

Many Happy Returns

A Reading A-Z Level X Leveled Book
Word Count: 1,811

Connections

Writing

Write a paper explaining the meaning of the title and how it relates to different events in the story.

Social Studies

Research to learn more about boomerangs.
Create a brochure that includes important details and interesting facts about them.

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Written by Marilyn Gould
Illustrated by Laura Nikiel

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Focus Question

How is the boomerang central to the story, both literally and figuratively?

Words to Know

avian	enthusiasm
boomerang	knack
desperate	recreation
dilemma	understatement
distract	wonderment

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Correlation

LEVEL X	
Fountas & Pinnell	S
Reading Recovery	40
DRA	40

"Things have a way of coming back to you, Jess, just like this **boomerang**," M'Gwump said, his arm cocked back to throw the curved piece of wood into the air.

"That's a bunch of hogwash," Jess said with a hangdog expression on his face. "Elsie will never come back to me, just like that boomer never comes back to me, M'Gwump."

Jess had spent the whole week freshening bowls of water and laying out seeds in the front and back yards, hoping to encourage his pet dove home. So far, the only birds that swooped in to nibble were little wrens and a large crow that frightened the wrens away.



Jess walked up one street of his neighborhood and down another, squinting into the treetops, searching for Elsie's silhouette among the leaves. He shook the shrubs in front of every house, whistling and calling, "C'mon, Elsie! C'mon baby! C'mon home!"

As each day came to a close, he scanned the sky from the front porch in a last **desperate** hope of seeing Elsie's beautiful white wings gliding home before dark.



At night, as he lay restless in bed, Jess thought about how he had trained Elsie to eat from his cupped hand and to snatch a seed from between his lips. When he watched television or finished homework, Elsie would sit on his shoulder and nip at his cheek, ever so gently—never hard enough to do any damage. Jess thought she—much smarter than most dogs and cats—was the best pet anyone could have.



Elsie even seemed to know how Jess was feeling. When he was in a grouchy mood, she'd cuddle quietly in his lap, close her eyes, and pretend to nap. When he felt happy, she'd fly and hop around his room acting like a clown, until Jess doubled over in laughter.

Oh, how he missed her! All night he listened for her *B'coo! B'coo!* but all he heard was an occasional emergency siren and, at dawn, the newspaper woman's car slowing down so she could lob the day's headlines onto the driveway.

When Jess wandered around all Saturday morning and didn't see even one trace of his **avian** companion, M'Gwump said, "Come on, Jess. Let's go to the park and sling my boomerang for a little **recreation**."

As if slinging a boomerang is recreation for me. Sure it's fun for M'Gwump. He's a champion boomerang slinger.

When Jess's M'Gwump was growing up in Australia, he won all sorts of medals and, even though M'Gwump liked to grumble—sometimes—about not having the same "touch," it was amazing what he could do. M'Gwump's throws made it appear as if the boomer was gone forever, but then that sleek, curved piece of wood would turn around, come back, and land right at his feet.

No matter how many times M'Gwump has shown me, it's as if the boomer's a stubborn mule where I'm concerned—never going where I want it to. That probably drives M'Gwump crazy because nothing would please him more than to make a champion boomerang slinger out of me.

So, Jess agreed to go with M'Gwump and **distract** himself from trying to find a needle in a haystack.

"I bet Elsie's on her way back to Balboa Island," Jess told M'Gwump when they arrived at the park. "She doesn't like living in this monster city any better than I do."

M'Gwump looked at Jess and came out of his pitching pose. "Home is where the heart is, Jess. Elsie just may decide she misses you more than she misses the island."

"She probably doesn't even know how to find food for herself," Jess said, his voice cracking like eggshells. "I've taken care of her since she was a baby, and she thinks everyone will treat her like their most-trusted friend. Why, she could even attempt to make friends with a mean old tomcat."

Jess looked down at the ground and kicked a dandelion as he regained control of his emotions. "Just like me—attempting to make friends with the mean kids in my new school."

M'Gwump scratched the back of his neck with the boomerang. "Kids around here haven't exactly been friendly, I guess."

"That's the **understatement** of the century," Jess muttered.

"I remember being teased for my Aussie accent when I moved here as a kid," M'Gwump recalled.

"Yep, it took some time for me to adjust to things and for things to adjust to me."

"That was a thousand years ago. This is the twenty-first century, GramPAW. Things aren't the same as when dinosaurs roamed the Earth."

The only times Jess called M'Gwump "Grampaw" was when he started talking about the "good old days." Otherwise, it was M'Gwump, the toddler version of "My Grandpa" that had stuck through Jess's childhood. It wasn't that Jess minded hearing M'Gwump's stories, even though he'd listened to most of them a zillion times before, but, once in a while, they were just too old-fashioned.

"Things sure aren't the same as when I was a kid," M'Gwump said with a chuckle. "When I was a kid I could hurl this boomerang 'til it was out of sight. Now I'm satisfied to throw it half the distance, knowing I can still make it return. Watch this toss."

M'Gwump hurled the boomerang into the air. It twirled up . . . up . . . up into the sky becoming a speck on the horizon, and then, as if M'Gwump were working a remote control airplane, it changed its course and came flying back, gliding in to land a few yards from his feet.



"It always comes back to you," Jess said with a lack of **enthusiasm**, "but not to me. Just like Elsie will probably never come back."

"I wouldn't be so fast to give up," M'Gwump said, handing over the boomerang. "Try it," he said. "Maybe today is your lucky day. Remember: wind, elevation, layover, spin, hardness."



Jess whispered to himself M'Gwump's training chant as he took the boomerang, checked the surrounding area to be sure it was clear, and threw the boomer into the air. But instead of soaring into space, it flopped around like a chicken trying to imitate a sea gull and dropped to the ground.

"I told you, M'Gwump, I always have to chase after it like a dog playing fetch with himself."

"Keep practicing," M'Gwump urged. "It takes a little doing, but once you get the **knack**, you've got it for life."

Jess took the boomerang in his right hand and tried again . . . and again, each time trying to do it just as M'Gwump had shown him. But each time it dropped to the ground with no sign of returning.

Jess looked at the boomerang and made a face. "Just one more try, boomer, and that's the last. I'm wasting time with you when I should be looking for Elsie."



He threw the boomerang into the air. It looped up, not very high, and came down right at the feet of Mitts Morgan, the meanest kid in Jess's class.

"What's the big idea throwing a stick at me?" Mitts said as he clenched his fist.

"It's not a tree branch. It's a boomerang." Jess forced a smile, but, like everything else, a smile didn't come back to him.

"What's a boomerang?" Mitts asked without unclenching his fist.

"It's a stick that you throw and it comes back to you," Jess explained.

"Yeah? Show me!" Mitts curled his upper lip.

Jess knew that was impossible, so he hastily looked around for M'Gwump. But M'Gwump had found a shady spot under a tree and was lying there with his hat over his face, snoring like Rip Van Winkle.

"Uh-well-uh, all you have to do is throw it in the air and it comes back to you," Jess stammered. "Why don't you try it?"

"You go first!" Mitts Morgan tightened his fist.

"Okay, okay!" Jess said, but he didn't mean okay. He was just stalling for time, trying to think of a way out of the **dilemma**. He knew Mitts would tell the whole story to everyone at school. He also knew how the boys would tease him and how the girls would giggle.



But then, if he didn't throw the boomerang, he'd end up with Mitts's fist in his face, and that would be just as bad, or worse. He had no choice but to try. If only this would be his lucky day!

He grasped the boomerang, taking special care to hold it at one end, exactly as M'Gwump had shown him. He pointed the other end up and away from him and took aim. His heart was pounding. His hand was shaking and his palm sweaty. He inhaled deeply, trying to relax, and he quietly pleaded, "Just this once, boomer, please come back."

After much preparation, Jess finally swung the boomerang, released it into the air as he caught sight of it, and then closed his eyes to avoid seeing it nose-dive like an out-of-control helicopter.

When Jess dared to open one eye, the boomerang was twirling through the air. It wobbled only slightly, and then to Jess's amazement, it started sailing smoothly, soaring up . . . up . . . UP . . . beyond the tallest trees, just as if M'Gwump had thrown it.

"Wow!" Mitts Morgan said.

"Wow is right," said Jess as both eyes popped wide.

"Look, it's curving around and coming back," Mitts Morgan shouted.

"It sure is," Jess said. He could hardly believe this wasn't his imagination. The boomerang had changed its course and was definitely heading back. It landed just a few yards from their feet, and Jess stared in **wonderment**.

"That's neat," Mitts Morgan said. Jess noticed he'd unclenched his fist. "Isn't your name Jess? Aren't you the new kid in our class?"

Jess nodded shyly.

"Could you show me how to throw that boomerang?"

"I don't know," Jess said, deciding now was as good a time as any to take advantage of the situation. "I only show that trick to my friends."

"Maybe we could be friends," Mitts said rather quietly, in a way he'd never before spoken to Jess. "Want to meet after school tomorrow at the park?"

"Okay." Jess smiled, and this time he got a smile back and even a wave as Mitts hopped on his bike and rode away.

"You should have seen it," Jess bragged to M'Gwump on the way home, "that boomer soared high up like a falcon and then turned around and came right back to me."

"And look who else has come back," M'Gwump said as they walked up the front path.

"B'Coo! B'Coo!" Elsie called to Jess.

Jess cuddled Elsie in his arms and winked at M'Gwump. "Things do have a way of coming back, GrandPAW, just like in the good old days."



Glossary

avian (<i>adj.</i>)	having to do with birds (p. 6)
boomerang (<i>n.</i>)	a flat, curved piece of wood designed to return to a person when thrown (p. 3)
desperate (<i>adj.</i>)	feeling or showing a loss of hope (p. 4)
dilemma (<i>n.</i>)	a situation involving a difficult choice or decision; a problem that can't be solved easily (p. 12)
distract (<i>v.</i>)	to keep a person from paying full attention to something; to cause a person to pay attention to something else (p. 6)
enthusiasm (<i>n.</i>)	strong excitement or interest (p. 9)
knack (<i>n.</i>)	a natural or unique talent for something (p. 10)
recreation (<i>n.</i>)	an activity that is fun or relaxing (p. 6)
understatement (<i>n.</i>)	the representation of something as smaller, worse, or less important than it is (p. 7)
wonderment (<i>n.</i>)	great surprise or amazed admiration (p. 14)