

Samuel Bradshaw

Mr. Edward Pate

English IV

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Outside Reading Assignment: *Gentle Ben*

1) *Three-paragraph plot summary:*

Mark Andersen, a young boy, lives in a small fishing town in Alaska. He makes friends with a brown bear named Ben. Ben is owned by a drunk, who keeps him in captivity in a small shed. Mark secretly visited the bear each day after school, bringing it food. The owner eventually decides that he needs to get rid of the bear, so he sells chances to use him as a hunting practice target. Mark convinces his parents to buy Ben, as his pet, and they finally consent – the doctor says that Mark needs to be outside more and be more active. Mark takes Ben into the field and to the river each day. Mark begins to help his dad fish during the fishing season on the *Far North*, their fishing boat, so he can pay for the expense of taking care of Ben. He also arranges to store fish and old bread from stores in a local cannery, owned by Mike Kelly.

One day, the original owner of Ben and some of his friends from the bar go to Ben's shed. One of the people swipes at Ben with a scythe and chops off part of his ear. Ben gets angry and lashes out at the people, injuring one. Mike Kelly, Mark, and Mark's parents come and send the people from the bar away, calm Ben down, and tend to his wound. But the town is afraid of the bear; they demand that Ben be either shot or released on a distant island where he can't return. Mark's dad arranges for Ben to be placed on an island, but he never finds out which island it is. A few months later, a storm comes and ruins the *Far North*. Mark's father has to find a job, so he is hired as a watchman by an owner of a fish trap during the fishing season. The trap

is on an island. The family moves to the small cabin on the island. Mark's father discovers that Ben is on the island, but he is afraid that he may be dangerous after having lived free for a time. He doesn't tell Mark.

By this time, Ben has become a huge bear. A hunting guide, who knows where Ben is, contacts a big game hunter with the promise of shooting the biggest bear he's ever seen. Mark discovers Ben, and Ben begins to come every day to the cabin for food, instead of the stream where all the other bears go. Ben then goes up to a low mountain ledge each day for an afternoon nap. When the guide arrives with the hunter, he is frustrated. He can't find Ben in any of the usual locations where bears are. He had seen Ben at the stream before, but that was before the Andersens came. One day, when the guide leaves the island to get more supplies, the hunter decides to go off by himself. He goes to the mountain and begins to climb to the ledge that the guide has told him about. He falls, and a rock traps his leg at the base of the mountain. Ben and Mark are on their way to the mountain when they see the hunter. The hunter is terrified, but Mark leads Ben to the rock, and Ben pulls the rock off the hunter's leg. The hunter, upon finding out that the bear is tame, is angry at the guide. He decides from then on that he will be an animal photographer, instead of a hunter. He and Mark's dad form an agreement and buy the fish trap together. They all live happily ever after.

*2) Personal response:*

The book was written well. It has a complicated but coherent plot – all the pieces fit together, making it interesting to read. The characters were believable and realistic. The situation was somewhat idealized, in that it's not very likely that everything would work out perfectly, having a bear for a pet. There was a lot of history and background in the book about Alaska

before it was actually a state (it was a U.S. territory at that time), as well as a lot of information about brown bears and salmon fishing.

3) *Theme of the book:*

*Gentle Ben* seems to be a kind of petition against cruelty to animals and hunting. Near the end of the book, the hunter says, "Know what I'm going to do? I'm going to get rid of all my guns. No more shooting to kill for me." I think the author wanted to prove that bears and other animals are not always wild and unpredictable, but that they have personalities and are not just driven by instinct – that they can be tamed. Mark's dad, soon after he bought Ben, was extremely anxious about Ben, who he said was "dangerous and unpredictable and ... is a wild animal no matter how tame he seems." As he follows Mark and Ben to the river, he gradually realizes that Ben is not threatening, and the bear follows Mark's lead like a dog.

4) *Definition and example of a hero:*

A hero is someone who is anxiously engaged in a good cause. He actively pursues a worthy goal to benefit others. In the book, an example of a hero is Mark's dad. After he sees that Ben is not dangerous, he fights to save him. He buys Ben, and helps in obtaining food and finding means to store it. Later, when the townspeople want Ben killed, Mark's dad puts forth the compromise to have Ben removed to an island instead. Mark's dad is a hero for his valiant efforts to protect and take care of the brown bear.

Not only is he a hero because of Ben, but he also works hard on his boat and at the trap to support his family throughout the book. In the beginning of the book, he cared enough about his son Mark's health to buy Ben for him, despite the danger and expense. These examples exemplify a heroic attitude, and prove that Mark's dad was a hero.