

## Book Club Discussion Outline for “The Borrowers”

### Book Summary:

A family of “borrowers” lives in a quiet country house owned by Great-Aunt Sophy in England. They live under the floorboards. Their one great fear is of being seen by human beings. One day Arrietty, the borrowers’ daughter, meets a human being boy who is visiting Great-Aunt Sophy and a unique friendship develops.

### Suggested Questions and Activities:

1. Which character in the story did you like best? Explain your answer.
2. How did Arrietty feel about how her family lived?
3. What would you like and dislike about being a borrower? Give detailed answers.
4. If you were a borrower, what kind of things would you borrow and why?
5. Discuss the ending of *The Borrowers*. What kind of things does it leave you wondering about? Does it make you want to read the next book in the series?
6. What is the difference between borrowing and stealing? Which do you think the borrowers are really doing and why?

Only pod is allowed to venture into the house above, because the danger being seen by a human is too great.] "What is a pod? Why is it too dangerous? Why can't they be seen by a human?"

*The Borrowers* can be seen as a parable of the disenfranchised and homeless of these latter days. It is this duality in appeal that makes this series comparable to Lewis Carroll's (1832-1898) **Alice's Adventures in Wonderland** and **Through the Looking Glass** and Kenneth Grahame's (1859-1932) **The Wind in the Willows**. While slanted perhaps slightly towards a female readership, with the vivacious Arrietty a prominent member of the Clock family, it is a neat counterpoint to the all-boys club of **The Wind in the Willows**.

The setting and personae of *The Borrowers* are distinctly British. While one might compare the books, in terms of their stature as children's classics, to L. Frank Baum's (1856-1919) **Wizard of Oz** series (1900-1920), it is this sort of difference which makes the recent Hollywood adaptation of *The Borrowers* so unlike the books in spirit.

Interestingly, the novels do not centre on any one member of the family to the exclusion of the others, giving the books a sense of the strength of family and community in times of crisis, without the sickly-sweetness of the **Little House on the Prairie** television adaptation of recent years.

The close-knit community of borrowers also reflects much better the life and aspirations of the average man, making the story much more believable, and not fanciful dreams of incredibly beautiful princesses and impossibly heroic warrior-princes. Better still, *The Borrowers* books do not talk down to children as do

many older children's novels, and don't have the nauseating saccharine prose and goody-two-shoes plotting of 19th, and even some 20th century works.

Part of the attraction of the Borrowers' world is the dangerous nature of their daily lives. Climbing up the kitchen furniture is rather like climbing a mountain. Everyday objects become threatening obstacles; and there is the constant terror of discovery by human 'beans'. The idea of 'borrowing' presents an interesting moral issue. In the first meeting between Pete - human bean boy - and Arrietty - Borrower girl - the boy says that borrowing is taking. Arrietty is shocked by this and insists that Borrowers borrow only what they need. Borrowers are taught that human beans exist only to provide for them. Borrowers are hunter-gatherers, risking their lives in order to survive. They have to live off their human hosts. As well as borrowing food and objects, Borrowers also borrow words, but they don't always get them quite right. Human beings become human 'beans', and Borrower names are mis-hearings of human names. Pod is borrowed from Bob, Homily from Emily and Arrietty from Henrietta. (Peagreen is an invention of the film-makers.) They are called the Clock family because they live under the grandfather clock.

Children easily identify with the Borrowers as small people struggling to survive in a large world, echoing their own efforts to learn to live in the adult world. The difference between the generations in a family is reflected in the Borrower world. Pod Clock (the father) is finding it difficult to train the younger generation of Borrowers in Borrower ways. He teaches his children the important rules of borrowing, but teenager Arrietty just wants to take risks and have fun. Pod and his wife Homily just want a quiet life and are afraid of anything new. Pod is overprotective, Homily is house-proud and nervous. The different stages of life are thus clearly displayed.

### **Chapter 7**

Answer these questions.

- (a) What do you think Jeff usually kills? Find the words in your dictionary.
- (b) Does Jeff want to kill the Borrowers? How do you know?
- (c) Jeff starts to say, 'They don't take things, they ...' Can you finish his sentence?
- (d) Look at the picture on page 15. What is happening here?
- (e) Who is flying across the room at the end of the chapter?

### **About the Author:**

Mary Norton started out as an actress and traveled all over, including England, Portugal, New York, and the Azores. After having a family and settling down a bit, she began writing in 1947. The Borrowers stories she attributes to her vivid imagination as a child growing up in the countryside of Leighton Buzzard in England.

Daughter of a physician, Mary Norton (née Spenser) was born December 10, 1903 in London, England. Raised in a Georgian manor house in Leighton Buzzard, Bedfordshire, she later attended St. Margaret's Convent school in East Grimstead, Sussex. Throughout her life, she enjoyed swimming and riding. A

member of the Old Vic Theatre Company from 1925 to 1926, she married Robert Charles Norton, a shipping magnate, in 1927, and had two girls and two boys with him. They lived in Portugal from 1926 through 1939. Upon returning to England in 1940 she worked for the BBC and for the War Office. The family moved temporarily to the United States in the early 1940s, and there she began writing books to supplement the family income. Mary Norton died of a stroke, August 29, 1992 in Hartland, Devonshire, England.

Her first book **The Magic Bed Knob; or, How to Become a Witch in Ten Easy Lessons** (1943) and the sequel **Bonfires and Broomsticks** (1947) were later reworked into **Bed-Knob and Broomstick** (1957), the basis for the 1971 Disney film **Bedknobs and Broomsticks**, starring Angela Lansbury. In 1952 the first of the books in the *Borrowers* series, **The Borrowers** was published to great critical acclaim. It won the Carnegie Medal, the Lewis Carroll Shelf Award Book, and was named an ALA Distinguished Book. This was followed by **The Borrowers Afield** (1955), **The Borrowers Afloat** (1959), **The Borrowers Aloft** (1961), **Poor Stainless: A New Story About the Borrowers** (1971), and **The Borrowers Avenged** (1982), which includes **Poor Stainless**. The last title sees the borrowers safe and sound in a new home, the Old Rectory, coincidentally one of Mary Norton's last postal addresses. *The Borrowers* has appeared as a series on British television, and has been recently made into a Hollywood movie. Another, non-series title, **Are All the Giants Dead?** (1975) is a story of what happens to retired fairy tale characters.

Mary Norton, who wrote the original novels about Borrowers on which the film and Penguin Reader are based, was born in 1903, and grew up in England. As a child, she lived in a big, old house, and used to play games with tiny dolls on the floor of her home. She was short-sighted and had to peer closely at things. This gave her the original idea for miniature humans living under the floorboards and behind the walls of old houses.

Mary Norton became an actress before marrying Robert Norton and going to live in Portugal. Here her four children were born. When war broke out in 1939, her husband joined the British Navy and she went to New York with her children. Money was short, and Mary wrote and published adult articles and stories.

In 1943 she returned to England, and began writing children's stories seriously. *The Magic Bedknob* was her first success, published in 1943, followed by *Bonfires and Broomsticks*. These two stories were later made into the popular children's film, 'Bedknobs and Broomsticks' (1971).

Real success came with the publication of the first of her Borrower stories in 1952. She went on to write five more Borrower stories. She died in 1993.

Mary Norton's Borrower world was immediately successful. Recent adaptations for radio, television and cinema prove their lasting appeal.

## ACTIVITY

### Memory game

Bring some of the following items to class:

dental floss, a spoon, a box of matches, a safety pin, some cheese, a rope, a watch, a letter

Place all the items on a desk. Tell students to close their eyes. Take one or two of the items away. Students open their eyes and identify what is missing.

**Draw Pod, Homily, and Arrietty based on the description in the book.**

Watch the recent made-for-tv movies based on *The Borrowers* books. How does the movie differ from the books? Which do you like better? Explain your answer.

**Chapters 8 & 9**

1 You are Jeff. Think of a way to catch the Borrowers. Make a picture of your idea or write it down.