

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for The Midwife's Apprentice by Karen Cushman

Book Information

Karen Cushman, The Midwife's Apprentice
Quiz Number: 11553
Houghton Mifflin, 1995
ISBN 0-395-69229-6; LCCN
122 Pages
Book Level: 6.0
Interest Level: MG

In medieval England, a nameless, homeless girl is taken in by a sharp-tempered midwife, and in spite of obstacles and hardship, eventually gains the three things she most wants: a full belly, a contented heart, and a place in this world.

Award: ALA Notable/Best Books; American Bookseller Pick of the List; Booklist Editors' Choice; Horn Book Fanfare; NCTE Notable Children's Books in the Language Arts; Newbery Medal; Parent's Choice Award/Honor Book; SLJ Best Book; State Award; Young Reader's Choice Award/Nominee

Topics: Countries/Regions, England; Family Life, Orphans; History, Middle Ages/Medieval; Read Now with Power Up Recommended Lists, Cherish Freedom; READNOW - Demco Media Turtleback Books, Demco Media - Read Now Grades 9+; Recommended Reading, California Recommended Lit., English, 6-8

Main Characters

Alyce also known as Brat and Beetle, the principal character in the story; a homeless adolescent girl who becomes a midwife's apprentice

Edward a young boy who Alyce finds and sends to the manor so he has food and shelter

Jane the midwife for whom Alyce works; she is greedy and harsh, though competent as a midwife

Jennet the wife of the proprietor of the inn where Alyce goes after running away from the village

Magister Richard Reese, M.A. a renowned scholar staying at the inn while working on a book of knowledge; he teaches Alyce her letters and how to read by "teaching" the cat

Purr a cat that Alyce feeds and rescues from the village boys' cruelty

Will Russet a redheaded village boy who Alyce rescues from drowning

Vocabulary

apprentice a person who works for another in order to learn a trade

moiling to make or get wet and muddy

pluck courage, bravery

threshing separating the grain from the seeds

wimple a woman's headcloth drawn in folds about the chin, formerly worn out of doors, especially in the Middle Ages

Synopsis

Alyce is a young, nameless adolescent girl who had never known family or home and lives from hand to mouth in various villages during the Medieval Ages. A greedy, harsh midwife named Jane finds her in a dung heap where she had sought refuge from the cold. Jane takes Alyce (whom she calls Beetle) into her home as a source of cheap labor, and to train as an apprentice who would be too stupid and scared to offer any competition. While living with Jane, Beetle learns about the herbs, magic and midwifery skills.

Village life serves as the backdrop to the situations she encounters. She notices a cat and they befriend one another after Beetle rescues it from the cruelty of the village boys. Beetle also discovers that Jane is having an affair, but is obligated to stay quiet about it for fear of living in the streets again. After going to a fair for supplies, she adopts some pride and the name, Alyce, after a man mistook her for someone who could read.

Alyce develops relationships with two boys during the story. The first is Will Russet whom she saves from drowning. She later helps Will deliver a set of twin calves from his cow, Tansy, and learns that kindness is an important tool in helping a mother through labor. Alyce finds a young homeless boy (whom she names Edward), and helps him by

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finding him a home at the manor.

Her confidence is again boosted when she successfully helps a mother through labor on her own after the midwife leaves to attend another birth that promises a better fee.

In a quick turn of events, Alyce runs away from the midwife and village after failing to deliver a baby from a woman who requested that Alyce attend her. She stops at an inn at a crossroads where she becomes the inn girl, a helper to Jennet, a round, rosy woman with a blind husband. She becomes fascinated by the Magister, who is living at the inn while writing. He notices Alyce's curiosity and begins to teach her the letters and words by teaching her cat, since Alyce is too shy to approach him. Alyce now begins to wonder about grander things than her next meal and keeping warm.

When Jane, the midwife, comes to the inn, Alyce overhears that she wants and needs a helper who can put up with her and keep trying without quitting. A visiting merchant arrives with his pregnant wife and Alyce attends the birth successfully. When she is presented with different options for her future, she searches her heart and finds that she wants to coax reluctant infants into life. She returns to the midwife, knowing how difficult she can be, in order to learn more and perhaps someday be a midwife herself.

Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

Initial Understanding

In what way does Will Russet influence Alyce?

Will's interactions with Alyce give her newfound confidence. He compliments her for saving him and helping him deliver the twin calves. Alyce learns that kindness of spirit is just as important as magic and potions in delivering babies. He serves as a confidant after seeing her at the inn.

Literary Analysis

How does the author show that religion and superstition were a big part of medieval life?

The story is laden with odd things necessary to help a laboring mother. When Alyce went to the fair, the hangman's murderer's wash water was selling well. The villagers attributed Alyce's wood-block hoofprints to the Devil. The people would at times call off a litany of some saints in their conversations and saint's days were celebrated with fairs.

Inferential Comprehension

How does Alyce's perception of herself change during the course of the story?

Alyce begins to see herself as a person of value, capable of feeling, loving, helping, and giving. She realizes she has needs other than food and shelter and begins to listen to her heart.

Constructing Meaning

The village boys picked on others who were even less fortunate than they were. Alyce, on the other hand, remembered the days of her homelessness and helped the little boy she found sleeping with the cows. Do you know people like the village boys or Alyce? Who would you like to imitate?

Answers may mention a playground bully who often picks on the most defenseless child. Children may also talk about gangs, whose members often come from our society's castaways. There are many examples of people who come back to help others lift themselves up from the bottom rungs of society. These include teachers, medical personnel, business workers, etc., who return to their old neighborhoods to help others. Alyce would be the person to imitate. She wanted the boy to know he was of such value that she named him after the king!

Teachable Skills

Recognizing Setting The story is set in medieval England. Have the students research what life was like at that time in a medieval village. Explain

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the differences between the lords and ladies of the manor and the peasant class. Literacy was a rare occurrence among the peasant class. Young men often followed in the occupation of their father. There was little "upward mobility" in the society and there was no welfare system, except for the generosity of an individual. For the peasant class, life was often governed by survival. In contrast, the people of the manor had their needs catered to. The children had tutors who taught them to learn to read and write. They had plenty of food and a staff of people to do the work. They enjoyed the privileges wealth could bring at that time. Students may also be asked to compare Alyce's life with their own. How do their chores compare? Their worries and cares? How is the reality of life back then different from the romance we sometimes imagine about life in Camelot?

Understanding Literary Features Superstition played a big role in the lives of the medieval people. What are some modern day superstitions and lucky charms that people still believe and use? Have students create a list of superstitions and charms. It might be fun to ask some older adults what superstitions existed when they were children. Reasons could be suggested as to the origins of certain superstitions, such as to generate fear, obedience, or hope. What is the relationship between superstition and education? Has superstition risen or fallen since scientific discoveries have become known?

Understanding Characterization A special relationship develops between Alyce and the cat, Purr. We find that Alyce empathizes with the cat as she rescues and nurses it. The village boys have tormented them both. The cat is the first one to whom Alyce is able to tell what she could remember of her life. After naming herself, Alyce then wants to name the cat. The cat becomes a means for her to talk and trust. Alyce later is able to move beyond this safe relationship and befriend people such as Edward and Will. Students can be asked to select another story where the main character has a relationship with an animal. Examples are *Charlotte's Web* with

Fern and Wilbur, and *Jim Ugly* with Jake and Jim Ugly. How do the relationships compare? How did the relationship develop? What is special about a relationship with an animal that can't be filled by another human being? What are the limitations?

Understanding the Author's Craft

Apprenticeships were the way knowledge of skills was passed from generation to generation for many centuries. In ancient Egypt, goldsmithing, stone-cutting and pottery apprenticeships existed. In more recent times, printing, plumbing, and carpentry have been taught by apprenticeship. Have a student pretend to be an apprentice. To whom would they apprentice themselves? How would they feel toward their "master"? What would they hope to learn. What parts of their job would they dislike. How would they accept criticism? Write about their experience.