

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

The Tale of Despereaux

by
Kate DiCamillo

Book Information

Kate DiCamillo, The Tale of Despereaux
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This book tells of the adventure of Despereaux Tilling, a small mouse of unusual talents, the princess he loves, the servant girl who longs to be a princess, and a devious rat determined to bring them all to ruin.

Award: ALA Notable/Best Books; BCCB Blue Ribbon Book; Booklist Editors' Choice; NCTE Notable Children's Books in the Language Arts; Newbery Medal; Parent's Choice Award/Honor Book; Publishers Weekly Best Book; State Award

Topics: Adventure, Misc./Other; Animals, Mice; Animals, Rats; Behavior, Meanness; Emotions, Love; Fairy Tales, Fairy Tales (All); People, Royalty; Popular Groupings, Middle Grades Popular Authors/Starred Reviews; Recommended Reading, All's Book Club (All Roker); Recommended Reading, Junior Library Guild Selection

Main Characters

Botticelli Remorso Roscuro's friend, a very old rat

Cook the chef and master soup maker of the castle

Despereaux Tilling an unusual mouse who falls in love with a princess

Furlough Tilling Despereaux's brother who tries to teach him how to behave

Gregory the jailer who watches over the dungeon

Head Mouse the mouse in charge of the Mouse Council

Hovis the threadmaster, who marks Despereaux as a prisoner but encourages him to be brave

King Phillip the king in whose castle the story takes place

Lester Tilling Despereaux's father

Louise the head of the serving staff who tries to train Mig

Miggery Sow a girl called Mig, sold by her father, who wants to become a princess

Princess Pea King Phillip's daughter

Queen Rosemary the queen, who dies after seeing a rat in her soup

Roscuro a rat named Chiaroscuro, born in the dungeon, who is very interested in the light

Uncle the man to whom Miggery Sow's father sold her

Vocabulary

clout a heavy blow that is usually struck with the hand; a punch or a hit

consequences results, often natural or logical; things produced by a cause or causes; outcomes of events; effects

destined determined or bound by fate; unavoidably or necessarily headed in a certain direction or for a certain end; bound for somewhere or something unavoidable

divine excellent, beautiful, or good to the highest degree; above that which is human; of, from, serving, or relating to a deity; holy or sacred; godlike; perfect; magnificent; heavenly

ominous threatening; menacing; foreshadowing, suggesting, or warning of danger, evil, or ill fortune; arousing fear or dread; scary or frightening; sinister

perfidy a betrayal of a trust; an act of disloyalty; a deliberate breach of faith, trust, allegiance, or loyalty; treachery; deceitfulness

quest a search, hunt, or mission, especially one that is extended or difficult; the act of pursuing, seeking, or looking for something

renounce to give up; to reject; to decline formally; to cast off or leave behind deliberately; to disown, dismiss, or deny; to refuse to acknowledge

revealed made known or uncovered; disclosed or unveiled

scurry to run with short, quick steps; to move quickly or in a rushed way

Synopsis

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Despereaux Tilling is a very small mouse who doesn't conform to expectations. One day as he seeks the source of a wonderful sound, Despereaux comes upon the king playing his guitar and singing to his daughter, Princess Pea. The princess reminds Despereaux of the fair maiden in his storybook, and he falls in love with her. When his brother Furlough sees Despereaux with the king and princess, Furlough runs off to tell their father, who then betrays Despereaux to the Mouse Council. The council finds that Despereaux has broken the rules of mouse conduct and sends him to the rats in the dungeon. But first, the threadmaster ties a red thread around his neck and urges him to be brave for the princess. In the dungeon, Despereaux meets Gregory, the jailer, who has a red rope tied about his ankle to keep him from getting lost in the maze of hallways. Gregory offers to save Despereaux if he will tell Gregory stories to bring light to his dark world.

The second book tells the story of Roscuro, a rat who runs afoul of Gregory for nibbling on his rope. To teach Roscuro a lesson, Gregory holds a lit match near Roscuro's face, which burns his whiskers but gives him a great interest in light of all sorts. Later, Roscuro finds his way out of the dungeon to the banquet hall, where a party is going on. As Roscuro enjoys the party, Princess Pea calls out that a rat is swinging from a chandelier, and Roscuro falls into the queen's soup. Spotting the rat, the queen squeals, collapses, and dies. Roscuro, whose heart is broken by the angry glare of Princess Pea, returns to the dungeon, vowing revenge. In his grief, the king outlaws soup and all soup utensils.

In the third book, Miggery Sow's father sells Mig at age six for some cigarettes, a red tablecloth, and a hen to Uncle, who punishes Mig for poor work with clouts to her ears, which come to resemble cauliflowers. When Mig sees the king, queen, and princess riding, she decides she wants to be a princess. Several years later, a soldier comes to Uncle's to enforce the king's soup law and takes Mig away from Uncle, telling him it is also against the law to own a human being. In this way, Mig ends up at the castle and is assigned to deliver food to

Gregory in the dungeon. There she meets Roscuro, who promises to help her become a princess if she helps him bring Princess Pea to darkness. Despereaux, folded inside Gregory's used napkin, overhears their plan.

Roscuro launches his plot in the fourth book by nibbling through Gregory's rope, causing the jailer to lose his way in the dungeon. Roscuro and Mig then force Princess Pea at knifepoint to the dungeon while all in the castle sleep. Unable to convince the king of what has happened, Despereaux, armed by the threadmaster with a needle and spool of thread, sets off for the dungeon, but not before Cook, secretly making soup, fortifies Despereaux with some. Botticelli, a rat who tried to teach Roscuro the art of torture, finds Despereaux in the dungeon and plans to torture him by leading him to the princess and then killing him, but when they find Pea and her kidnappers, Roscuro smells soup on Despereaux and the memory of the banquet causes him to beg to be killed. Pea promises that Cook will serve Roscuro soup in the banquet hall if he leads them all out of the dungeon, which he agrees to do, and Princess Pea proclaims Despereaux her knight with a shining needle.

Open-Ended Questions

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

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Inferential Comprehension

When the author tells about Despereaux reading the storybook, she says, "Reader, you must know that an interesting fate (sometimes involving rats, sometimes not) awaits almost everyone, mouse or man, who does not conform." In what ways does Despereaux not conform to what is expected of him?

Despereaux is an unusual mouse. He would rather read a book than eat the glue and pages. He prefers watching light stream through a window to learning how to scurry. He approaches the king and princess instead of hiding. He is also unique in his appearance, a very small mouse with big ears, and he was born with his eyes open.

Constructing Meaning

Think about the character Miggery Sow and her life. What happens to Mig? How do the changes in her life make you feel?

Students may express their feelings using incidents from the story. Mig confronts many sad things, including the death of her mother, being sold by her father, and being beaten by Uncle, who owns her for a time. She finds hope in her dream of being a princess but is willing to harm Pea to get her wish. Many times the author states that no one cares what Mig wants. After a very sad time, things turn out better for Mig when she is reunited with her father, a prisoner freed by Pea, who treats her as a princess to make up for what he did.

Teachable Skills

Understanding Literary Features

Understanding the Author's Craft

Extending Meaning

Identifying Persuasive Language