



THE PRAIRIE DOGS

STUDY GUIDE

By Glenda Goertzen

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Introduction to *The Prairie Dogs*

I first met the ‘real’ Prairie Dogs when I was growing up in small Saskatchewan town, back when the prairie teemed with wildlife like badgers and burrowing owls. My favourite pastime was taking my terrier for long walks across the fields. Sometimes a pack of small dogs fell in behind us and escorted us wherever we went, vanishing when another human came into sight. I often wondered about these mysterious little strays. Where did they come from? What were they up to when they disappeared? Years earlier I had written a collection of short stories based on the imaginary adventures of my favourite stuffed animals. Meeting those little strays inspired me to turn those stuffed animals into real animals and those short stories into a novel.

My main goal in writing *The Prairie Dogs* was to entertain children who love animals, but I also wanted to describe the Canadian prairie in a way children can relate to—through the eyes of an inquisitive outsider, a creature who lives through his senses. The beauty and adventure of the Canadian prairie is best appreciated at ground level, and who better to describe it than a small dog?

I’ve always loved dogs. As a child, I read every dog story I could get my hands on. I read about Dalmatians, collies, Irish setters, German shepherds, and St. Bernards. However, I found very few books featuring heroic poodles, terriers, or Chihuahuas. This bothered me to no end. Courage and loyalty shouldn’t be measured by the pound. My small companions may not have been capable of doing battle with bears or dragging me out of a raging river, but I watched them outfox larger adversaries and pull off stunts that left me shaking my head in disbelief. Some of the Prairie Dogs’ more interesting escapades are based on true events. When I decided to write my own canine adventure, I chose the smallest of dogs for my heroes.

I never once thought of changing Pierre from a poodle to a more popular breed. I enjoy going against stereotypes and it tickled me to have a poodle as an action hero. The most intimidating dog in the story, a Great Dane, turns out to be a lonely soul who doesn’t have a clue how to fight. I try to avoid gender stereotypes as well; Dare and little Mew are two of the liveliest, boldest characters in the story, in contrast to Mouse, the most timid of creatures.

While the characters behave like dogs, they think like children and adolescents. Thus Pierre and his companions provide a unique perspective on issues that affect today’s youth—resisting peer pressure, coping with bullying and abuse, learning to tolerate differences in one another. Pierre is briefly coerced into joining the toughest “gang” in town. Mouse was mistreated by his former owners and has a dangerous addiction to bugs. Dare struggles with her own prejudices when Mew decides to behave like a cat and brings skunks into their circle of friends.

The adventures of the Prairie Dogs are continued in the sequel, *City Dogs*.

I hope you enjoy sharing this story with your students. The Study Guide can be used to encourage them to take a closer look at the underlying themes and lessons in the story. But above all, make it fun!

Glenda Goertzen

About the Book

Prince Pierrot Rudolphe IV used to live the pampered life of a star, travelling across the country in a silver coach. Now the champion agility dog lives the adventurous life of an abandoned stray, travelling on four paws through the dusty streets of a small prairie town.

And he travels with three new friends; Dare, the terrier that nothing can scare; Mouse, the fainting Chihuahua; and Mew, the puppy who thinks she's a cat. Together, they call themselves the Prairie Dogs, their mission to have fun and stay out of trouble.

Too bad trouble comes looking for them. There's a wild wolf-dog who roams the countryside looking for prey. There's a gun-happy exotic animal rancher who thinks Pierre killed his prized peacock. There's a Great Dane looking for revenge against those four little thieves who keep stealing his food. And the roughneck Bull Dogs think a dog with Pierre's brains belongs in *their* pack.

Quick wits and quick feet keep the Prairie Dogs one step ahead of their enemies until the night the only human they care about needs rescuing. Only Pierre and his friends know where he is, but to save him they must leave town and venture deep into the heart of the Bull Dogs' territory. And the Bull Dogs aren't the only dangers awaiting them in the prairie night . . .

About the Author



Glenda Goertzen was born in Morse, Saskatchewan. Frequently bedridden with severe asthma, she became a voracious reader and began her creative career at the age of four by drawing picture books. She wrote the first draft of *The Prairie Dogs* in high school. After receiving her BFA in Film and Video she worked in television for ten years before switching to a career in libraries.

Glenda spends much of her time giving readings and writing workshops in Canadian schools and libraries. When not writing or travelling, Glenda reads, gardens, practices yoga, walks dogs for the SPCA, and enjoys the outdoors. Her love of Canada's natural environment plays a strong role in her books.

Glenda's works-in-progress include adult and young adult mystery and fantasy novels, juvenile novels (including sequels to *The Prairie Dogs* and *City Dogs*), juvenile nonfiction books, and children's picture books, with a little sketching and cartooning on the side.

For more information about Glenda Goertzen and her books, visit www.glendagoertzen.ca.

Reviews

“The Prairie Dogs...entertains many social themes: homelessness, bullying, rural vs. urban lifestyles, and friendship...its genuine appeal is Goertzen’s ability to think like a dog and write humorously from that mindset. At the same time, she offers a great deal of information about animals and animal habitats...The Prairie Dogs takes us to very real places which even prairie dwellers have often not been privileged to experience.” ~ Canadian Children’s Book News

“More than just another fish-out-of-water story, this is a delightful, fast-paced tale of canine survival and camaraderie that ends with a wholly satisfying conclusion. Characters such as Mew, the puppy who thinks she’s a cat, and Mouse, the sensitive Chihuahua who faints at the most inopportune moments, are quirky and memorable...an excellent choice for fans of animal fiction and for teachers looking for an appealing classroom read-aloud.” ~ Quill & Quire

“Pierre and his Prairie Dog friends are caring, supportive and protective of each other, yet their story does not escape the harsh reality of independent existence...there are lessons to be learned and the outcome is plausible and satisfying. The vocabulary is appropriate and free flowing, keeping the story moving at a good pace. Several black and white illustrations, scattered throughout this chapter book, are animated and fun. An entertaining story, especially for animal lovers, it is recommended for a school library collection.” ~ Resource Links

“The plot moves very well and keeps the reader’s interest...The book was very enjoyable. It was suspenseful to see if Pierre’s owners would return, if Pierre would be caught by the Bull Dogs or Mr. Calloway, and if Mr. Abram has gone to the ‘Forever Field,’ like Mew’s mother, after he left in the ambulance. The ending is delightful. The novel is highly recommended as a read aloud book to younger children and a must for school, public and personal libraries for middle year students.” ~ CM Magazine

The Prairie Dogs was shortlisted for the Saskatchewan Book Award, the OLA Silver Birch Award, and the SYRCA Diamond Willow Award.



Curriculum Links

Language Arts

- Skills of listening, speaking, reading, writing, viewing, and representing
- bullying,
- Resource-based learning (refer to the article “Connecting Fact and Fiction in *The Prairie Dogs*” by Ellen Donogh, *Canadian Children’s Book News*, Winter 2006)
- Thematic links: Dogs ~ Animals ~ Bullying ~ Gangs ~ Friendship ~ Prejudice ~ Prairie environment ~ Gender equity ~ Portrayal of characters with disabilities

Science

- Prairie ecology: the story mentions many species of prairie plants and animals
- *The Prairie Dogs* promotes respect for the environment and endangered species



Chapter One: Royalty in Silvertree

Define the following words and use them in a sentence.

- Agility dog
- Negotiate
- Etiquette

1. What kind of dog is Pierre?
2. Why does Pierre sneak out of the motor home?
3. Why is Bull hostile toward the terrier and the Chihuahua?
4. What skills does Pierre use to rescue the other two dogs and himself from Bull's pack?

Chapter Two: Beggars...

Define the following words and use them in a sentence.

- Abandoned
- Prey
- Soulful

1. What is Pierre afraid of now that he's on his own?
2. List three facts about prairie dogs.
3. Why does Mew think she's a cat?
4. What are three ways Pierre tries to get food?



Chapter Three: ...And Thieves

Define the following words and use them in a sentence.

- Ordeal
- Lumbered
- Sett

1. Why does Dare sneak into the yard of Titan, the Great Dane?
2. How did Mouse become a stray dog?
3. Why does Dare like to roll in smelly stuff?
4. Where do Dare and Mouse sleep at night?

Chapter Four: Breakfast for Three

Define the following words and use them in a sentence.

- Emerged
- Aromas
- Bizarre

1. What two kinds of birds does Pierre hear and see when he comes out of the burrow?
2. Why doesn't Mouse like Mew's new friends?
3. Why is the woman from the restaurant angry at the dogs?
4. Why does Pierre decide to take Mew back to her farm?

Chapter Five: Where Green Chickens and Buffalo Roam

Define the following words and use them in a sentence.

- Speckled
- Field trial
- Role model



1. Why is the killdeer "faking" a broken wing?
2. What kinds of animals does Pierre see on the farm? What does he think they are?
3. Why does the farmer shoot at Pierre?
4. What does Pierre explain to Mew at the end of the chapter? How does Mew respond?

Chapter Six: A Day in the Life of a Prairie Dog

Define the following words and use them in a sentence.

- Despicable
- Remorse
- Instincts

1. Why did Old Sam and Mr. Abram give up their favourite sport?
2. Why do Dare and Pierre chase geese off the runway?
3. Name three unpleasant things about being a stray dog, according to Mouse.
4. Where was Dare born?

Chapter Seven: The Bull Dogs

Define the following words and use them in a sentence.

- Quirk
- Thug
- Worthy

1. What bad habit does Dare want Mouse to give up?
2. What kind of creature does Daisy protect her humans from?
3. Why does Bull want Pierre in his pack?
4. Why does Pierre want to join the Bull Dogs?

Chapter Eight: Titan the Terrible

Define the following words and use them in a sentence.

- Technique
- Professional
- Resentment



1. What do the Bull Dogs do when they realize Titan is loose?
2. How does Pierre escape Titan?
3. What does Titan want from the other dogs?
4. What choice does Pierre make at the end of the chapter? Why does he make this choice?

Chapter Nine: The Return of the Green Chicken Man

Define the following words and use them in a sentence.

- Hazy
- Social call
- Whiff

1. How do the Prairie Dogs keep their promise to Titan?
2. Why is Mouse heartbroken?
3. Why does the rancher Calloway chase the Prairie Dogs?
4. Who saves Pierre from Calloway?

Chapter Ten: The Dogs of War

Define the following words and use them in a sentence.

- Ransacked
- Grain elevator
- Territory

1. How does Pierre prevent the Bull Dogs from attacking him?
2. Why does Bull's behaviour make life more difficult for Pierre and his friends?
3. Where does Pierre want the Prairie Dogs to live? How does Dare respond?
4. Why do Pierre and Dare go to the Water Park? Why doesn't Old Sam want them to go?



Chapter Eleven: The Water Park

Define the following words and use them in a sentence.

- Horizon
- Shun
- Prone

1. What is Bull's plan for his dog pack, and why does he need Pierre's help?
2. What does Dare do to help Pierre after he escapes from the Water Park?
3. Why does Wolf pursue Pierre?
4. What does the rancher Calloway think Pierre is doing in his shed?

Chapter Twelve: Friends in Strange Places

Define the following words and use them in a sentence.

- Disgraceful
- Ancestors
- Horrendous

1. What do Dare and the Bull Dogs think when they hear the gunshot?
2. How does Mew prevent the dogfight?
3. Why does Mouse change his mind about allowing Mew to play with cats and skunks?
4. Why does Calloway change his mind about shooting Pierre?



Chapter Thirteen: The End of the Road

Define the following words and use them in a sentence.

- Confession
- Scrounging
- Coaxed

1. How does Pierre escape from his kennel?
2. What does Dare offer to Ratter now that they are no longer enemies?
3. What happens to Bull when he sees the Prairie Dogs?
4. What do the dogs think Calloway will do to them?

Chapter Fourteen: The Forever Field

Define the following words and use them in a sentence.

- Ruckus
- Spry
- Loyal

1. How has Old Sam changed in this chapter?
2. Where do Ratter and the skunks live now?
3. How does Pierre trick Paul and Melissa into giving him up to Mr. Abram?
4. What upcoming event are Dare and Pierre happy about at the end of the book?



Review Questions

1. Describe one of these characters:
 - Pierre
 - Dare
 - Mouse
 - Mew
 - Old Sam
 - Bull
 - Mr. Abram
 - Titan
 - Daisy
2. What other dog books can you name?
3. Some of the problems faced by the Prairie Dogs are similar to problems faced by young people today. Can you give an example?
4. Pierre has many fears when he first arrives in Silvertree. List some of his fears. Which ones has he overcome by the end of the story?
5. Some of the characters have strong prejudices against certain animals. Can you give an example? By the end of the story, has this character changed his or her mind? Why or why not?

Suggested Projects

1. Draw a picture of one of the characters. Underneath write what breed of dog or what kind of animal it is.
2. Find more information about one of the wild animals Pierre and his friends come across.
3. Put on a skit based on one of the chapters of the book.
4. Send a letter or email to the author. Describe what you enjoyed about the book.
5. Write a short story about a real animal you've known. It could be a pet, an animal in a zoo or a wild animal. It can be a true story or a made up story.
6. If you live on the prairie, take a walk through a natural area. See how many prairie plants and animals you can identify.

Answer Key: Definitions

Chapter One: Royalty in Silvertree

- Agility dog: A dog who competes in agility trials, where a dog runs through an obstacle course to test its skill at running through and over obstacles.
- Negotiate: To arrange or settle by discussion and mutual agreement.
- Etiquette: Acceptable behaviour.

Chapter Two: Beggars...

- Abandoned: Deserted; forsaken; left to fend for oneself.
- Prey: An animal hunted or caught for food; quarry.
- Soulful: Full of or expressing deep feeling; profoundly emotional.

Chapter Three: ...And Thieves

- Ordeal: A difficult or painful experience.
- Lumbered: Walked or moved with heavy clumsiness.
- Sett: A badger's burrow.

Chapter Four: Breakfast for Three

- Emerged: Rose up from under the water or from under the ground.
- Aromas: Pleasant odors, as of plants, spices, or food.
- Bizarre: Strikingly unconventional and far-fetched in style or appearance; odd.

Chapter Five: Where Green Chickens and Buffalo Roam

- Speckled: Dotted or covered with speckles.
- Field trial: A competition for certain hound or sporting breeds in which dogs are judged on ability and style in tracking, finding, coursing, or retrieving game.
- Role model: A person (or dog) who serves as a model in a particular behavioural or social role for another person (or dog) to emulate.

Chapter Six: A Day in the Life of Prairie Dog

- Despicable: Deserving of contempt or scorn; vile.
- Remorse: Moral anguish arising from repentance for past misdeeds; bitter regret.
- Instincts: Powerful motivations or impulses.

Chapter Seven: The Bull Dogs

- Quirk: A peculiarity of behaviour; an idiosyncrasy.
- Thug: An aggressive and violent criminal.
- Worthy: Having worth, merit, or value; useful or valuable.

Chapter Eight: Titan the Terrible

- Technique: The procedure by which a complex task is accomplished.
- Professional: Having or showing great skill; expert.
- Resentment: Indignation or ill will felt as a result of a real or imagined grievance.

Chapter Nine: The Return of the Green Chicken Man

- Hazy: Unclear, confused, or uncertain.
- Social call: A friendly visit.
- Whiff: A brief, passing odor carried in the air.

Chapter Ten: The Dogs of War

- Ransacked: Roughly searched; pillaged.
- Grain elevator: A building equipped with mechanical lifting devices and used for storing grain.
- Territory: An area occupied by a single animal, mating pair, or group and often vigorously defended against intruders, especially those of the same species.

Chapter Eleven: The Water Park

- Horizon: The line where earth and sky meet, as seen by an observer.
- Shun: To avoid deliberately; keep away from.
- Prone: Lying down.

Chapter Twelve: Friends in Strange Places

- Disgraceful: Bringing or warranting disgrace; shameful.
- Ancestors: Persons from whom one is descended, especially if more remote than a grandparent; forebears.
- Horrendous: Hideous; dreadful.

Chapter Thirteen: The End of the Road

- Confession: A written or oral statement acknowledging guilt.
- Scrounging: Seeking to obtain something by begging or borrowing with no intention of reparation; foraging about in an effort to acquire something at no cost.
- Coaxed: Persuaded or tried to persuade.

Chapter Fourteen: The Forever Field

- Ruckus: A disturbance; a commotion.
- Spry: Lively, active, and brisk; vigorous.
- Loyal: Faithful to a person, ideal, custom, cause, or duty.

The Prairie Dogs Trivia Challenge

How many of the wild prairie mammals and birds mentioned in the book can you name?

What was Mouse's name before his humans abandoned him?

- A) Chico
- B) Ratter
- C) Prince Pierrot Rudolphe IV
- D) Koko

What sound does Mew make when she's upset?

- A) Meow
- B) Bark
- C) Hiss
- D) Burp

What is Dare's favourite hobby?

- A) Collecting scents
- B) Stealing the Great Dane Titan's supper
- C) Playing baseball
- D) All of the above

What is Pierre's least favourite food?

- A) Radishes
- B) Crunchy Nibbles
- C) Carrots
- D) Garbage

What is Mouse's favourite food?

- A) Carrots
- B) Bugs
- C) Tacos
- D) Cheese

What exotic animals does Calloway have on his ranch?

- A) Emus and llamas
- B) Ostriches and zebras
- C) Peafowl and bison
- D) Ptarmigan and musk ox

What kind of trials did Pierre compete in before he came to Silvertree?

- A) Obedience dog
- B) Hunting dog
- C) Stock dog
- D) Agility dog

How did Dare's mother lose her leg?

- A) Train accident
- B) Rats chewed it off
- C) Fight with a coyote
- D) Fight with a Canada goose

The Prairie Dogs Trivia Challenge Answers

How many of the wild prairie mammals and birds mentioned in the book can you name?

Badger

Bison or buffalo (they're mostly domesticated, but in some places in Canada they run wild)

Burrowing owl

Canada goose

Coyote

Deer

Duck

Fox

Gopher

Hawk

Jackrabbit (which is actually a hare)

Killdeer

Meadowlark

Mouse

Pigeon

Prairie dog

Rabbit

Rat

Robin

Skunk

Squirrel

Wolf (he's half husky, but he's still wild)

What was Mouse's name before his humans abandoned him?

A) Chico

What sound does Mew make when she's upset?

C) Hiss

What is Dare's favourite hobby?

D) All of the above

What is Pierre's least favourite food?

B) Crunchy Nibbles

What is Mouse's favourite food?

B) Bugs

What exotic animals does Calloway have on his ranch?

C) Peafowl and bison

What kind of trials did Pierre compete in before he came to Silvertree?

D) Agility dog

How did Dare's mother lose her leg?

A) Train accident

Prairie Dogs Word Search

Circle the letters of the hidden words!

E	P	N	T	S	E	P	V	E	F
R	Z	C	E	I	L	O	V	I	C
R	E	I	R	L	C	O	B	R	H
E	S	T	R	V	A	D	E	I	I
I	U	Y	I	E	R	L	A	A	H
P	O	X	E	R	I	E	G	R	U
E	M	H	R	T	M	Z	L	P	A
F	R	R	G	R	F	H	E	L	H
F	A	A	F	E	S	G	O	D	U
W	E	M	D	E	V	Z	J	O	A

BEAGLE
 CHIHUAHUA
 CITY
 DARE
 DOGS
 MEW
 MIRACLE

MOUSE
 PIERRE
 POODLE
 PRAIRIE
 SILVERTREE
 TERRIER