



The Puppets of SPELHORST

Kate DiCamillo
illustrated by Julie Morstad

Shut up in a trunk by a taciturn old sea captain with a secret, five puppets—a king, a wolf, a girl, a boy, and an owl—bicker, boast, and comfort one another in the dark. Individually, they dream of song and light, freedom and flight, purpose and glory, but they all agree they are part of a larger story, bound each to each by chance, bonded by the heart's mysteries. When at last their shared fate arrives, landing them on a mantel in a blue room in the home of two little girls, the truth is more astonishing than any of them could have imagined. From master storyteller Kate DiCamillo comes the first of the Norendy Tales, a series of original fairy tales, each illustrated by a different virtuoso artist. Julie Morstad's enchanting illustrations bring to life this story of five friends who confront circumstances beyond their control with patience, cunning, and high spirits.

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COMMON CORE CONNECTIONS

This guide, which can be used with large or small groups, will help students meet several of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) for English Language Arts. These include the reading literature standards for key ideas and details, craft and structure, and integration of knowledge and ideas (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL), as well as the speaking and listening standards for comprehension and collaboration and for presentation of knowledge and ideas (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL). Questions can also be used in writing prompts for independent work.

Discussion Questions

1. How do the similes that the author includes (see some examples on pages 8, 13, and 17) help with the imagery of the story?
2. What would you hear if you lay in your bed all day like the sea captain does on page 8?
3. Why do you think the sea captain had to have the puppets? Why do you think he responded the way he did when he got home with the puppets?
4. The girl puppet considers the rising of the sun “a different thing entirely than the rising of the moon—the sun was more insistent, more certain of its power” (pages 19–20). How would you describe the rising of the sun versus that of the moon?
5. On page 26, the king says that he knows he has a heart because he could hear the beautiful song. What do you think shows that someone has a heart?
6. You learn more and more about each of the puppets’ true personalities throughout the book, even though they often repeat the same lines. How would you describe each puppet’s personality?
7. The wolf says “the point” is “to capture, to subdue” (page 28). What do you think the king, boy, girl, and owl think is “the point” of their life? What do you think is “the point” of life?
8. Why do you think Martha is so infatuated with the wolf?
9. Jane was given the name Jane, instead of Violet, because her ma wanted her to have a sturdy name for a hard world. Why were you given your name?
10. On page 69, when the king commands someone to make the world different, the girl asks, “What kind of different do you want it to be?” If the king asked you this question, how would you answer?
11. On page 81, the king wonders what is the point of being king if no one heeds your commands. What do you believe is the point of being a king? How does the king get the idea of leadership wrong?
12. As they venture deeper into the woods, Martha compares Emma and herself to Hansel and Gretel (page 85). Why would Martha make this connection? Do you agree or disagree with the comparison?
13. Jane, on page 93, describes where she would go if she could go anywhere. Why do you think Jane fantasizes about going where camels are? Where would you go?
14. What is the message of the play that Emma wrote?
15. On pages 137–138, an old woman compliments Emma on her play and shares her own story. Who is this woman? Why do you think that? How does she connect to the story as a whole?
16. Why do you think Jane made the choice she did, and why did she take the puppets with her? Based on the final image, where did Jane end up?
17. Martha and Emma may be sisters, but they are very different. How would you compare the two of them?
18. Songs are a big part of the joy of the puppets’ lives. What song brings you joy? Why does music often bring joy to those who are listening to it?
19. How do the illustrations add to your experience of reading the story?
20. Why do you think the author divided the story into acts?
21. *The Puppets of Spelhorst* is described as “an original fairy tale.” What aspects of the book make it a fairy tale?



Classroom Activities

Creating and Performing a Puppet Show

Emma created a play for the puppets that she, with her sister and Jane's help, put on for an audience. Split up your class into groups of five. Then have your students create their own puppets, write their own play following a narrative arc, and put on their play for their classmates.

Vocabulary

Kate DiCamillo is a master at specific word choice, and her books provide many opportunities to read and discuss new vocabulary in context. After reading *The Puppets of Spelhorst*, have your students look back at the vocabulary she used and choose five words they do not know. For each word, have your student create a word map for the unknown word. The map could include:

- The student's guessed definition based on context clues and the dictionary definition in the student's own words
- The part of speech
- One or two synonyms
- One or two antonyms
- The sentence using the word from the book and a sentence using the word created by the student
- An illustration of the word
- Word parts (prefixes, suffixes, roots)
- Associations with the word

Some examples of words from the first six chapters of the book that students may choose are:

bewitched (page 9)

devoid (page 9)

loomed (page 31)

prow (page 7)

cataracts (page 7)

divert (page 31)

mournful (page 29)

solemn (page 20)

contemplative (page 18)

gust (page 9)

perched (page 13)

utterance (page 14)

descended (page 40)

insistent (page 20)

portentousness (page 33)

whimsy (page 9)

despair (page 13)

jostled (page 33)

profound (page 41)

winsome (page 30)



Classroom Activities

What Do You Sense from Your Bed?

Using the second paragraph on page 8 (which begins "On bad days, he stayed abed . . .") as a mentor text, have students write their own paragraph describing what they see, hear, smell, taste, and feel in their bed. If you prefer they do this at school, students can use their desk or another spot each selects in the classroom or school.



Photo by Dina Kantor

About Kate DiCamillo

Kate DiCamillo is one of America's most beloved storytellers. She is a former National Ambassador for Young People's Literature and a two-time Newbery Medalist. Born in Philadelphia, she grew up in Florida and now lives in Minneapolis.



About Julie Morstad

Julie Morstad is the illustrator of numerous acclaimed books for young readers, including *House of Dreams: The Life of L. M. Montgomery* by Liz Rosenberg, *When Green Becomes Tomatoes* by Julie Fogliano, and *Swan: The Life and Dance of Anna Pavlova* by Laurel Snyder. She lives in Vancouver, British Columbia.

These questions were prepared by Kellee Moyer, a middle school librarian in Orlando, Florida. She is the author of various teaching guides for all levels, the coauthor of the blog *Unleashing Readers*, the 2024 president-elect of the Assembly on Literature for Adolescents of NCTE (ALAN), and a member of NCTE, ALAN, FAME, AASL, and ALA. She served as a 2016–2018 member of the ALAN Board of Directors, a member and then cochair of the 2020–2021 Schneider Family Award Jury, and a member and then chair of the Amelia Elizabeth Walden Book Award committee from 2012 to 2014.

