



THE BEAR SUIT

Reading Guide

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Preliminary Remarks

- Teachers or students can choose tasks from the following activities.
- Many tasks are suitable for talks or presentations to a class.
- The material can be edited and students may copy instructions, questions, and answers into their exercise books.

The Author Speaks

I've always been interested in myths that involve people being transformed into animals. I find them funny and imaginative and I like the way they bridge the natural and human worlds, bringing them closer together. It's fascinating to me how these myths always tell us much more about human beings than they do about animals. People usually get turned into animals for particular reasons that have to do with their character and circumstances, for example as a punishment or to escape some terrible fate. In **The Bear Suit**, I wanted to write a modern myth about a person who turns into an animal because of his own character and desires. I also wanted to explore contemporary ideas about animals and nature, and have the chance to set a story in my beloved Sierra Nevada mountains.

About the Book

Rollo has had enough of human beings. He thinks they're greedy and selfish and destroying the planet, and he has a hard time getting along with them. His dream is to run away to the mountains where he can live wild, far from the "messed-up, man-made" world. There's only one problem: his hungry stomach. No matter how much food he carries in his backpack, it's never enough to stay out in the wilderness as long as he wants to. His answer, which comes in the form of a rented bear costume, seems like a stroke of genius—until the bear suit begins to take over his life, changing it in ways he could never have imagined.

About the Author

In a varied career, Marta Maretich has been a publisher, journalist, fiction writer and teacher of English language, composition and literature. She writes poems, short stories and nonfiction and is the author of three novels: **The Bear Suit** (2017), **The Merchants of Light** (2015) and **The Possibility of Lions** (2011). Born in Nigeria, raised in California, Marta Maretich lives in London, a city she loves for its international spirit.

Pre-Reading Questions

COVER:

What does the cover image make you think this story will be about?

TITLE:

Do you know what a bear suit is? Have you ever seen anyone wearing one? Have you ever dressed up as a bear yourself? Have you dressed up as anything else?

As You Read

FIND ANSWERS TO THESE QUESTIONS:

- When is the story set?
- Where does most of the action take place?
- Who is Rollo?
- What is his problem?
- What solution does he find?

SETTING:

This story is set in California and especially in the national parks of the Sierra Nevada mountains. In what ways is the setting important to this story? Could it have been set in a different place?

EXPLORE:

Use the internet to find information about Californian national parks like Yosemite or Sequoia National Park. Look for images of mountain scenery, campgrounds and trails. <http://www.nps.gov/state/ca/index.htm>

After Reading

SUMMARIES:

Create short summaries (one or two sentences) for each chapter.

CHARACTER:

Come up with short physical descriptions for Rollo, Doctor Elaine Minter-Moore and Ranger Quinn, using words and phrases from the book.

Describe Rollo's character. What kind of person is he? What are his reasons for wanting to go to the mountains?

What is Elaine doing in the mountains? Why is she so thin and weak? Why isn't she surprised to meet Rollo in the bear suit?

Compare Rollo's, Elaine's and Ranger Quinn's feelings about the mountains. How are they the same? How are they different?

PLOT:

When does Rollo first get the idea to use a bear suit? Why does he need it?

Besides wearing the suit, what does Rollo do to act like a bear?

What kinds of food does Rollo find to eat?

What happens when Rollo meets Elaine? What does she ask him?

What two questions does Ranger Quinn ask Rollo? What does she tell him to do?

What do the park rangers do to Rollo in the end? Why do they do it? (Hint: use the internet to research how rangers manage bears in national parks.)

How does Rollo survive on the snowy mountain? What happens to him?

THEME: TRANSFORMATIONS

Stories about people turning into other things are common around the world. Myths from many cultures tell of people changing into animals, birds, fish, insects, plants, trees and even rivers and mountains. Why do you think people invented these stories?

Come up with examples of other stories, books or movies where people become animals. Was there a reason the person turned into an animal? What happened to them after they changed?

Rollo doesn't change into a bear all at once. Find places in the story that show how Rollo is gradually changing. What signs show he's becoming more of a bear? When does he change completely?

By the end of the story, Rollo's body has changed. Has his personality also changed? Is he a better "person" or worse?

THEME: DREAMS

There are two different dreams in **The Bear Suit**, one at the beginning, another near the end. How do they help tell the story? What do you learn from them? How do they show the changes in Rollo?

WRITING ACTIVITIES:

These suggestions can also be used as prompts for classroom discussion.

Invent your own animal transformation myth. Tell the story of a person becoming an animal or an animal turning into a person. You might want to think about these questions as you write: Why does it happen to them? What is their life like after they change? Do they ever change back?

The Bear Suit is told from Rollo's point of view. If this was written from the point of view of Ranger Quinn, what would be different? What does she think of Rollo when she meets him? What does she think about Elaine and what she's doing? How is she involved in what happens to Rollo?

Rollo meets a real bear in his campsite. Write an account of this meeting as told by the bear.

Have you ever been camping in the mountains? Write about your trip, where you went, what you carried with you and what you did. Don't forget to include details of what you ate!

What happens to Rollo after the story ends? Write about where he goes and what he does next.