SUMMARY

‘Mij thought of a new game. He liked to come up quietly behind a cow while it was drinking and pull its tail. Then he jumped back to escape the dangerous kicks of the cow. Mij found this game very amusing and never got hurt.’

On reading the above excerpt from Ring of Bright Water, one would guess that Mij is probably a small boy. That would be wrong - Mij is a tame young otter, one of the much-loved pets described by Gavin Maxwell in his magical book. Ring of Bright Water is unique, the true story of Maxwell's life in a remote part of the British Isles. Beautifully written, Ring of Bright Water is most memorable for its descriptions of the author's relationship with the three otters which he kept as pets. The book has many qualities: it is comical when it describes the almost human antics of the otters, and deeply moving when it describes their deaths.

Published in 1960, Ring of Bright Water became an instant classic, loved by the British public and all those who dream of a life in closer contact with the natural world. Maxwell's story begins with him moving to a cottage in a remote part of the West Highlands of Scotland. The cottage had 'glass in its windows and a roof on its walls' but little else. The nearest village 'with more than one shop' was 50 kilometres away. Maxwell sets about turning the house into a real home. He has a companion, his beloved dog Jonnie, but Jonnie dies and Maxwell is lonely. Travelling in southern Iraq, Maxwell learns that the local people keep otters as pets. Soon Maxwell gets his own otter, a lovable little creature called Chahala, 'with a tail as long as a pencil'. But Chahala eats poisoned meat and dies. A friend finds another young otter for Maxwell, and a relationship rather like that between a father and son begins between Maxwell and the young animal! Maxwell brings Mij the otter back to his cottage in the West Highlands, and there, in the waters and meadows, Mij tumbles and frolics. However, he is killed, and Maxwell is broken-hearted.

Through an extraordinary coincidence, Maxwell comes upon another tame otter, Edal, and once again, Camusfearna is home to a most unusual pet . . . .

ABOUT GAVIN MAXWELL

Gavin Maxwell was a man of many talents: he was a writer, traveller and conservationist. Born in 1914 to a wealthy family in southern Scotland, Maxwell became interested in wildlife as a boy. His book The House of Elrig (1966) is a rich description of his childhood and youth. Maxwell went to university at Herford College, Oxford, where he took a degree in land management. He fought in the army in the Second World War, but in 1944 he left the army for health reasons. He then bought a small Scottish island, and there he set up a shark fishing business. It was not successful, however.

After working as a journalist and portrait painter, Maxwell travelled in Sicily and Iraq, and wrote three travel books. One of these was his famous description of the Marsh Arabs of Southern Iraq, an award-winning book called A Reed Shaken by the Wind (1956).

Maxwell moved to the West Highlands of Scotland in 1949, and there in a remote cottage he lived with his otter companions. Ring of Bright Water, published in 1960, met with huge success and critical acclaim. Sadly, from this point on, Maxwell's life went downhill; in the similarly autobiographical The Rocks Remain (1963) and Raven Seek Thy Brother (1968) the author describes his personal and financial insecurities.

In 1968, Maxwell's beloved Scottish cottage was destroyed by fire. He died a year later.

BACKGROUND AND THEMES

Ring of Bright Water is a very special book, written by a very special man. Gavin Maxwell was the kind of person who, in dreams, others sometimes long to be. He was the opposite of conventional. He never settled for comfortable domesticity, preferring the challenges of a much harder life that brought different kinds of rewards.

There are over one million copies of Ring of Bright Water in print. The reason for its success is that Maxwell
succeeds in vividly conveying the wildness of the western coast of Scotland, and the richness of his relationship with the semi-tame otters which lived with him. His descriptions of the otters are enchanting - the animals seem almost human, and there are many wickedly funny passages describing their antics. Animal lovers will be moved to tears by the passages describing the deaths of these animals, and will probably briefly consider acquiring an otter as a pet!

Then discuss (b) and (c) as a whole class.

Chapters 8-10
Put students in pairs and tell them to choose one of these role-plays to act out. After students have done the role-plays, ask them to explain why they chose that role-play.
(a) Maxwell’s conversation with Big Angus after the death of Mijbil.
(b) Maxwell’s conversation with the Macdonalds, when he meets them for the first time.
(c) Maxwell’s conversation with Jimmy, after Jimmy finds Edal half-way to the MacKinnons’ house and brings her back.

ACTIVITIES AFTER READING THE BOOK
1 Put students into small groups. Ask them to discuss the following question. Teach the word ‘relationship’. A lot of Ring of Bright Water is about Maxwell’s relationship with animals. What problems are there for wild animals in the world today? What can we do about each problem? Then have a whole-class discussion. Write the main points on the board.
2 Put students into pairs, and ask them to say what they have learnt about otters from reading Ring of Bright Water. They then write two or three paragraphs about what they have learnt.

Glossary
It will be useful for your students to know the following new words. They are practised in the ‘Before You Read’ sections of exercises at the back of the book. (Definitions are based on those in the Longman Active Study Dictionary.)

Chapters 1-4
air (n) the gas round the earth which people take into their body and let out again
alone (adj/adv) not with other people
companion (n) a person you are with, often a friend
poisonous (adj) if you eat something poisonous, it will kill you
rocks (n) large pieces of stone which stick up out of the ground or the sea
stream (n) a small river
tail (n) the part of an animal that sticks out at the end of its back
waterfall (n) a place where water falls over rocks from a high place to a lower place
wave (n) water in the sea when it gets higher and then breaks

Chapters 5-7
bedclothes (n) the covers on a bed to keep you warm
footprint (n) if you walk on soft ground, your feet leave footprints
gloves (n) a piece of clothing which you wear on your hands
harness (n) you put this round an animal or small child to hold on to it
lead (n) you put this on a dog to take it for a walk
tear (v) to make a hole in something or break it
1 Read the Introduction in your book and look at the map on page 2. Then complete these sentences.
(a) The Western Highlands are in ..........................................
(b) Maxwell’s dog was called ..........................................
(c) Maxwell’s three otters were called ......................................
(d) Maxwell’s Scottish home is called ........................................
(e) Maxwell describes his early years in a book called ..................
(f) Ring of Bright Water was written in the year .......................... 
(g) Maxwell died in the year ..........................................

2 Look at the pictures on pages 4 and 25. Then answer these questions.
(a) What kind of place is this, do you think?
(b) What do you think the weather is like?
(c) What is it like to live there, do you think?

Chapter 1

1 Are the following sentences right or wrong? If they are wrong, correct them.
(a) The name of the nearest village is Druimfiaclach.
(b) Maxwell has lived in his home for ten years now.
(c) Maxwell was born in the north of Scotland.
(d) He started a sea-fishing business but it never made much money.
(e) A friend asked Maxwell to buy his house in the West Highlands.
(f) The MacKinnon family are Maxwell’s nearest neighbours.
(g) You can drive to Camusfearna.
(h) Camusfearna has no glass in its windows.

2 Imagine you are Maxwell. You have been in Camusfearna for a few days. Write a letter to a friend about the place and how you feel about it.

Chapter 2

(a) Which of these things does Maxwell discuss in this chapter?
   furniture, television, shops, neighbours, dogs, letters, wild swans, fishing, the radio
(b) What does Maxwell say about these things? Write down what he says about them.

Chapter 3

1 Answer these questions. All the answers are numbers.
(a) How many years was it before Maxwell got running water?
(b) How many of Morag’s goats did Maxwell have for a time?
(c) How many boats does Maxwell have now?
(d) How many centimetres long are the baby eels that go up the stream each year?
(e) How many little silver fish were there in the sea ‘one warm September’?
(f) How many illnesses did Jonnie have?

2 Work in groups of three or four and discuss these questions.
(a) What strange things do we learn about animals in this chapter?
(b) What other strange things do you know about animals?

Chapter 4

1 Complete these sentences.
(a) After Jonnie died, Maxwell wanted an animal companion because ..........
(b) In 1956, Maxwell went with Wilfred Thesiger to live among ...........
(c) Maxwell paid the price of ........ for the otter.
(d) Maxwell carried the otter inside ............
(e) Maxwell called the otter ......................, which is the name of the river where he bought her.
(f) The otter thought of Maxwell as her .............
(g) Chahala died because she ate a .............. and it had poison in its body.

2 What do you know about otters? For homework, find some information about them. Then write one or two paragraphs about them.

Chapter 5

1 What things does Mijbil do that show he is an intelligent, friendly animal that needs love and fun?

2 Work with another student.
   Student A: You are the young woman who looked after the passengers on the plane. You were very amused by Maxwell and his otter when they were flying on your plane. Tell your friend about it.
Chapter 6
1 Correct the mistakes.
Maxwell took Mij to his house in London. The first day in London, Mij slept in the bath. Mij and Maxwell stayed in London for nearly two months. Mij was very happy alone and never got lonely. Maxwell never took him out of the house. Mij bit Maxwell's leg because the author took away one of his little glass balls. Maxwell took Mij to see a man who worked for a museum. This man gave him the name Maxwell's Otter. Maxwell and Mij left for Scotland in early June - they went by car. Mij taught himself to catch things to eat and killed chickens - this was a problem. Mij attacked a little bird and killed it.

2 Work in groups. One after another, describe something about Mijbil that you have learnt from this chapter.

Chapter 7
1 Are these sentences right or wrong?
(a) Mij pulled the bedclothes off Maxwell in the morning.
(b) Mij pulled sheeps' tails.
(c) Mij hurt himself badly on the rocks.
(d) Mij ate mackerel.
(e) Once, Mij stayed away because he climbed above a waterfall and could not move.
(f) Once, Mij stayed away a day and a night because his harness probably caught on something.
(g) Mij pushed Maxwell into the water when Maxwell was taking a photo of him.
(h) Mij bit a woman's ear.

2 Imagine you are Mij. Describe your life at Camusfearna with your friend, Maxwell.
Write some sentences.

3 What do you think will happen in the next few chapters? Will life stay the same for Maxwell and Mij? Or will it change in some way?

CHAPTERS 8 - 10

Chapter 8
1 Put these sentences in the order of the story.
(a) Big Angus kills Mij.
(b) A friend agrees to look after Mij at Camusfearna for two weeks.
(c) Maxwell talks to Big Angus.
(d) Maxwell looks for a keeper for Mij but can't find one.
(e) Maxwell returns to Camusfearna.
(f) The London Zoo takes Mij into their animal hospital.

2 Work with another student. Discuss how you feel about Mij's death. Do you feel sad to read about the death of an animal?

Chapter 9
(a) Tell/write the story of how Maxwell found Edal. These words will help you:
19th April - I went to village fifty kilometres from Camusfearna - friend. Hotel - drink - doorman ran in. Told me - look outside. Front door - four people - large otter. Talked excitedly. Name of otter - Edal - eight months old. Mr and Mrs Macdonald - owners - good home for Edal in Britain.
(b) Tell/write the story of Edal's early life. These words will help you.

Chapter 10
1 These are the first lines of some paragraphs in this chapter. Say or write what you can remember about the paragraph.
(a) It's time to describe Edal more fully.
(b) Because she grew up with people instead of her natural mother, there are some things she can't do well.
(c) Edal isn't the only new animal at Camusfearna this summer.
(d) I remember one day going with Edal to one of the white beaches in the islands, where some visitors from a sailing boat were having a swim.

2 Write your answer or talk with another student. Would you like to keep an otter? Say why/why not.

Activities after reading the book
1 Ring of Bright Water is a very famous book. It has sold over one million copies. Why is it so popular, do you think? Talk with another student or write three or four paragraphs about this.
2 Jimmy Watt is the boy in the last chapter who helps Maxwell with Edal. Write a letter from Jimmy to his parents, telling them about his life at Camusfearna.