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This is the story of how, one by one, a man found himself a family. Almost nowhere in fiction is there a stranger, dearer, or funnier family -- and the life that the members of *The Animal Family* live together, there in the wilderness beside the sea, is as extraordinary and as enchanting as the family itself.

The Animal Family Details

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Author : Randall Jarrell , Maurice Sendak (Illustrator)

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From Reader Review *The Animal Family* for online ebook

Daniel Jr. says

I have just finished reading this book for the sixth or seventh time, and its power over me continues. It's simply gorgeous, an all-time favorite.

Wendy Darling says

What an exquisite little gem this book is. I have been bemoaning the lack of great mermaid stories far and wide, and though I've tried a great many, none have ever even touched on the surface of the enchantment and mystery that I'd hoped for until the gracious Ceridwen whispered in my ear about *The Animal Family*. This isn't really strictly a mermaid tale, however, it's really a deceptively simple but layered story of a family that is not born, but made.

Once upon a time, there was a hunter who lived alone in the woods, dreaming of those who have left him behind. In just a few pages, the author shows us the hunter's loneliness and makes us want things for him that perhaps he doesn't even let himself dream of.

But when the logs had burnt to embers and the embers had burnt away to coals, the man would lie in his bed, warm under the bearskin, and listen to the great soft sound the waves made over and over. It seemed to him it was like his mother singing.

Then one evening, as he stands out by the seal rocks on the shore, he hears a song being sung without words.

...as the hunter stared into the moonlight round the rocks, a sleek wet head came up out of the water, stared at him with shining eyes, and then sank back under and was gone. It was nothing he had ever seen before. Its long shining hair and shining skin were the same silvery blue-green, the color of the moonlight on the water.

The hunter and mermaid of course make a life together, and they add to their family with some very unexpected and funny choices. The imagery is evocative and quite beautiful, and the ideas and language were at times so clever that I was chortling as I turned the pages.

This is a story written in the traditional lovely, lyrical prose of old-fashioned fairy tales, and one that readers of classics will very much appreciate. The book was published in 1965 and was declared "a timeless and universal story" as reviewed for the New York Times Book review by none other than P.L. Travers, who also said "Occasionally, very rarely--like the spirit of delight--comes a book that is not so much a book but a kind of visitation. I had not known that I was waiting for *The Animal Family*, but when it came it was as though I had long been expecting it."

I had no idea I was waiting for this book either, but I'm very glad it finally came.

Ruthie says

pure magic. very delicate.

Adam says

For the characters in Randall Jarrell's *Animal Family*, the world is a wondrous place, full of adventure and discoveries to be made, but also a familiar one, with all the comforts that implies. The world is new and thus nothing is surprising or shocking but everything is exceedingly fascinating. It should be needless to say that this is quite refreshing. It's a perspective we ought to take in our own lives, but which the conforming pressures of society and our own deeply entrenched habits of thought and reaction often prevent us from achieving.

Animal Family is simple and elegant. It is an image of some universally recognizable potential of domestic life, a glimpse into the happy life of one unlikely household. It is not the 1950's stereotype of domesticity, but rather a pure one based on genuine, earnest, unconditional love and acceptance.

Luann says

What a sweet and interesting story! I expected more of an ending, but overall I really enjoyed this. I would have LOVED this as a child. My one question while I was reading is how did the mermaid get around so easily on land?

This was a Newbery Honor winner in 1966.

Meredith says

Every once in a while, I pick this book up again so I can sink into its still and beautiful time-before-time. "Say what you like, but such things happen. Not often, but they do happen."

Jean Fendick says

I started reading this to Katie and Mia, but had to finish it myself after the first night. We are reading this at bedtime after a few picture books so Mia usually falls asleep or just lies in bed singing to herself. It is an enjoyable story about the creation of a very unusual family which begins when a lone hunter meets a mermaid. Katie is fascinated and giddy with both the oddness and familiarities in the story.

Does anyone have any suggestions for reading bedtime stories to different ages? Generally, I let each girl pick one or two book. We read Mia's first particularly if Katie picks something we won't finish in one night. Often, Mia will not pay much attention to the chapter books -- meaning she will listen for a while and then start doing her own thing. For the most part I think this is working out fine but I don't want Mia to get bored.

When Katie was Mia's age we would read four or five bedtime stories that were appropriate for her age. Now it is tempting for me to just get on to the chapter books.

Miriam says

A hunter lives alone by the shore. Once he had parents, but they died, probably when he was quite young. Perhaps he has never had any other human contact, we aren't told; he seems to be familiar with some norms like "men don't wear necklaces" but he doesn't know what velvet is... this question isn't central, I just wonder given his loneliness why there's no question of looking for other people. Maybe he would have left eventually had he not met a mermaid.

autumnthing says

I acquired this book in the seventh grade when a teacher was clearing out some shelves. I have always adored this book; its simple but tender prose, and the delightful story it tells. It is so innocent and pleasant, yet never seems to lose touch with the gravity of loneliness, sorrow, and death. I recommend this book to everyone, especially those who, like me, cannot maintain much of an attention span for books. You will love the enchanting history of Jarrell's inspiring and unexpected "animal family". Also, Maurice Sendak's decorations throughout the book are a nice treat. I plan to make it required reading for all of my children.

Josh says

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Fantastic book. I read it to E and L. At one point, I was (ahem) overcome by the story, and got a bit choked up. This made for a very confusing moment for E and L. She followed suit, but then to deal with the trauma of seeing his father cry at a children's story, E began to laugh. This became a preferable option to L as well. As long as I had trouble getting it together, they both laughed at me. Me crying, my children laughing at me -- standard parental operating procedure.

Caroline says

I got this for Christmas when I was 9 years old and I still love to read it. Touching, lovely, timeless.

Ben Loory says

this right here is a perfect book. right here. perfect book.

Lea says

This book is slow (in a good way), mellow and sweet. It reminds me very much of the tv series Little Bear. There isn't any great drama -- just a lovely story that explores the nature of "family", and the importance of having a family to belong to.

I found the mermaid in this story to be an especially wonderful character. She is happy all the time, accepting that life throws a few unexpected problems into the mix, and understanding that the best way of dealing with those problems is by working with what you have rather than by complaining about what you don't have.

This might be a fun story to read with children, although some of the ideas and themes may be a little too complex for them. Death is also dealt with, in a very straightforward manner -- some children might still find these scenes upsetting.

Highly recommend.

Rachel says

"That's what they called me. The one who lives with the animals."

My mother read this to me as a child & the memory of it has always been a warm light in my heart.

I finally decided read this on my own, as an adult. I was around four when my mom read it to me. It's so incredible to go back & re-read the books that carved us into who we are as people. And it's magical to think that after all these years, this story is almost exactly as I remembered it.

Books we love become part of who we are and stay with us, always.

Kapila says

I came across this title in a recent edition of the HB magazine. It sat on my shelf at work, and then I brought it home, and it sat some more on top of the chest of drawers. And then I started reading it. First, in spurts -- but those short spurts were enough to want to make me continue. I found out a bit about the author, who was, not surprisingly from the lyrical quality of this book, an American poet - who translated both Chekov and Goethe. And it shows:

The hunter and the mermaid were so different from each other that it seemed to them, finally, that they were exactly alike; and they lived together and were happy.

This book tells the story of a man who lives on an island until he meets a mermaid - who decides to stay with him for a spell - a long spell, interspersed with visits to her sea people. They are self-sufficient, and by chance and planning, end up making a family with a bear, a lynx and a little human child.

The Animal Family makes a great read-aloud for boys and girls aged 5 to 9 or so (the HB article's subject was just such books). It may feel a bit slow to some because of its rhythm that relies more on episodes of story rather than a single plot; but the language and the thoughtfulness of the happenings make for a kind of magic in reading, enhanced subtly by the signature-style pen and ink illustrations of Maurice Sendak, which are equally contemplative and impersonal. The prose and the pictures make you reflect upon things, or no-things, as the case could be. By the time you reach the end of the novel, you feel like you've lived your own entire life in those pages. The day ahead of you, this moment now, feels different.

Jennifer says

Absolutely beautiful.

Cheryl says

Ok, this is the second time I've read this. I believe child me would have liked it. Now, I don't know what to think... it's like an elusive dream... it seems like just a series of anecdotes about how each new member of the family arrives and becomes integrated, but surely there's a deeper resonance that makes it worthy of a Newbery Honor.

Don't be put off by the page count. It's a small book, with huge margins, and can be read by an adult in one sitting.

I'd love to know what a family who reads it aloud together thinks about it.

Marie says

Too sophisticated to be a children's book, too simple to be for adults. I don't know what to do with it, but I love this lyrical, unexpected, and poetic book.

Sarah says

This book is totally amazing and weird, and the pictures are beautiful. It's at a low enough reading level for most intermediate ESOL students, I would think, or intermediate ABE readers, and it has a clear story. There aren't a lot of big questions in it, society-wise, although one could talk quite a bit about what makes a family, and what it is to leave your home and go to another land with another totally different way of life, and what it's like to have a mixed marriage. It's also sort of a story about adoption. It's poetry just as much as it is a novel, and quite short. The characters are very interesting and it might be a nice exercise to have students write from the point of view of some of the characters. And there's the question: where is everyone else?

What would happen if this strange family were discovered by the "real world"?

Karima says

My only regret about this book is that I didn't come across it sooner. Lucky the child (or adult) that has this book read to them! I am going to promptly purchase this for my granddaughter and any new little people that come my way.

Here is how the story is introduced:

"Say what you like, but such things do happen-not often, but they do happen."

Here is an excerpt in which the mermaid is explaining to the hunter the difference between living in the sea and living on land:

"Sometimes the sea is rough, sometimes it's calm, but down underneath it's always the same.

They (the creatures of the sea) don't know how to be bored or miserable. One day is one wave, and the next day is the next, for the sea people-and whether they're glad or whether they're sorry, the sea washes it away.

When my sister died, the next day I'd forgotten and was happy. But if you died, my heart would break.

When it storms for the (sea) people, no matter how terrible it storms, the storm isn't real-swim down a few strokes and it's calm there, down there it's always calm. And death is no different, if it's someone else who dies. We say, 'Swim away from it'; we swim away from everything.

But on land it's different. The storm's real, here, and the red leaves, and the branches when they're bare all winter. It all changes and never stops changing, and I'm here with nowhere to swim to, no way ever to leave it or forget it. No, the land's better! The land's better!"

Read this with/to anyone you love.
