

## A GUIDE TO

## All Creatures Great and Small

James Herriot

*All things bright and beautiful,  
All creatures great and small,  
All things wise and wonderful,  
The Lord God made them all.*

**THE BOOK AT A GLANCE****Genre:** Memoirs.**Setting:** Countryside of Yorkshire, England, during the late 1930s.**Structure:** Vignettes covering a two-year period, in chronological order.**Conflicts:** The narrator, James Herriot, must win acceptance from animal owners who think they know more than he, a trained veterinarian, does. Herriot also has humorous conflicts with the inept Tristan and endures some embarrassing moments as he attempts to win the lovely Helen.**Tone:** Love of the beautiful countryside; respect and affection for its fiercely independent inhabitants; appreciation of the comedy and pathos of everyday life.**Themes:** People are capable of coping with hardships bravely, often in unconventional ways. People should face life's ups and downs with both humor and courage. Love finds a way.**BACKGROUND****Setting.** In England in the late 1930s, jobs are scarce, veterinarians make calls in the middle of the night, telephones are becoming more common, cars (some of which still need to be cranked) have no heaters, and windshield wipers are a new invention.**Vocabulary.** The meanings of most medical and dialect terms are clear from the context. British usages and spellings can be looked up in a dictionary; some examples are *dole queue* (bread line), *dale* (valley), *byre* (barn).**MAIN CHARACTERS  
(IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE)****James Herriot**, a Scot; a newly graduated veterinary surgeon who joins the practice of Siegfried Farnon in Darrowby, Yorkshire county, northern England.**Mrs. Hall**, housekeeper for Siegfried Farnon at Skeldale House in Darrowby; a silent woman of sixty.**Siegfried Farnon**, Herriot's employer, a veterinarian with five years' experience; tall, thin, thirty years old, with a mercurial personality; a sought-after bachelor. He and his brother are named for characters in operas by the German composer Richard Wagner.**Tristan Farnon**, Siegfried's younger brother; a reluctant veterinary student; specializes in avoiding work and chain-smoking Woodbine cigarettes. Siegfried repeatedly fires him and then forgets having done so.**Helen Alderson**, a beautiful and capable young woman; has run the family farm for her father and brothers since her mother's death. Herriot is among her many admirers and eventually marries her.**CONTENTS**

These summaries are intended to function as quick reminders of the anecdotes in each chapter.

**Chapter 1. A flash-forward:** The book opens with a dramatic flash-forward. Seven months into his first job, young James Herriot labors in the middle of the night to deliver a badly positioned calf. He considers giving up, but the spark of life he senses in the calf keeps him going. This episode illustrates Herriot's reverence for life, a quality that comes through in all the anecdotes in the book.**Chapters 2–4. Setting the scene:** Herriot describes the difficulty of getting a veterinary position in 1937. In addition, he tells of his first impressions of Yorkshire and his first encounters with Mrs. Hall, various veterinary clients, and his boss, Siegfried Farnon.**Chapters 5–6. The first case:** On his first case without Siegfried, Herriot decides that he must put a valuable hunting horse to sleep. Fortunately, a post-mortem proves his diagnosis correct. Siegfried's younger brother, Tristan, arrives to work in the practice.**Chapter 7. A sense of satisfaction:** Herriot revels in the beauty of the countryside and learns to appreciate the "core of friendliness . . . under the often unsmiling

surface” of the local people. After a tough session with a herd of cows, he stretches out bruised and sore but happy not to be shut up in some city office.

**Chapters 8–9. The office team:** These chapters **characterize** Siegfried as something of an eccentric and include some humorous anecdotes about the battles between the vets.

**Chapter 10. Time ticks away:** Herriot calls on the Bellerby family and agrees to drive them into town for a performance of Handel’s *Messiah*. Tension ties him in knots as the Bellerbys leisurely eat a huge dinner while show time gets closer and closer.

**Chapter 11. A love story:** Herriot has the painful task of telling an old man that his faithful pet, “old Bob,” should be put to sleep. The old man bids a poignant farewell to his dog before telling Herriot to go ahead.

**Chapter 12. Bookkeeping:** After competently collecting monthly payments, Tristan loses the list—and the clients are billed again. Herriot and Siegfried struggle to mollify irate clients.

**Chapter 13. Tricky Woo:** Herriot paints a portrait of Mrs. Pumphrey, the doting owner of a Pekingese called Tricky Woo. Mrs. Pumphrey sends gifts in the name of her pampered pet to “Uncle Herriot.”

**Chapter 14. A new character:** Siegfried hires Miss Harbottle to set the practice’s record-keeping straight.

**Chapters 15–16. Pigs and chickens:** Hoping to gain a degree of self-sufficiency, Siegfried buys ten pigs and twelve chickens. The hens lay no eggs and keep flying away. One day Tristan leaves a gate open, and the pigs cause mayhem in the town market and post office. Siegfried gives up the project.

**Chapter 17. Comedy:** Siegfried trembles as the formidable Miss Harbottle hounds him about his constant depletion of “her” petty-cash box, his illegible writing, and his failure to record his visits and fees in a timely fashion.

**Chapter 18. School days:** Herriot recalls his third day as a veterinary student, when he thought he knew all about horses. After a horse bit down on Herriot’s shoulder and ruined his coat, the owner shouted, “Dinna meddle wi’ things ye ken [know] nuthin’ about!”

**Chapter 19. Tricky Woo again:** Invited by Tricky Woo, Herriot enjoys a dazzling society party at Mrs. Pumphrey’s. That evening, just as he is dropping off to sleep, he is called to help a sow deliver piglets. This plunge back into his work reminds him that a veterinarian is guaranteed “a life of endless . . . variety.”

**Chapter 20. More conflict with Miss Harbottle:** Miss Harbottle sputters helplessly as Siegfried turns her complaints inside out, declaring that it’s *her* fault that the cash box is frequently empty and that clients are not billed promptly.

**Chapter 21. The howling dog:** Tristan spends a

harrowing day and night with a Labrador that emerges from surgery howling continuously. Later the dog trots back and forth incessantly, keeping Tristan and Herriot awake all night.

**Chapter 22. Comedy:** Herriot brings a sick dog to another vet, Angus Grier, and Grier asks him to help with a messy operation. Grier provides him with a shiny rubber suit. Herriot dons the suit; his appearance awes and terrifies onlookers.

**Chapter 23. War with Miss Harbottle:** Herriot is cosseted by a client’s wife after saving a cow. He then returns to Skeldale House to find the war between his boss and Miss Harbottle escalating. He decides that being an assistant, rather than a boss, is “not such a bad life.”

**Chapter 24. Another Tristan anecdote:** Siegfried sends Tristan to lance the ear of a mean pig that both he and Herriot are afraid of. Anger helps Tristan complete the near-impossible task.

**Chapter 25. A horse story:** Herriot, no horseman, reluctantly goes off to operate on a dangerous stallion. His first attempt leaves him with a hole in his right thigh. However, with the aid of “a small army of helpers,” he later completes the job.

**Chapter 26. Two puzzling cases:** Phineas Calvert, an easygoing farmer, teases Herriot for using simple remedies. His attitude changes when Herriot’s common-sense solutions prove effective in two puzzling cases—one of lead poisoning, the other of sunstroke.

**Chapter 27. Slapstick:** Siegfried succeeds in removing a wire from a cow’s second stomach. During the operation, the cow’s rumen (first stomach) sprays quantities of vile fluid all over Siegfried, his shiny instruments, and his carefully set-aside new tweed jacket.

**Chapters 28–29. A nightmare world:** Herriot describes the nightmare world of Jeff Mallock’s knacker yard, where dead livestock are processed. But even Mallock refuses to tell an insurance company that a cow belonging to penny-pinching Isaac Cranford was killed by a bolt of lightning. Siegfried hopes to be permanently rid of Cranford as a client; he gets his wish when Tristan accidentally mails Cranford a large test sample of messy cow dung.

**Chapter 30. Comic irony:** Tricky Woo is dangerously ill from overfeeding. Herriot decides to keep the pampered pet for two weeks of romping with Siegfried’s dogs. All at Skeldale House enjoy the eggs and expensive liquors Mrs. Pumphrey sends for Tricky. Picking up her pet, who has received no medical treatment at all, she exclaims, “This is a triumph of surgery!”

**Chapter 31. Comedy:** Herriot has remained in his pajamas to help birth a foal at 3 A.M. and is later refused service at an all-night cafe.

**Chapter 32. A year gone by:** A year into his practice, Herriot spends days treating a cow that won’t get up

and patiently listening to the advice of Mr. Handshaw, who remembers the home remedies of “me dad.” After Herriot misdiagnoses the animal’s problem as a broken pelvis, the cow becomes a local celebrity as the one “Mr. Herriot said would never get up n’more!”

**Chapter 33. Tricky Woo gets a pal:** Mrs. Pumphrey buys a young pig, Nugent, as a companion for Tricky Woo. Nugent enjoys a long and happy life.

**Chapters 34–35. A local character:** Herriot fills in for Angus Grier while Grier recovers from broken ribs. In a number of cases, Herriot follows Grier’s instructions, only to find that the job must be redone. After two weeks with Grier, he is happy to return to Siegfried and Tristan.

**Chapter 36. Dedication:** A hard-working farmer’s round-the-clock care miraculously succeeds in restoring his cow’s health.

**Chapter 37. Thriftiness:** Siegfried lectures Herriot about the need to economize on surgical equipment. When the two go on a call together soon after, Herriot, mindful of Siegfried’s instructions, uses tiny lengths of gut to stitch up a wound. Siegfried impatiently pushes him aside and takes over. Later he expresses wonderment at Herriot’s excessive thriftiness.

**Chapter 38. A pub raid:** Mr. Worley owns the Langthorpe Falls Hotel and breeds fine pigs. One night, Mr. Worley’s after-hours pub patrons dupe Herriot into buying a round, but justice is served: After Herriot leaves, a constable raids the pub and arrests them all.

**Chapter 39. Slapstick:** Tristan and Herriot watch helplessly as Siegfried’s car, a battered old Austin, rolls down a hill and flattens a small clubhouse. Just two weeks earlier, Tristan had overturned another car, the Hillman. While the Austin is in the shop, Siegfried allows Tristan to take a third vehicle, the Rover, on a case. Tristan loses two doors in a sideswipe.

**Chapter 40. A possible romance:** Called to treat a calf’s broken foreleg, Herriot is much taken with the owner’s daughter, Helen Alderson. Siegfried tells Herriot that she has half the men in the district chasing her.

**Chapters 41–42. Old ways vs. new:** Serving as Local Veterinary Inspector of the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries, Herriot finds his timetables shattered by farmers’ not-so-subtle resistance when he comes to test their cattle for tuberculosis.

**Chapter 43. A touching experience:** Herriot feels humbled by the responsibility of caring for the dying Miss Stubbs’s aging dogs and cats. He assures Miss Stubbs that he believes “wherever you are going, they are going too.”

**Chapter 44. The romance plot thickens:** After spending many Tuesday evenings watching Helen at the Darrowby Music Society, Herriot succeeds in making a Saturday-night date with her.

**Chapter 45. Two old horses:** While treating two ancient horses for the wealthy John Skipton, who keeps

the “retired” horses for sentimental reasons, Herriot learns that even big owners can develop love and affection for their animals.

**Chapter 46. Delicate sensibilities:** Herriot describes several incidents in which burly stockmen display surprisingly delicate sensibilities. He develops a theory that the biggest men are the most likely to faint at gruesome sights.

**Chapter 47. At the races:** The vets are well acquainted with the ways of the Sidlows, who use home remedies, call the vet too late, and then blame the vet when their animal dies. But Herriot finds it impossible to forgive the Sidlows for causing him to miss out on a fifty-pound win at the racetrack.

**Chapter 48. Comedy:** Disasters on Herriot’s date with Helen include his own ridiculous clothes, a flooded roadway, a flat tire, and no dance at the hotel that night.

**Chapter 49. Another Siegfried story:** Siegfried keeps forgetting to get the brakes in Herriot’s car fixed. Then the day comes when Siegfried himself cannot stop it.

**Chapter 50. Mother love:** Herriot is bitten while fending off a Great Dane protecting her pups.

**Chapter 51. Irony:** After Herriot has barely made it through a howling blizzard, a client remarks on the “plain sort o’ day” it is.

**Chapter 52. Siegfried doesn’t listen:** Already upset by his disastrous date with Helen, Herriot is nearly maddened by Siegfried’s habit of listening and talking right past him. Tristan proposes a double date with two friends to soothe Herriot.

**Chapters 53–54. A suspenseful wait:** Herriot characterizes Dick Rudd, father of seven, as the prototypical kindly Yorkshire small farmer. He agonizes alongside Rudd as they work to save a pedigreed cow meant to start a herd. Herriot rejoices the day the emaciated cow begins to recover.

**Chapters 55–56. Local characters:** Among the clients who fail to pay vet bills, the charming Major Bullivant is a true master at avoiding payment while wheedling further favors. Less likable is a butcher and small farmer who charges Herriot for a “gift” of sausage links.

**Chapter 57. A double date:** Tristan and Herriot double-date with Brenda and Connie. They start at a pub and end at a dance, where Herriot and Connie, sick from too much beer, fall in the mud. Unfortunately, they then encounter Helen Alderson.

**Chapter 58. Job satisfaction:** Certain things brighten whole days for Herriot: the tough old dog that sleeps outside in sun or snow; an old farmer’s exasperation with a cow; a one-sentence letter from the Bramleys saying that his inoculation of their kittens worked.

**Chapter 59. The pony:** Stumped, Herriot calls on Siegfried to save a Gypsy family’s prized pony, the

beloved companion of three small girls.

**Chapter 60. Help from a hip:** With Helen's help, Herriot sets her dog's dislocated hip. He converses with her easily this time and ends up inviting her to a movie.

**Chapter 61. Fathers and daughters:** In two very different families—one living in a beautiful house, the other struggling to survive on meager farmland—Herriot finds that the father-daughter relationship is what makes all the difference.

**Chapter 62. Comedy:** A disastrous cinema date with Helen ends with her laughing in total abandonment and suggesting that they go for a walk next time.

**Chapters 63–64. Siegfried again:** Under consideration for a well-paying position as supervisory veterinarian for the racing district, Siegfried makes a powerful impression on the dignitaries. After going off to drink with an old friend, however, he cannot find his car key to drive the dignitaries home.

**Chapter 65. A push from a friend:** Herriot finds that he has fallen into a pattern of visiting or dating Helen several times a week. Yet it takes Siegfried's intervention to spur him to propose marriage. She says yes but tells Herriot to speak with her father.

**Chapter 66. The battle won:** The night Herriot uses Mrs. Hall's sweet-smelling bath salts to soak away the day's stink, Mr. Alderson, Helen's father, calls him to help a cow get through a dangerous calving. The stall ends up smelling like a hairdressing salon, but Herriot succeeds. He also finds the courage to tell Mr. Alderson he wants to marry Helen. Mr. Alderson responds by telling Herriot about his beloved wife, and Herriot knows all will be well.

**Chapter 67. A happy ending:** Although he and Helen spend their honeymoon doing tuberculin testing, Herriot has much to be happy about: Siegfried has made him a partner and the honeymoon week is a grand time of "laughter, fulfillment, and camaraderie."

## APPROACHES FOR POST-READING ACTIVITIES

You may wish to have students complete one or more of the following activities.

### 1. Writing a One-Act Play

Have a group of students choose a chapter or combination of chapters filled with humorous characters and conflict. Their task is to adapt the chapter or

chapters into a one-act play (about an hour long). They might consider single incidents or an ongoing conflict. Students should include stage directions that describe the characters' feelings and actions. They may need to create some dialogue. They should choose an appropriate title. Before they start writing the play, tell them to decide which scene will mark its climax.

### 2. Supporting a Critic's Comments

Phoebe Adams, writing for *The Atlantic Monthly*, said that this book is [1] full of recalcitrant cows, sinister pigs, neurotic dogs, [2] Yorkshire weather, and [3] pleasantly demented colleagues. It continues to be one of the [4] funniest and most likable books around. Ask students to write an essay in which they cite passages from the book to illustrate each of the four numbered parts of Adams's comments.

### 3. Comparing Media

Have students find and watch a videotape based on one of Herriot's chapters or books. Ask students to compare an episode in the book with its depiction in the film. They should compare the two versions' treatment of characters and of the crisis or problem Herriot faces, as well as the overall theme or attitude communicated. They should conclude by stating whether they liked the book or the film version better, and why.

## MEET THE WRITER

**James Herriot** (1916–1995) is the pseudonym of James Alfred Wight. Herriot was already in his fifties when he began writing about his work as a country veterinarian in Yorkshire. His books radiate simplicity, grace, and humor. His titles, taken from a nineteenth-century poem by Cecil Frances Alexander, reflect his love of all living things. Herriot's entertaining tales were best-sellers. Two of them have been adapted for film and television: *All Creatures Great and Small* and *All Things Bright and Beautiful*.

## READ ON

**James Herriot, *All Things Bright and Beautiful*.** Sequel to *All Creatures Great and Small*. *All Things Wise and Wonderful* is the third book in the series. *The Lord God Made Them All* is the fourth book in the series.

**Truman Capote, "A Christmas Memory."** A short story about an old woman whose spirit shines.

**Barry Lopez, "A Presentation of Whales."** The true story of an attempt to rescue some stranded whales.

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