

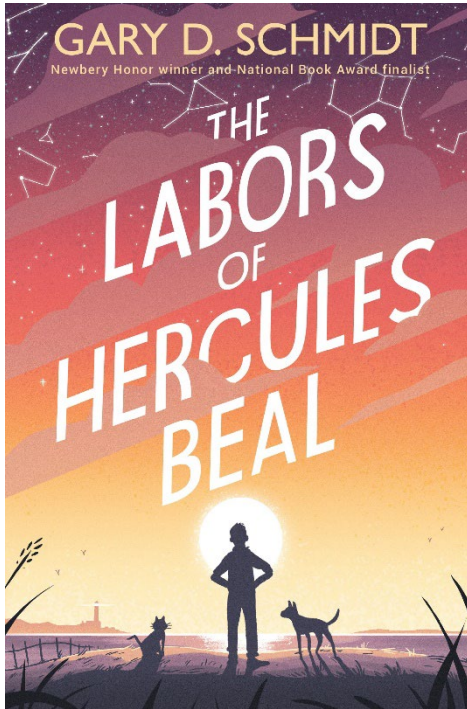


The Book Planter



Ag in the Classroom

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April 2025 – Chapter Book *The Labors of Hercules Beal* Written by: Gary D. Schmidt

This warm and witty novel explores characters around a coastal plant nursery. Herc Beal knows who he's named after—a mythical hero—but he's no superhero. He's the smallest kid in his class. So when his homeroom teacher at his new middle school gives him the assignment of duplicating the mythical Hercules's amazing feats in real life, he's skeptical. Missing his parents terribly and wishing his older brother wasn't working all the time, Herc figures out how to take his first steps along the road that the great Hercules himself once walked. Soon, new friends, human and animal, are helping him. And though his mythical role model performed his twelve labors by himself, Herc begins to see that he may not have to go it alone.

Chapter-by-Chapter Discussion Guide¹

Chapter 1

- We get to see just how much Hercules loves Truro. He even describes it as “the most beautiful place on earth.” Is there any place that you love as much as Hercules loves Truro? What makes you love it?
- Achilles had to give up “the best job in the whole freaking world” to come back and run the Beal Brothers Farm and Nursery. How do you think he felt giving up a career that he loved during one of the hardest times of his life? Why did he do this?
- What do you think Lieutenant Colonel Hupfer was “measuring” while shaking Hercules’ hand at the door?
- Extension Activity: By chance, Hercules finally gets a dog. He seems to have an instant connection with Mindy. Describe your favorite pet you’ve ever had. If you’ve never had a pet, describe the ideal pet you’d like to have someday.

Chapter 2

- Look back at the final page of Chapter 2. Analyze this brief conversation between Colonel Hupfer and Hercules. What does the Colonel mean when he tells Hercules, “But I think you already know that.”
- Before giving out the assignments to the class, Lieutenant Colonel Hupfer explains classical mythology, “They are stories meant to convey something about the world and your place in it.” Then he assigns each student a project. Besides the fact that Hercules shares a name with the Greek Hero, why do you think Colonel Hupfer chose this project for Hercules Beal?
- Extension Activity: Pretend it’s your first day in Mr. Kelderman’s “Geography and You” class: Write or talk about the place you live just as Hercules did.
 - Things to think about:
 - What grows where you live
 - What the seasons are like
 - The history of where you live
 - What you like about where you live
 - What you find beautiful or interesting

Chapter 3: The Nemean Lion

- What do you think Hercules means when he talks about becoming a “secret to yourself”?
- Elly tells Hercules not to worry because even though she wasn’t sure what would happen, the “right something” always happens. Do you agree or disagree with Elly? Do you prefer to wait for something to happen or make something happen?
- What is a “labor” in your life that could compare to Hercules capturing the Nemean Lion?
- Extension Activity: This chapter highlights art forms of sculpture, drawing, and even writing. What is an art form that you appreciate or enjoy doing yourself? What do you connect with this form or art?

Chapter 4: The Lernaean Hydra

- In school, Hercules learned a lot about systems. How many parts of your life involve systems? Do systems apply to everything or just ecosystems? Are there different types of systems--what are they?
- Hercules knew that he wouldn’t be able to get all the plants that Mrs. DeJong needed himself, so he asked his family for help completing a nearly impossible task. What big tasks have your families helped you with, or vice versa?
- Extension Activity: Using the internet, look up one of the latin names of the plants referenced in this chapter. Then, share what you learned about it.
 - Things to think about:
 - Where this plant is originally from
 - What the plant looks like
 - How you can take care of this plant as a houseplant or in a terrarium

- **Extension Activity:** Using the [NC Careers Ag Mag](#) and [Seed Your Future website](#), research a career in Plant Science/Horticulture.
 - Things to think about:
 - What education is required for this career?
 - What does a day-in-the-life look like?

Chapter 5: The Ceryneian Hind

- For Hercules' fifth labor it was Henry who came up with the idea and made the flyers. Why do you think that he was so willing to help Hercules?
- Based on his reaction, how do you think Lieutenant Colonel Hupfer felt about the kids painting the leaves of the tree?
- If people would have waited just a few more days, the leaves would have changed colors all on their own and Hercules would have needed a different labor, but he wouldn't have gotten in trouble. What are some real-life examples of getting a better outcome if you wait just a little longer, or as Colonel Hupfer says, "being still"?

Chapter 6: The Boar of Erymanthus

- When Mr. Neal came to the door for help to find his wife, the boys ran out of the house immediately. Why do you think Hercules and Achilles were so willing to help, even though it was dangerous for both of them?
- Hercules admits to us, the readers, that he was thinking about his parents during the ordeal at the Neals' house. Why do you think they were on his mind during this emergency situation?
- One "millimillionth" of a second is used a lot by Hercules in his reflection. What, good or bad, has happened to you that changed your life in a "millimillionth" of a second?

Chapter 7: The Augean Stables

- This chapter brings Lieutenant Colonel Hupfer and Hercules together in new ways. Explain how their relationship has changed throughout the book and predict how it might continue to change.
- Hercules led the effort of organizing everyone at the school clean up even though he was one of the youngest people there. Why do you think everyone so willingly listened to him? What qualities does an effective leader have?

Chapter 8: The Birds of Stymphalus

- What are some traditions that your family has around the holidays?
- After the detention is over, Lieutenant Colonel Hupfer opens up to Hercules. Why do you think he decides to tell Hercules more than his usual "I don't care?"
- What is the impact to Hercules when he finds out that Achilles knows he goes to the Dune? In what ways was it significant when he invites Achilles to go with him on Christmas?

- Extension Activity: Trees grow in rings. If you cut a tree trunk crosswise, the rings can tell the story of that tree's life. Tree rings can show storm or insect damage, years of drought, and years of perfect growing conditions. Use the internet to research tree rings and see some examples of what the rings can show us. Then, use a paper plate to mimic a cross-section of a tree trunk. Draw a ring for every year of your life. Add in bumps or spots where meaningful events in your life happened. You can also briefly explain or identify the moments in your life that have made the biggest impact on you as a person.

Chapter 9: The Cretan Bull

- Hercules talks about everything they have to do at the nursery to get ready for winter and prepare for next spring. Can you think of ways that farms around you have to prepare for the change in seasons?
- How does Hercules' view of Mr. Moby change in this chapter? What important lesson does Hercules learn?

Chapter 10: The Mares of Diomedes

- What do you think would have happened if they hadn't caught and relocated the coyotes? Was it a good thing they were there, or would the area have been better off without them?
- How do the coyotes fit into the "systems" mentioned earlier in the book? What role do they play in the local ecosystem? In your opinion, why was it so important to Hercules to release the coyotes?
- In Lieutenant Colonel Hupfer's response he broke one of his own rules and opened up to Hercules. Why do you think Lieutenant Colonel Hupfer feels comfortable getting personal with Hercules? Is it only to help Hercules or is it beneficial for him too?

Chapter 11: The Belt of Hippolyta

- Mrs. Savage tells Hercules, "maybe art tells the truth best when it admits our mortality." What does she mean by this? Do you believe that art can "tell the truth"?
- Why do you think it was so important to Hercules to get Ira back for Mrs. Savage?
- In his response, Hercules talks about how Hercules the myth still hasn't learned anything. What do you think Hercules Beal has learned from his life and his "labors" so far?
- Extension Activity: Hercules is bored by the study of rocks at school. He might not realize that, without rocks, he wouldn't have the soil that the Beal Brothers Farm and Nursery needs to grow crops. Using the internet, research the connection between rocks and soil.

Chapter 12: The Cattle of Geryon

- Why was it so important to Hercules that Achilles and Viola don't give up on each other? How does he help them start communicating again?
- Predict what will happen with Hercules and Elly's friendship since she is now in Ohio and likely not moving back.

- What do the pillars that Viola placed in the yard represent? How do they relate to the real Hercules and his Labors?

Chapter 13: The Golden Apples of Hesperides

- How well do you think Hercules handled Achilles and Viola being gone?
- Why is it so important for the nursery to be taken care of? What would have happened to all the plants if they had just left it for two weeks?
- How has Hercules and Mr. Moby's relationship grown throughout the book?
- What life lessons has Hercules Beal learned through the events of this chapter?
- Extension Activity: The setting of the Beal Brothers Farm and Nursery is very important to the book and the author has described it in detail in many chapters. Draw a map of the Beal Brothers Farm and Nursery based on how you imagine it in your mind after reading this chapter. Be sure to label each part of your drawing.

Chapter 14: Cerberus

- When Hercules is in the hospital waiting to hear about Achilles he keeps saying, "It was all the same" and then he talks about how Hercules the myth was such a jerkface for making Theseus remember. Do you think Hercules really wants to forget?
- How do you think Hercules felt when he found the dune was gone? What does the dune being gone represent?
- Do you think it was the right decision for Hercules and Viola not to tell Achilles about flipping the car? Why or why not?
- Extension Activity: The book is all about The 12 Labors of Hercules, as well as the Labors of Hercules Beal. Recall all 12 of the labors described in the book and then think of times in your life that could represent them.
 - Things to think about:
 - Struggles you've gone through
 - Achievements you've made

Final Questions

- How did Hercules and Lieutenant Colonel Hupfer's relationship change and grow throughout the book?
- In what ways were Hercules the myth and Hercules Beal alike? In what ways were they different?
- Explain Hercules' growth throughout the book. Consider: his growth in relationships with family, friends, and neighbors, how he handles situations, and how he communicates.
- Which labor do you think Hercules learned the most from?
- Of all 12 of Hercules' reflections, which could you relate to the most? Why?

Sources

1. <https://www.agintheclassroom.org/media/csulqpah/the-labors-of-hercules-beal-reading-guide-final.pdf>

3-8 Subject Areas: English Language Arts, Science and Social Studies

English Language Arts

- RL.3.1 Ask and answer questions to demonstrate understanding of a text, referring explicitly to the text as the basis for the answers.
- RL.3.2 Recount stories, including fables, folktales, and myths from diverse cultures; determine the central message, lesson, or moral and explain how it is conveyed through key details in the text.
- RL.3.3 Describe characters in a story and explain how their actions contribute to the sequence of events.
- RL.3.4 Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, identifying words that impact the meaning in a text
- RL.3.5 Refer to parts of stories, dramas, and poems when writing or speaking about a text, using terms such as chapter, scene, and stanza; describe how each successive part builds on earlier sections.
- RL.3.6 Distinguish their own point of view from that of the narrator or those of the characters.
- W.3.5 Conduct short research projects that build knowledge about a topic.
- W.3.6 Recall information from experiences or gather information from print and digital sources; take brief notes on sources and sort evidence into provided categories.
- RL.4.1 Refer to details and examples in a text when explaining what the text says explicitly and when drawing inferences from the text.
- RL.4.2 Determine a theme of a story, drama, or poem from details in the text; summarize the text.
- RL.4.3 Describe in depth a character, setting, or event in a story or drama, drawing on specific details in the text.
- RL.4.4 Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including words that affect meaning and tone
- W.4.5 Conduct short research projects that build knowledge through investigation of different aspects of a topic.
- W.4.6 Recall relevant information from experiences or gather relevant information from print and digital sources; take notes and categorize information, and provide a list of sources
- RL.5.1 Quote accurately from a text when explaining what the text says explicitly and when drawing inferences from the text.
- RL.5.2 Determine a theme of a story, drama, or poem from details in the text, including how characters in a story or drama respond to challenges or how the speaker in a poem reflects upon a topic; summarize the text.
- RL.5.3 Compare and contrast two or more characters, settings, or events in a story or drama, drawing on specific details in the text.
- RL.5.4 Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, recognizing specific word choices that contribute to meaning and tone.
- RL.5.5 Explain how chapters, scenes, or stanzas provide the overall structure of a particular story, drama, or poem.
- RL.5.6 Describe how a narrator's or speaker's point of view influences how events are described.
- W.5.5 Conduct short research projects that use several sources to build knowledge through investigation of different aspects of a topic.
- W.5.6 Recall relevant information from experiences or gather relevant information from print and digital sources; summarize or paraphrase information in notes and finished work and provide a list of sources.
- RL.6.1 Cite textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.
- RL.6.2 Determine a theme of a text and how it is conveyed through particular details; provide a summary of the text distinct from personal opinions or judgments.
- RL.6.3 Describe how a particular story's or drama's plot unfolds in a series of episodes as well as how the characters respond or change as the plot moves toward a resolution.
- RL.6.5 Analyze how a particular sentence, chapter, scene, or stanza fits into the overall structure of a text and contributes to the development of the theme, setting, or plot.
- RL.6.6 Explain how an author develops the point of view of the narrator or speaker in a text.
- W.6.5 Conduct short research projects to answer a question, drawing on several sources and refocusing the investigation when appropriate.
- W.6.6 Gather relevant information from multiple print and digital sources; assess the credibility of each source; and quote or paraphrase the data and conclusions of others while avoiding plagiarism and providing basic bibliographic information for sources.
- RL.7.1 Cite several pieces of textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.
- RL.7.2 Determine a theme of a text and analyze its development over the course of the text; provide an objective summary of the text.
- RL.7.3 Analyze how particular elements of a story or drama interact.
- RL.7.5 Analyze how a drama's or poem's (or other literary genre's) form or structure contributes to its meaning.
- RL.7.6 Analyze how an author develops and contrasts the perspectives of different characters in a text.
- RI.7.5 Analyze the structure an author uses to organize a text, including how the major sections contribute to the whole and to the development of the ideas.
- W.7.5 Conduct short research projects to answer a question, drawing on several sources and generating additional related, focused questions for further research and investigation
- RL.8.1 Cite textual evidence that most strongly supports an analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.
- RL.8.2 Determine a theme of a text and analyze its development over the course of the text, including its relationship to the characters, setting, and plot; provide an objective summary of the text.

- RL.8.3 Analyze how particular lines of dialogue or incidents in a story or drama propel the action, reveal aspects of a character, or provoke a decision.
- RL.8.4 Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text; analyze the impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone, including analogies or allusions to other texts.
- RL.8.5 Compare and contrast the structure of two or more texts and analyze how the differing structure of each text contributes to its meaning and style.
- RL.8.6 Analyze how differences in the perspectives of the characters and the audience or reader create such effects as suspense or humor.

Science

- LS.5.2 Understand the interdependence of plants and animals within their ecosystem.
- ESS.4.2 Understand patterns of change in the Earth's surface over time.
- ESS.5.1 Understand how Earth systems (hydrosphere and atmosphere) impact patterns of weather and climate.

Social Studies

- 3.G.1 Understand how geography impacts the development of regions and communities.