered at me as I extricated myself, with a look of astonishment on her face." Chapter 3, Page 63

"I soon had more water spiders than I knew what to do with and I found, to my annoyance, that the mother, with complete lack of parental feeling, was happily feeding off her own progeny. So I was forced to move the babies into another aquarium, but as they grew they took to feeding upon each other and so in the end I just kept the two most intelligent-looking ones and took all the rest down to the lake and let them go." Chapter 4, Page 85

"Disappointing though this was, a dead turtle was better than no turtle at all, and so I laboriously towed his body alongside the 'Bootle-bumtrinket' and made it fast by one flipper to the side of the boat." Chapter 5, Page 104

"But the most they had ever tackled had been a very large green lizard, so I was interested to see whether they would tackle the turtle. They ran towards it, their antennae waving eagerly, and then stopped, thought about it for a bit, held a little consultation and then retreated in a body; apparently even the ants were against me, so I returned dispiritedly to the villa." Chapter 5, Page 109

"The journey by train was uneventful, except that Mother was in constant fear of being arrested by the Fascist carabinieri. This fear increased a thousandfold when, at Milan, I



drew a caricature of Mussolini on the steamy window of the carriage. Mother scrubbed at it for quite ten minutes with her handkerchief, with all the dedication of a washerwoman in a contest, before she was satisfied that it was obliterated." Interlude for Spirits, Page 129

"If I took him out and placed him on the floor, he would hop round the room after me and then, if I sat down, would climb laboriously up my leg until he reached my lap, where he would recline in a variety of undignified attitudes, basking in the heat of my body, blinking his eyes slowly, grinning up at me and gulping." - Description of Augustus Tickletummy, Chapter 6, Page 153

"'Look,' said Larry, 'you are the one who came back from London covered with ectoplasm and talking about the infinite. It's probably some hellish thing you've conjured up from one of your séances that's followed you here. That makes it your pet. You go and deal with it.'" Chapter 7, Page 185

"And so that was the last we saw of Captain Creech. But what we all referred to as Mother's great romance made an auspicious start to the year." Chapter 8, Page 210

"The first half of the morning was devoted to mathematics, and with my head full of thoughts of Pavlo, I proved to be even duller than usual, to the consternation of Kralefsky, who had hitherto been under the impression that he had plumbed the depths of my ignorance." Chapter 9, Page 223

"Lulled by the wine and the throbbing heart of the boat's engine, lulled by the warm night and the singing, I fell asleep while the boat carried us back across the warm, smooth waters to our island and the brilliant days that were not to be." Chapter 10, Page 244



Topics for Discussion

What does Gerald say about the reason for going to Corfu? What are some of the things he likes best about the area? What is it that causes them to leave?

Describe Gerald's siblings. What is known about his parents? Describe, in detail, Gerald's relationship with other family members.

Who is Theodore? Spiros? George? Richard Kralesky? Sven? Captain Creech? Papa Demetrios? Donald and Max? How do each of them come to be important to the family?

How does Gerald spend his time? List five "specimens" he captures. Describe two outings during which Gerald captures some particular creature that fascinates him. Describe two time in which he is given a gift of some particular creature.

What is Sally? How does Sally come to be part of Gerald's life? What is Roger? What is Puke and Widdle? What is Augustus Tickletummy? How does Gerald come to have this creature?

Why does Gerald go to London? Who are the relatives there? What is significant about these relatives? Describe them. Who else does Gerald meet while in London?

Describe how Gerald comes to know Pavlo. What person does Gerald meet at the same time and what is this person's relationship with Pavlo? What is the curiosity that also travels with Pavlo?