

Sylvester and the Magic Pebble

by William Steig

Teacher's Guide

Written By Linda Crosswhite



CLASSROOM FAVORITES

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Synopsis

Sylvester Duncan, a little donkey, finds a red pebble to add to his collection. However, he soon finds out that his pebble is different. When he touches it and makes a wish, the wish comes true!

Sylvester runs into a problem when he meets a hungry lion. He wishes that he would turn into a rock. His wish is granted, and he becomes a large rock with the magic red pebble lying beside him.

Because he can't touch the pebble, he cannot make another wish. His parents try unsuccessfully to find him. After a year has passed, his parents decide to go on a picnic on Strawberry Hill. They decide to use a large rock for their table. The rock is really Sylvester! Mr. Duncan, Sylvester's father, picks up the red pebble and places it on the rock. Sylvester wishes he were a donkey again, and is immediately reunited with his family!

Timeline

During vacation

On a rainy Saturday, Sylvester finds a bright red pebble for his rock collection. He discovers that it grants wishes.

On the way home

Sylvester encounters a lion; in a panic, he wishes to become a rock.

Later

Sylvester is a rock on Strawberry Hill; he realizes the pebble only works if he touches it, and he is stuck as a rock.

Back at home

Mr. and Mrs. Duncan, Sylvester's parents, look every where for their son.

After a month

Mr. and Mrs. Duncan begin to believe they will never see

Later

Sylvester again. Sylvester experiences fall and winter as a rock.

One day in May

Mr. and Mrs. Duncan decide to go on a picnic and try to be happy.

Later that day

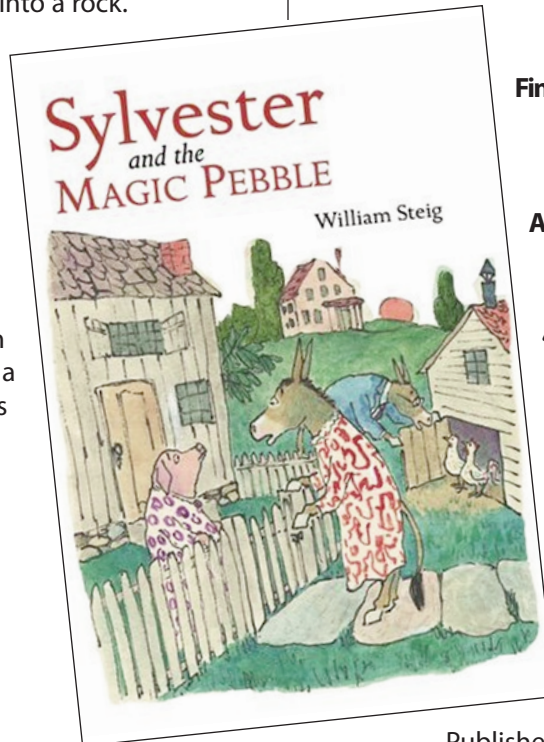
They set up their picnic on the rock that is Sylvester, then find the magic pebble and put it on the rock.

Finally

Sylvester, with the pebble touching him, is able to wish himself back to normal; he and his parents are overjoyed.

After

They all realize they have everything they want already.



Author Sketch

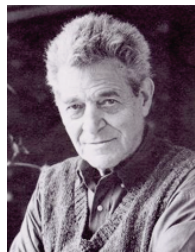
Author/illustrator William Steig (1907-2003), had a long, distinguished, and prolific career, first as an illustrator and later as the writer of children's books. Born November 14, 1907, in Brooklyn, N.Y., he grew up in the Bronx in a family of Polish-Jewish immigrants that encouraged his artistic interests. His father was a housepainter, his mother a seamstress. Steig told

Publishers Weekly that he initially wanted to be "a professional athlete, a sailor, a beachcomber, or some other form of hobo, a painter, a gardener, a novelist, a banjo-player, a traveler, anything but a rich man. ... I was going to be a seaman like (Herman) Melville, but the Great Depression put me to work as a cartoonist to support the family." Faced with providing for the family after his lost everything in the Crash of 1929, Steig turned to what he considered his most marketable talent: drawing. Within a year he was supporting the family by selling cartoons to the New Yorker for what at the time was "big money": \$40 a cartoon. Eventually dubbed "the King of Cartoons" by Newsweek magazine, Steig went on to provide over 1,600 illustrations and 117 covers to the New Yorker over seven decades.

Steig began writing children's books relatively late in life, at the invitation of a friend and fellow New Yorker

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cartoonist Bob Kraus, who was working with Harper Collins; his first children's book, a letter-puzzle book entitled *C D B!*, was published in 1968, when Steig was sixty-one years old. Over the next thirty-some years, he produced more than thirty children's books and won numerous awards, including the Caldecott Medal for his third book, *Sylvester and the Magic Pebble*. Other notable titles include *Doctor De Soto* (1982), about a dentist who is a mouse, and *Shrek!* (1990), the basis for the Oscar-nominated 2001 animated movie and its sequels.



Steig was married several times and had two daughters and a son: Lucy, a painter, Maggie, an actress, and Jeremy, a jazz flutist. He was married to artist Jeanne Doron from 1968 until his death. Steig continued working until his final years, and died at home in Boston of natural causes October 3, 2003, at the age of 95.

Critic's Corner

Steig's work was famous for its wit, style, depth, and childlike simplicity. He wrote to and for children, but never down to them, and refused to water down his vocabulary in his books. "Like Isaac Bashevis Singer, E.B. White, and a select company of others, Steig is a writer of children's books whose work reaches beyond the specific confines of a child audience," noted James E. Higgins in *Children's Literature in Education*. "[He] has the unusual childlike capacity to present incidents of wonder and marvel as if they are but everyday occurrences. He writes not out of a remembrance of childhood, but out of the essence of childhood which no adult can afford to give up or to deny." Joshua Hammer described Steig in *People* magazine as "an idiosyncratic innocent in a never-never land of his own making, waging a private war against the craziness of modern life with the pen of a master and the eye of a child." Beneath the charming drawings and poetic prose lies a complicated world seen through a child's eyes: a world of wonder, magic, joy, sorrow, ethical dilemmas, and personal transformations.

Critics have noted that his work can be enjoyed on a number of levels, by both children and adults. "His books, including *Sylvester and the Magic Pebble*, *Doctor De Soto*, and *Spinky Sulks*, are smart, funny and neither condescending nor punitive," wrote Sarah Boxer in a 1997 *New York Times* interview with Steig. "The villains are vanquished but never killed; [Lee] Lorenz [a former

New Yorker cartoon editor who wrote a biography of Steig] points out. 'There is no sense of revenge.' And they are often full of verbal mischief. In the books *CDB* (for children) and *CDC?* for older kids and adults) he uses letters to stand for words. A picture of pygmies standing around a carcass is, for example, captioned V F E-10 D L-F-N. In other books Mr. Steig manages to slip in words like "cloaca" and "cleave," little linguistic messes for the parents to clean up. Why does he do that? 'Kids like those words.'"

This unique worldview and its inventive presentation won Steig widespread critical acclaim. *Amos and Boris*, published in 1971, won the *School Library Journal* Best Book of the Year award, the *Horn Book* Fanfare award, the *New York Times Book Review's* Best Illustrated Book of the Year and Notable Book of the Year awards, and the *New York Times* Outstanding Book of the Year award, and was a National Book Award finalist and an ALA Notable Book.

Bibliography

William Steig website, <www.williamsteig.com>
"William Steig," <www.nndb.com/people>
"William Steig,"
<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/william_steig>
"William Steig," <www.crystalinks.com/hop.2.html>
"Wry Child of the Unconscious; William Steig, 90, on Art, Life and the Mysterious Orgone," by Sarah Boxer. *New York Times*, November 29, 1987.
"William Steig, 95, Dies; Tough Youths and Jealous Satyrs Scowled in His Cartoons," by Sarah Boxer. *New York Times*, October 5, 2003.
"Shrek Author Steig Dies at Age 95." BBC News, Oct. 3, 2003.

Selected Works by William Steig

About People (1939)
The Lonely Ones (1942)
All Embarrassed (1944)
Small Fry (1944)
Persistent Faces (1945)
Agony in the Kindergarten (1950)
The Rejected Lovers (1951)
C D B! (1968)
Roland the Minstrel Pig (1968)
The Bad Island (1969, aka *Rotten Island*)
Sylvester and the Magic Pebble (1969, banned)
An Eye for Elephants (1970)

The Bad Speller (1970)
Amos and Boris (1971)
Dominic (1972)
The Real Thief (1973)
Farmer Palmer's Wagon Ride (1974)
Abel's Island (1976)
The Amazing Bone (1976)
Caleb & Kate (1977)
Tiffky Doofky (1978)
Gorky Rises (1980)
Doctor De Soto (1982)
C D C? (1984)
Yellow & Pink (1984)
Solomon the Rusty Nail (1985)
Brave Irene (1986)
The Zabajaba Jungle (1987)
Spinky Sulks (1988)
The Old Testament Made Easy (1990, with Jeanne Doron)
Shrek! (1990)
Doctor De Soto Goes to Africa (1992)
Alpha Beta Chowder (1992, with Jeanne Doron)
Zeke Pippin (1994)
Grown-Ups Get to Do All the Driving (1995)
The Toy Brother (1996)
Toby, Where Are You? (1997)
Pete's a Pizza (1998)
Wizzil (2000)
Made for Each Other (2000)
Patch & Polly (2002)
When Everybody Wore a Hat (2003, memoir)

Selected Awards

Abel's Island - Published 1976
Newbery Honor Book
ALA Notable Book
Horn Book Fanfare
Boston Globe-Horn Book Award, Honor Book
New York Times Book Review Notable Children's Book of the Year
New York Times Outstanding Book of the Year

The Amazing Bone - Published 1976
Caldecott Honor Book
ALA Notable Book
School Library Journal Best Book of the Year
School Library Journal Best of the Best Books
Horn Book Fanfare
Boston Globe-Horn Book Award, Honor Book for Illustration
New York Times Book Review Notable Children's Book of the Year
New York Times Outstanding Book of the Year

Amos and Boris - Published 1971
National Book Award Finalist
ALA Notable Book
School Library Journal Best Book of the Year
Horn Book Fanfare
New York Times Book Review Best Illustrated Book of the Year
New York Times Book Review Notable Book of the Year
New York Times Outstanding Book of the Year

Brave Irene - Published 1986
Booklist Editors' Choice
Horn Book Fanfare
New York Times Book Review Best Illustrated Book of the Year
Publishers Weekly Notable Children's Book of the Year

Caleb & Kate - Published 1977
National Book Award Finalist
ALA Notable Book
Horn Book Fanfare
New York Times Book Review Notable Children's Book of the Year
New York Times Outstanding Book of the Year

Doctor De Soto - Published 1982
American Book Award, Children's Picture Book, Co-winner
Newbery Honor Book
ALA Notable Book
Booklist Best Book of the 80's
School Library Journal Best Book of the Year
Horn Book Fanfare
Boston Globe-Horn Book Award, Honor Book for Illustration
New York Times Book Review Notable Children's Book of the Year
New York Times Outstanding Book of the Year
United States Honor Book, IBBY
International Reading Association-Children's Book Council Children's Choice

Dominic - Published 1972
National Book Award Finalist
ALA Notable Book
Horn Book Fanfare
Christopher Award for Juvenile Fiction

Farmer Palmer's Wagon Ride - Published 1974
ALA Notable Book
Horn Book Fanfare
International Reading Association-Children's Book

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Council Children's Choice

Gorky Rises - Published 1980

New York Times Book Review Best Illustrated Book of the Year

New York Times Book Review Notable Children's Book of the Year

New York Times Outstanding Book of the Year

The Real Thief - Published 1973

ALA Notable Book

New York Times Book Review Notable Children's Book of the Year

New York Times Outstanding Book of the Year

International Reading Association-Children's Book

Council Children's Choice

Shrek! - Published 1990

School Library Journal Best Book of the Year

Publishers Weekly Notable Children's Book of the Year

Spinky Sulks - Published 1988

ALA Notable Book

Horn Book Fanfare

New York Times Book Review Notable Children's Book of the Year

New York Times Outstanding Book of the Year

Publishers Weekly Notable Children's Book of the Year

The Zabajaba Jungle - Published 1987

Publishers Weekly Notable Children's Book of the Year

Cross-Curricular Sources

Movies/DVDs

Shrek movies: *Shrek* (2001), *Shrek 2* (2004), *Shrek the Third* (2007)

Internet

William Steig website, <www.williamsteig.com>

"William Steig lesson plans and teaching tips,"

<www.webenglishteacher.com/steig.htm>

"William Steig Teacher Resource File,"

<falcon.jmu.edu/~ramseyil/steig.htm>

Reference Books

The World of William Steig, Lee Lorenz, 1998

Related Reading

Baillie, Marilyn, *Magic Fun*

Baylor, Byrd, *Everybody Needs a Rock*

Brown, Marcia, *Stone Soup*

Carrick, Carol, *Aladdin and the Wonderful Lamp*

Chapman, Carol, *Barney Bibble's Magic Dandelions*

Cobb, Vicki, *Magic . . . Naturally: Science Entertainments and Amusements*

De Paola, Tomie, *Strega Nona*

Evans, David & Williams, Claudette, *Seasons & Weather*

Galdone, Paul, *Magic Porridge Pot*

Hall, Donald, *Ox-Cart Man*

Ladizinsky, Eric, *Magical Science: Magic Tricks for Young Scientists*

Littledale, Freya, *Magic Fish*

Lobel, Arnold, *Frog and Toad All Year*

Oppenheim, Joanne, *Donkey's Tale*

Podendorf, Ilia, *Seasons*

Rhee, Nami, *Magic Spring*

Steig, William, *Amazing Bone*

Amos and Boris

Brave Irene

Caleb & Kate

Doctor DeSoto

Farmer Palmer's Wagon Ride

Solomon, *The Rusty Nail*

Wolkstein, Diane, *Magic Wings: A Tale From China*

Themes and Motifs

- families
- animals
- magic
- wishes
- rocks/pebbles

Goals and Objectives

- Predict words in context
- Recognize supporting details
- Determine story structure

The following suggested plans and activities can be used with this book. You may choose to select and modify these to best meet the needs and interests of your students.

Comprehension Study

Building the background

1. Hide a pebble in your fist. Show your fist to the children and ask them to guess what is hidden in your hand. After an appropriate length of time, display the pebble. Ask the children what we call this object. List their responses on the board or a chart. Example:
 - rock
 - stone
 - pebble

2. Ask the students if they think this pebble could be magic. Record their responses. You may wish to encourage them to discuss stories about magic, tell about magic tricks they've seen or what magic means to them.
3. Display other books that relate to magic. (Refer to the Related Reading section for possible selections.)

Introducing the book

1. Present the book to the students. Have them identify the title and author/illustrator. As the children observe the cover, generate responses concerning the characters and the setting.
2. Have the students make predictions about the story based on the title and the (front and back) cover illustrations.

Setting the purpose for reading

Have the children read to confirm their predictions and gain the meaning of the story.

Post Reading: Confirming, analyzing, synthesizing or evaluating the reading.

1. Encourage the children to share their feelings about the story. Assist the children in confirming their predictions.
2. Initiate a small group or whole class discussion of the story. Some of the following questions may help to start and/or guide this process:
 - What did Sylvester do to determine that the pebble was magic?
 - Why did Sylvester choose to be turned into a rock? What would you have chosen?
 - What were some of the feelings Sylvester had when he was a rock?
 - What did Mr. and Mrs. Duncan do to try to find Sylvester?
 - How did Mr. and Mrs. Duncan try to make themselves feel better?
 - What do you do to cheer yourself up when you're feeling sad?
 - What would you have asked Sylvester when he turned back into a donkey?
 - Why do you think Mr. Duncan put the magic pebble in the safe?
 - Do you think the Duncans will use the pebble again? Why?
 - What would you do if the magic pebble was yours?

Predicting words in context

1. Use the cloze technique to have the students predict words and their meanings within the context

of the story. This strategy can be presented in two ways:

2. In the text, cover a whole word with a "Post-It" or a piece of paper. Have the students predict the "covered" word by using the context of the sentence/story and any picture clues. Remove the cover to confirm their predictions.
3. Make an overhead transparency from the text. Show the transparency on the overhead. Cover up one word at a time. Have the students read the page, predicting the covered word. Remove the cover to confirm their predictions. This may be done several times, covering and uncovering different words each time.

As some of the words in this story may be new to the students' reading vocabularies, you may wish to extend this lesson by listing these on a chart with other words that mean the same. Example:

Extraordinary
Ceased
Ratified
Perplexed

Recognizing supporting details

Have the students revisit the books (both story and illustrations) to determine and note how the author has provided details in both the pictures and words to add meaning and interest to the story. Record some of the supporting details on the board or a chart.

Determining story structure

Discuss the five major story elements with the students: setting, characters, problem, action and resolution/outcome.

Across the Curriculum

The following activities may be introduced after the story, integrated into the appropriate content areas or used as learning center activities.

Writing

1. Take the class for a walk around the neighborhood to allow each student to find a small pebble or rock, or have each child bring one to class. (These will be used in various ways.) Provide the students with the writing supplies necessary to write a detailed description of their pebbles and rocks. Display the pebbles and rocks with their descriptions.

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2. Initiate a discussion about wishes, how we make them, when, why, etc. Have the students write three wishes they would like to make and an explanation of each wish. You may have students make a "wish list."
3. Revisit this book to study the author/illustrator's style. Write a sequel to *Sylvester and the Magic Pebble*. This activity can be done individually, in small groups or as a class. Illustrations can be drawn to add detail and interest to the story.

Math

1. Discuss the hobby of collecting with children. Use the types of collections the children have mentioned to form and discuss a graphic representation of this information. Example:
 - Collection
 - rocks/pebbles
 - seashells
 - books
 - stamps
 - music boxes
 - stuffed animals
2. Provide the students with pebbles and rocks of various sizes and shapes. These can be used in the following ways:
 - Classify and sort according to size, shape, and/or color.
 - Provide a scale and recording sheet for students to use in estimating and weighing these.
3. Provide each student with a 3-by-5-inch card. On the front of the card, have each student write a story problem. The actual mathematical equation and answer can be recorded on the back of the card. These cards can be placed in a file in the math center. Students can work and self-correct these problems.

Social Studies

1. Use the first illustration in the story to initiate a discussion about collections. Ask the students what people collect and why. Give them an opportunity to describe and/or show a collection they have or would like to have. (This information can be used with Math Activity 1 as well.)
2. Discuss ways rocks, stones, etc., are used by people and animals. These can be listed on the board or a chart. Example:
 - People
 - Animals
 - to build houses for homes
 - to collect for hiding
 - in jewelry to sun themselves
3. Visit a science or geological museum to learn more

about rocks, their formation and effect on various cultures, if possible. OR Invite an archaeologist and/or lapidary to discuss their occupation(s).

4. Have the students revisit the book to review where Sylvester lived. Present the fact that Strawberry Hill was less than a mile away from his home. Discuss the places within a mile radius of the school. As a class, make a map with the school at the center and designate the major landmarks within a mile of the school. Students can also mark the location of their homes and any other points of interest that are significant to them.

Science/Health

1. Revisit the book to initiate a discussion about the four seasons and how our senses alert us to the happenings of each. Following the discussion, divide the class into four groups. Assign a season to each group. Have students list characteristics of their assigned season, including what the season feels, smells, sounds, and even tastes like. Upon completion, the groups may share what they have recorded. If desired, comments from the other groups may be added.
2. Have the children use the rocks they have collected to try various experiments:
 - Place several rocks in water to observe what happens.
 - Feel the rocks and describe the various textures.
 - Select several rocks. Place each rock inside a cloth or paper bag. Break each rock inside the bag by hitting the bag with a hammer. (This activity should be done with care and by the teacher.)
 - Discuss how the rocks' breaks differ inside.
 - Observe rocks with a magnifying glass and/or under a microscope. Discuss observations.
3. Have each student select one form of rock to research. Provide resource books and materials to allow students to complete a report on the type of rock they have chosen. The written reports can be displayed with their chosen rock (real, photo or illustration).
4. Give the students an opportunity to perform various science "magic" tricks using the magic books listed in the Related Reading Section or any other books you may have available.
5. Review the menu for the Duncans' picnic, noting that these are foods that would probably be enjoyed by donkeys. Discuss the main food groups and create a healthy picnic menu that could be used by the class. Record this. (This can be used as part

of the Culminating Activity.)

Art

1. Have each of the students select one portion of the story to illustrate on an 8 1/2-by-11-inch sheet of drawing paper using crayons and/or markers. Provide 9 inch-by-12 inch sheets of construction paper, glue and scissors. Instruct the students to glue their pictures on a sheet of construction paper. Allow these to dry. Next, have each student draw puzzle shapes on the back of the construction paper. (You may wish to remind them not to make too many shapes!) Have them cut along the lines they have drawn, turn the pieces right side up and put them together again. These "puzzle pictures" can each be stored in an envelope and shared with other students.
2. Let each of the students use a rock or pebble (this can be the one used for Writing Activity 1) to create an animal, person or object. Supply sticks, buttons, yarn, fabric, construction paper, paint, brushes and any other media necessary to allow for these creations. You may wish to extend this activity by allowing time for the students to write about their creation.
3. Divide the students into four groups. Assign each group the task of creating a mural of one of the four seasons. Supply each group with a large sheet of butcher paper, crayons, markers and any other appropriate art media for this activity. These can be labeled and displayed for all to view.
4. Have the students work in pairs to design and create a mosaic picture by gluing pebbles or aquarium gravel on sheets of 9-by-12-inch poster board.

Music

Teach the students, "When You Wish Upon a Star," and any other songs about wishes. This is also an appropriate time to teach any other songs that could relate to this story.

Drama

Divide the class into two groups: "readers" and "players." The "readers" will determine which segment of the story each will read aloud. The "players" will choose or be assigned a character part. Props may be added, if desired. As the "readers" read the story, the "players" act out the scenes.

Evaluating the Reading Experience

- Keep a teacher's journal of those strategies that best helped the students understand the story.
- Record the children's behaviors and learning by jotting

these on "Post-its." These comments can later be transferred to a journal containing daily comments on the students.

- Prepare a chart to record the completion of the projects for each of the students.
- Record the students' responses as they briefly retell the story.
- Collect a piece of each child's writing to evaluate.
- Develop criteria for evaluating student work or refer to established forms of evaluation to assess the projects and activities completed.

Alternate Assessment

1. Give the students an opportunity to present their dramatization of the story to another class. They can also display their writing, art work and projects as they share the information they have learned. You may wish to include a picnic using the menu developed during Science/Health Activity #5, as part of this activity. Share other books (see Related Reading section) and/or videos that relate to wishes.
2. Initiate an author study of William Steig.

Vocabulary Test

(20 points)

Match each boldface word with its meaning listed below. Write the letter of the appropriate meaning in the space next to the sentence number.

- ___ 1. One of his hobbies was **collecting** pebbles of unusual shape and color.
- ___ 2. On a rainy Saturday during vacation he found a quite **extraordinary** one.
- ___ 3. As he was studying this **remarkable** pebble, he began to shiver.
- ___ 4. It didn't stop gradually as rains usually do. It **CEASED**.
- ___ 5. In all his young life Sylvester had never had a wish **gratified** so quickly.
- ___ 6. He started home, eager to **amaze** his father and mother with his magic pebble.
- ___ 7. He could have wished many things, but he **panicked** and couldn't think carefully.
- ___ 8. Mr. and Mrs. Duncan paced the floor, **frantic** with worry.
- ___ 9. At dawn, they went about **inquiring** of all the neighbors.
- ___ 10. You can imagine the scene that followed—the embraces, the kisses, the questions, the answers, the loving looks, the fond **exclamations!**

- a. Highly unusual; noteworthy; worth remarking on
- b. Became suddenly scared and confused
- c. Asking questions; seeking answers or information
- d. Strong or sudden cry; excited speaking
- e. Surprise; astound
- f. Out of the ordinary; extra special
- g. To stop right away.
- h. Answered, acted upon; satisfied
- i. Finding and saving different examples of a thing
- j. Agitated and frightened; beside themselves

Comprehension Test

Part I: True/False (20 points)

In the space provided, write T if the statement is completely true, and F if any part is false.

- _____ 1. Sylvester wished he was a butterfly.
- _____ 2. Sylvester was crossing Strawberry Hill when he saw the lion.
- _____ 3. Mr. and Mrs. Duncan weren't worried; Sylvester had run away before.
- _____ 4. One of Sylvester's hobbies was collecting pebbles.
- _____ 5. Mr. and Mrs. Duncan found Sylvester right away.
- _____ 6. Nobody helped them look for him.
- _____ 7. After they had Sylvester back, they threw the magic pebble away.
- _____ 8. Sylvester was an only child.
- _____ 9. Once the pebble was touching him, Sylvester was able to wish himself back to his normal form.
- _____ 10. After Sylvester was back, the family realized they already had everything they could wish for.

Part II: Circle the Answer (20 points)

Circle the word that correctly completes the sentence.

After a (**week, month**) of searching, Mr. and Mrs. Duncan no longer knew what to do.

As a rock, Sylvester was (**asleep, awake**) most of the time.

Sylvester found the walk (**during vacation, after school**).

Sylvester wanted the bright (**red, blue**) pebble for his collection.

Sylvester was (**surprised, bored**) when the rain immediately ceased.

Mr. and Mrs. Duncan went on a picnic in (**May, June**).

Even though they couldn't find him, Sylvester was (**less than a mile, only five miles**) away.

Sylvester felt he would be a rock (**forever, only a short time**).

His parents were (**angry, very happy**) when they finally saw him again.

After Sylvester was back to normal, he and his family felt they (**needed more stuff, had all they needed**).

Answer Key

VOCABULARY TEST (20 POINTS)

1. i
2. f
3. a
4. g
5. h
6. e
7. b
8. j
9. c
10. d

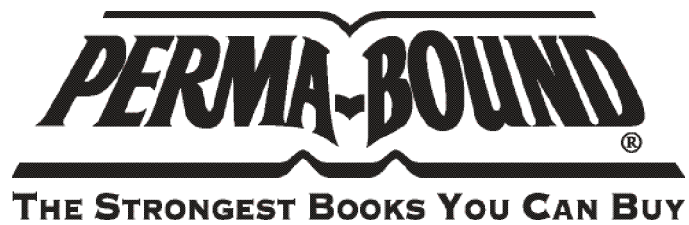
COMPREHENSION TEST

Part I: True/False (20 points)

1. F
2. T
3. F
4. T
5. F
6. F
7. F
8. T
9. T
10. T

Part II: Circle the Answer (20 points)

1. month
2. asleep
3. during vacation
4. red
5. surprised
6. May
7. less than a mile
8. forever
9. very happy
10. had all they needed



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