

All Creatures Great and Small

Discussion Guide

In chapter 1 of this narrative, a sarcastic and derogatory character known only as Uncle tells the typically hard-at-work Herriot: “You can ‘ave your book learning. Give me experience every time” (p. 4). Discuss this remark as a key theme of *All Creatures Great and Small*. Do all of the small farmers and countrymen in this book feel as Uncle does? What about Herriot himself—how do you think he would finally answer the debate about knowledge vs. experience?

Revisit the end of chapter 7, where Herriot compares (as he does at other points in his book) working in the city with working in the country. Shortly thereafter, at the beginning of chapter 8, he likens looking out over the Yorkshire countryside to “taking time out of life” (p. 51). What does he mean by this?

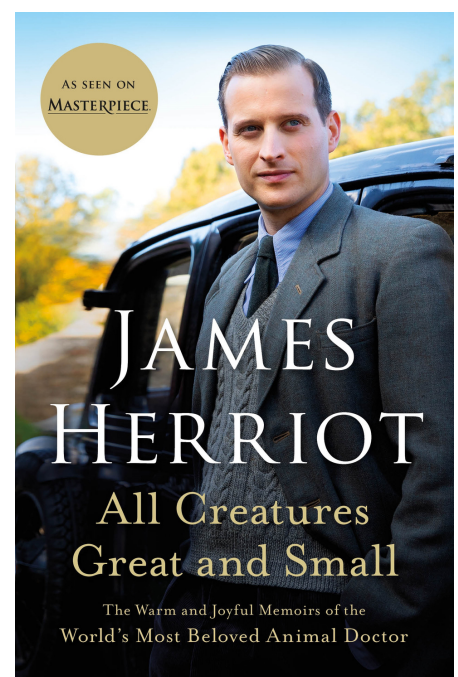
“I often wondered what drove him on,” writes Herriot of Siegfried Farnon (p. 51). Many pages later, Herriot refers to him as “my gifted but mercurial boss” (p. 216). What do you think drives or motivates him? Why do you think he’s so “mercurial”?

In chapter 19, remembering how he watched a batch of newborn piglets gather around their mother, Herriot writes: “I couldn’t say how long I had been standing there looking at the wonder that never grew stale” (p. 116). Make a list of other such moments—moments defined by wonder—that you recall from these pages. Discuss the relationship between this timeless “wonder” and the book’s broader universality (as in, its widely appealing and ever-applicable story).

More than once in this book, we as readers encounter a character who loves animals, takes care of animals, cherishes animals, is committed to saving animals, and is also fond of eating those same animals. This even applies to Herriot himself, and to Siegfried. Is this contradictory to you? Why or why not?

“The calf felt no pain now that the broken ends of the bone were immobilized,” writes Herriot in chapter 40, “and the fear which always demoralizes a hurt animal had magically vanished” (p. 246). Is it fair to say, regarding the pain and fear that animals experience, that whenever a vet treats one, he or she is automatically treating the other as well? Is this duality also true among doctors and human patients?

Later in chapter 43, Miss Stubbs—who’s on her deathbed, and who owns several beloved pets—asks Herriot if he thinks that animals have souls. How does he answer her? Is he telling her what he really believes, or is he telling a dying woman what he thinks she wants to hear?



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The wealthy and reclusive John Skipton enlists Herriot's help in chapter 45. Skipton has a pair of old horses who are both ailing; one is thirty, and the other is a year or two younger. He says of his horses: "They were two slaves when I was a slave" (p. 282). What does he mean here? Why is he taking such devoted care of two very old horses?

Look again at the beginning of chapter 55, where Herriot talks about how money "has always formed a barrier between the farmer and the vet" (p. 346). Why are farmers, in Herriot's experience, often reluctant to pay their veterinary bills? Why does he state that "the veterinary surgeon [now] stands pitilessly exposed as the only man who has to be paid?"

"You don't find people like the Bramleys now," writes Herriot of a certain family (p. 375). Describe this family, and explain why the author thinks that such "simple people" are no longer to be found nowadays. Also, discuss the fact that—for a book primarily about farm animals and their treatment—this text is actually filled with memorable human beings. Did this strike you, as a reader, as odd? Ironic? Surprising? Necessary? All of the above, or none?

In chapter 61, we encounter two distinct families: the Taveners and the Altons. How are these families similar and different?

