1059CH08

6 Mijbil the Otter

Gavin Maxwell

Before You Read

Gavin Maxwell lives in a cottage in Camusfearna, in the West Highlands in Scotland. When his dog Jonnie died, Maxwell was too sad to think of keeping a dog again. But life without a pet was lonely... Read what happened then, in Maxwell's own words.

Activity

1. *Do you have a pet? If you do, you perhaps know that a pet is a serious responsibility. Read in the box below what the SPCA — the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals — has to say about how to care for a pet.*

Owning a pet is a lifetime of commitment (up to ten years or more if you own a dog or a cat) involving considerable responsibility. The decision to acquire one, therefore, should be made by the whole family. Without full agreement by everyone, the pet could end up unwanted. Puppies and kittens are so adorable, it is easy to understand why adults and children alike would be attracted to them. Unfortunately their cute looks are often a disadvantage, because people purchase them without consideration and the knowledge on how to take proper care of them. The basic points you should keep in mind before adopting a puppy are:

- an annual dog licence in accordance with government regulations
- its annual vaccination against major diseases
- toilet training
- regular grooming and bathing
- obedience training
- don't forget you should feed your pet a balanced diet
- socialisation (many dogs are kept confined in cages or tied up to stop them from dirtying the garden or from chewing on shoes — this is wrong) is very important
- a daily dose of exercise, affection and play.

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Reading up on the subject beforehand is another important requirement and will guide you towards being a responsible pet owner. Selected pet shops and major book stores provide books on the care of various breeds/pets.

2. *Imagine someone has gifted you a pet. With your partner's help, make a list of the things you need to know about the pet in order to take good care of it. One has been done for you.*

   (i) The food it eats.

   (ii) _____

   (iii) _____

   (iv) _____

   (v) _____

3. *Otters are found in large numbers in the marshes (i.e. wet areas near lakes, rivers or seas) near Basra, a town in Iraq. Imagine you wanted to bring an otter from Iraq to London, as a pet. What special arrangements would you need to make for your pet otter? You would need to find a place with lots of water, for example. What other points should you think about? The information about Iraq and London given below may help you.*

Iraq	*London*
Iraq has mostly broad plains and marshes along the Iranian border in the south, with large flooded areas. A large part of Iraq's land area is desert, so it has cool winters and dry, hot and cloudless summers. The mountain areas near Iran and Turkey have cold winters. There is heavy snowfall there, and when the snow melts in spring, it causes floods in central and southern Iraq.	London has a large population and is a very busy city. In addition to multi-storeyed buildings, however, it has many open spaces or parks. It has a temperate climate (i.e. it is neither very hot, nor very cold), with regular but generally light rainfall or snow throughout the year. The warmest month is July, and the coolest month is January. February is the driest month. Snow is not very common in London.

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I

EARLY in the New Year of 1956 I travelled to Southern Iraq. By then it had crossed my mind that I should like to keep an otter instead of a dog, and that Camusfearna, ringed by water a stone's throw from its door, would be an eminently suitable spot for this experiment.

crossed my mind (a thought) came into my mind

a stone's throw a very short distance

When I casually mentioned this to a friend, he as casually replied that I had better get one in the Tigris marshes, for there they were as common as mosquitoes, and were often tamed by the Arabs. We were going to Basra to the Consulate-General to collect and answer our mail from Europe. At the Consulate-General we found that my friend's mail had arrived but that mine had not.

I cabled to England, and when, three days later, nothing had happened, I tried to telephone. The call had to be booked twenty-four hours in advance. On the first day the line was out of order; on the second the exchange was closed for a religious holiday. On the third day there was another breakdown. My friend left, and I arranged to meet him in a week's time. Five days later, my mail arrived.

cabled sent a message by telegraph

I carried it to my bedroom to read, and there, squatting on the floor, were two Arabs; beside them lay a sack that squirmed from time to time. They handed me a note from my friend: "Here is your otter..."

squirmed twisted about

II

With the opening of that sack began a phase of my life that has not yet ended, and may, for all I know, not end before I do. It is, in effect, a thraldom to otters, an otter fixation, that I have since found to be shared by most other people, who have ever owned one.

thraldom (old fashioned) being under the control of

fixation a very strong attachment or feeling

The creature that emerged from this sack on to the spacious tiled floor of the Consulate bedroom resembled most of all a very small, medievally-conceived, dragon. From the head to the tip of the

medievally-conceived an imagination of the Middle Ages

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tail he was coated with symmetrical pointed scales of mud armour, between whose tips was visible a soft velvet fur like that of a chocolate-brown mole. He shook himself, and I half expected a cloud of dust, but in fact it was not for another month that I managed to remove the last of the mud and see the otter, as it were, in his true colours.

Mijbil, as I called the otter, was, in fact, of a race previously unknown to science, and was at length christened by zoologists *Lutrogale perspicillata maxwelli,* or Maxwell's otter. For the first twenty-four hours Mijbil was neither hostile nor friendly; he was simply aloof and indifferent, choosing to sleep on the floor as far from my bed as possible. The second night Mijbil came on to my bed in the small hours and remained asleep in the crook of my knees until the servant brought tea in the morning, and during the day he began to lose his apathy and take a keen, much too keen, interest in his surroundings. I made a body-belt for him and took him on a lead to the bathroom, where for half an hour he went wild with joy in the water, plunging and rolling in it, shooting up and down the length of the bathtub underwater, and making enough slosh and splash for a hippo. This, I was to learn, is a characteristic of otters; every drop of water must be, so to speak, extended and spread about the place; a bowl must at once be overturned, or, if it will not be overturned, be sat in and sploshed in until it overflows. Water must be kept on the move and made to do things; when static it is wasted and provoking.

christened
named

hostile
unfriendly

aloof and indifferent
keeping a distance

apathy
absence of interest

so to speak
as it were (one could say this)

provoking
causing anger or some other reaction



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Two days later, Mijbil escaped from my bedroom as I entered it, and I turned to see his tail disappearing round the bend of the corridor that led to the bathroom. By the time I got there he was up on the end of the bathtub and fumbling at the chromium taps with his paws. I watched, amazed; in less than a minute he had turned the tap far enough to produce a trickle of water, and after a moment or two achieved the full flow. (He had been lucky to turn the tap the right way; on later occasions he would sometimes screw it up still tighter, chittering with irritation and disappointment at the tap's failure to cooperate.)

fumbling
trying to do something in a clumsy manner

Very soon Mij would follow me without a lead and come to me when I called his name. He spent most of his time in play. He spent hours shuffling a rubber ball round the room like a four-footed soccer player using all four feet to dribble the ball, and he could also throw it, with a powerful flick of the neck, to a surprising height and distance. But the real play of an otter is when he lies on his back and juggles with small objects between his paws. Marbles were Mij's favourite toys for this pastime: he would lie on his back rolling two or more of them up and down his wide, flat belly without ever dropping one to the floor.

flick
a quick, light movement

Oral Comprehension Check

1. *What 'experiment' did Maxwell think Camusfearna would be suitable for?*
2. *Why does he go to Basra? How long does he wait there, and why?*
3. *How does he get the otter? Does he like it? Pick out the words that tell you this.*
4. *Why was the otter named 'Maxwell's otter'?*
5. *Tick the right answer. In the beginning, the otter was*
   - *aloof and indifferent*
   - *friendly*
   - *hostile*
6. *What happened when Maxwell took Mijbil to the bathroom? What did it do two days after that?*

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III

The days passed peacefully at Basra, but I dreaded the prospect of transporting Mij to England, and to Camusfearna. The British airline to London would not fly animals, so I booked a flight to Paris on another airline, and from there to London. The airline insisted that Mij should be packed into a box not more than eighteen inches square, to be carried on the floor at my feet. I had a box made, and an hour before we started, I put Mij into the box so that he would become accustomed to it, and left for a hurried meal.

dreaded the prospect
was in great fear of something that would happen in the future

When I returned, there was an appalling spectacle. There was complete silence from the box, but from its airholes and chinks around the lid, blood had trickled and dried. I whipped off the lock and tore open the lid, and Mij, exhausted and blood-spattered, whimpered and caught at my leg. He had torn the lining of the box to shreds; when I removed the last of it so that there were no cutting edges left, it was just ten minutes until the time of the flight, and the airport was five miles distant. I put the miserable Mij back into the box, holding down the lid with my hand.

an appalling spectacle
a shocking scene

whipped off
quickly took off

I sat in the back of the car with the box beside me as the driver tore through the streets of Basra like a ricochetting bullet. The aircraft was waiting to take off; I was rushed through to it by infuriated officials. Luckily, the seat booked for me was at the extreme front. I covered the floor around my feet with newspapers, rang for the air hostess, and gave her a parcel of fish (for Mij) to keep in a cool place. I took her into my confidence about the events of the last half hour. I have retained the most profound admiration for that air hostess; she was the very queen of her kind. She suggested that I might prefer to have my pet on my knee, and I could have kissed her hand in the depth of my gratitude. But, not knowing otters, I was quite unprepared for what followed.

ricochetting bullet
a bullet which changes direction after hitting a surface

infuriated
very angry

took her into my confidence
here, shared with her my experiences or secrets

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Mij was out of the box in a flash. He disappeared at high speed down the aircraft. There were squawks and shrieks, and a woman stood up on her seat screaming out, "A rat! A rat!" I caught sight of Mij's tail disappearing beneath the legs of a portly white-turbaned Indian. Diving for it, I missed, but found my face covered in curry. "Perhaps," said the air hostess with the most charming smile, "it would be better if you resumed your seat, and I will find the animal and bring it to you."

portly
stout

I returned to my seat. I was craning my neck trying to follow the hunt when suddenly I heard from my feet a distressed chitter of recognition and welcome, and Mij bounded on to my knee and began to nuzzle my face and my neck.

bounded on to
climbed up quickly

nuzzle
to rub gently with the nose

Oral Comprehension Check

1. *How was Mij to be transported to England?*
2. *What did Mij do to the box?*

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3. *Why did Maxwell put the otter back in the box? How do you think he felt when he did this?*
4. *Why does Maxwell say the airhostess was "the very queen of her kind"?*
5. *What happened when the box was opened?*

IV

After an eventful journey, Maxwell and his otter reach London, where he has a flat.

Mij and I remained in London for nearly a month. He would play for hours with a selection of toys, ping-pong balls, marbles, rubber fruit, and a terrapin shell that I had brought back from his native marshes. With the ping-pong ball he invented a game of his own which could keep him engrossed for up to half an hour at a time. A suitcase that I had taken to Iraq had become damaged on the journey home, so that the lid, when closed, remained at a slope from one end to the other. Mij discovered that if he placed the ball on the high end it would run down the length of the suitcase. He would dash around to the other end to ambush its arrival, hide from it, crouching, to spring up and take it by surprise, grab it and trot off with it to the high end once more.

Outside the house I exercised him on a lead, precisely as if he had been a dog. Mij quickly developed certain compulsive habits on these walks in the London streets, like the rituals of children who on their way to and from school must place their feet squarely on the centre of each paving block; must touch every seventh upright of the iron railings, or pass to the outside of every second lamp post. Opposite to my flat was a single-storied primary school, along whose frontage ran a low wall some two feet high. On his way home, but never on his way out, Mij would tug me to this wall, jump on to it, and gallop the full length of its thirty yards, to the hopeless distraction both of pupils and of staff within.

terrapin shell
the shell of small turtle found in North America

engrossed
completely interested in

ambush
to attack suddenly from a hidden position

compulsive habits
habits impossible to control

upright
(here) post or rod placed straight up

distraction
something that takes away one's attention from what one is doing

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It is not, I suppose, in any way strange that the average Londoner should not recognise an otter, but the variety of guesses as to what kind of animal this might be came as a surprise to me. Otters belong to a comparatively small group of animals called Mustellines, shared by the badger, mongoose, weasel, stoat, mink and others. I faced a continuous barrage of conjectural questions that sprayed all the Mustellines but the otter; more random guesses hit on 'a baby seal' and 'a squirrel.' 'Is that a walrus, mister?' reduced me to giggles, and outside a dog show I heard 'a hippo'. A beaver, a bear cub, a leopard — one, apparently, that had changed its spots — and a 'brontosaur'; Mij was anything but an otter.

barrage of conjectural questions
a stream of questions filled with guesses

But the question for which I awarded the highest score came from a labourer digging a hole in the street. I was still far from him when he laid down his tool, put his hands on his hips, and began to stare. As I drew nearer I saw his expression of surprise and affront, as though he would have me know that he was not one upon whom to play jokes. I came abreast of him; he spat, glared, and then growled out, "Here, Mister — *what is that supposed to be?*"

Oral Comprehension Check

1. *What game had Mij invented?*
2. *What are 'compulsive habits'? What does Maxwell say are the compulsive habits of*
   (i) school children
   (ii) Mij?
3. *What group of animals do otters belong to?*
4. *What guesses did the Londoners make about what Mij was?*

Thinking about the Text

1. What things does Mij do which tell you that he is an intelligent, friendly and fun-loving animal who needs love?
2. What are some of the things we come to know about otters from this text?
3. Why is Mij's species now known to the world as Maxwell's otter?

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4. Maxwell in the story speaks for the otter, Mij. He tells us what the otter feels and thinks on different occasions. Given below are some things the otter does. Complete the column on the right to say what Maxwell says about what Mij feels and thinks.

What Mij does	*How Mij feels or thinks*
plunges, rolls in the water and makes the water splosh and splash	
Screws the tap in the wrong way	
Nuzzles Maxwell's face and neck in the aeroplane	

5. Read the story and find the sentences where Maxwell describes his pet otter. Then choose and arrange your sentences to illustrate those statements below that you think are true.

Maxwell's description

(i) makes Mij seem almost human, like a small boy.
(ii) shows that he is often irritated with what Mij does.
(iii) shows that he is often surprised by what Mij does.
(iv) of Mij's antics is comical.
(v) shows that he observes the antics of Mij very carefully.
(vi) shows that he thinks Mij is a very ordinary otter.
(vii) shows that he thinks the otter is very unusual.

Thinking about Language

I. Describing a Repeated Action in the Past

To talk about something that happened regularly in the past, but does not happen any longer, we use *would* or *used to*. Both *would* and *used to* can describe repeated actions in the past.

(a) Mij *would* follow me without a lead and come to me when I called his name.
(b) He *would* play for hours with a selection of toys.
(c) On his way home... Mij *would* tug me to this wall.
(d) When I was five years old, I *used to* follow my brother all over the place.
(e) He *used to* tease me when Mother was not around.

To describe repeated *states* or *situations* in the past, however, we use only *used to.* (We cannot use *would* for *states* or *situations* in the past.) So we do

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not use *would* with verbs like *be*, *have*, *believe*, etc. Look at the following sentences.

(a) When we were young, we *used to believe* there were ghosts in school.
(*Note: believe* shows a state of mind.)

(b) Thirty years ago, more women *used to be* housewives than now.
(*Note: be* here describes a situation.)

From the table below, make as many correct sentences as you can using would and/or used to, as appropriate. (*Hint*: First decide whether the words in italics show an action, or a state or situation, in the past.) Then add two or three sentences of your own to it.

Emperor Akbar		*be fond of musical evenings.*
Every evening we	would	*take long walks* on the beach.
Fifty years ago, very few people		*own cars.*
Till the 1980s, Shanghai	used to	*have very dirty streets.*
My uncle		*spend his holidays* by the sea.

II. Noun Modifiers

To describe or give more information about a noun (or to ***modify*** a noun), we use adjectives or adjectival phrases. Look at these examples from the text:

(a) An *eminently suitable* spot
(b) His *wide, flat* belly
(c) *Symmetrical pointed* scales
(d) A *ricocheting* bullet

Nouns can also be used as modifiers:

(a) The *dinner* party
(b) A *designer* dress
(c) The *car* keys

We can use more than one noun as modifier. Proper nouns can also be used:

(a) The *Christmas dinner* party
(b) A *silk designer* dress
(c) The *Maruti car* keys

In the examples below, there is an adjectival phrase in front of a noun modifier:

(a) The *lovely* Christmas party
(b) A *trendy* silk designer dress
(c) The *frightfully expensive golden* Maruti car keys

1. **Look at these examples from the text, and say whether the modifiers (in italics) are nouns, proper nouns, or adjective plus noun.**

(i) An *otter* fixation
(ii) The *iron* railings
(iii) The *Tigris* marshes
(iv) The *London* streets
(v) *soft velvet* fur
(vi) A *four-footed soccer* player

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2. **Given below are some nouns, and a set of modifiers (in the box). Combine the nouns and modifiers to make as many appropriate phrases as you can. (*Hint*: The nouns and modifiers are all from the texts in this book.)**

temple	girls	triangle	dresses
person	thoughts	boys	roar
gifts	scream	farewell	expression
time	subject	landscape	handkerchief
crossing	flight	chatterbox	profession
physique	coffee	view	celebration

college	rough	hundred	stone	ordinary
love	uncomfortable	white	slang	slack
bare	railroad	termendous	family	marriage
plump	invigorating	panoramic	heartbreaking	birthday
incorrigible	ridiculous	loud	first	three

III. Read this sentence:

He shook himself, and I half expected *a cloud of dust*.

The author uses *a cloud of dust* to give a picture of a large quantity of dust. Phrases like this indicate a particular quantity of something that is not usually countable. For example: *a bit of land*, *a drop of blood*, *a pinch of salt*, *a piece of paper*.

1. **Match the words on the left with a word on the right. Some words on the left can go with more than one word on the right.**

(i)	a portion of	– blood
(ii)	a pool of	– cotton
(iii)	flakes of	– stones
(iv)	a huge heap of	– gold
(v)	a gust of	– fried fish
(vi)	little drops of	– snow
(vii)	a piece of	– water
(viii)	a pot of	– wind

2. **Use *a bit of/a piece of/a bunch of/a cloud of/a lump of* with the italicised nouns in the following sentences. The first has been done for you as an example.**

(i) My teacher gave me *some advice.* — My teacher gave me a bit of advice.

(ii) Can you give me *some clay,* please. — _____

_____

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(iii) The *information* you gave was very useful. _____

(iv) Because of these factories, *smoke* hangs over the city. _____

(v) Two *stones* rubbed together can produce sparks of fire. _____

(vi) He gave me *some flowers* on my birthday. _____

Speaking

You have seen how Maxwell describes Mij the otter's feelings and thoughts by watching him. Play the game of dumb charades. Take turns to express a feeling or thought silently, through gestures. Let the class speak out their guesses about the feelings or thoughts you are trying to express.

Writing

Write a description of a person or an animal (such as a pet) that you know very well and love very much. Questions (4) and (5) in 'Thinking about the Text' will have given you some idea about how to do this. Mention some things the person or animal does, what you think the person or animal feels, etc.

In This Lesson

What We Have Done

Narrated a story about an interesting and unusual pet.

What You Can Do

1. The events narrated in this text took place over half-a-century ago. Discuss with your class what changes have taken place over these years in
   (i) what animals we can keep as pets (some species are protected under the laws for wildlife preservation)
   (ii) the laws for exporting and importing or trading in animals
   (iii) rules for transporting goods, pets, etc. on aircraft.

   The class might wish to do their own research on these questions and report their findings in class.
2. Ask students if they know of other examples of unusual pets or of wild animals which are trained to work for or amuse humans (eg dancing bears, lions and tigers in a circus, elephants trained to work or take part in ceremonies). Then lead students into a discussion about the ethics of keeping wild animals as pets: What are the difficulties these may entail? According to the students, what will the animal miss most when it is taken away from its natural habitat? Do they think that it is 'cute' to see Mij the otter on a leash? Get them to look at the situation from all points of view.
3. Visit the website **wwf.org.uk/core/wildlife** to know more about otters and otter conservation projects.

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Fog

The fog comes
on little cat feet.
It sits looking
over harbour and city
on silent haunches
and then moves on.

CARL SANDBURG

Glossary

on haunches: sitting with knees bent

Thinking about the Poem

1. (i) What does Sandburg think the fog is like?
   (ii) How does the fog come?
   (iii) What does 'it' in the third line refer to?
   (iv) Does the poet actually say that the fog is like a cat? Find three things that tell us that the fog is like a cat.
2. You know that a metaphor compares two things by transferring a feature of one thing to the other (See Unit 1).
   (i) Find metaphors for the following words and complete the table below. Also try to say how they are alike. The first is done for you.

Storm	tiger	pounces over the fields, growls
Train		
Fire		
School		
Home		

   (ii) Think about a storm. Try to visualise the force of the storm, hear the sound of the storm, feel the power of the storm and the sudden calm that happens afterwards. Write a poem about the storm comparing it with an animal.
3. Does this poem have a rhyme scheme? Poetry that does not have an obvious rhythm or rhyme is called 'free verse'.

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