

Zel

by

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Book Information

Donna Jo Napoli, Zel
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Interest Level: UG

In this retelling of the fairy tale RAPUNZEL, a woman's plan to guard her daughter's devotion drives them apart and nearly robs her daughter of her sanity and her true love.

Award: BCCB Blue Ribbon Book; Canadian Library Association Honour; NCTE Notable Children's Books in the Language Arts; Publishers Weekly Best Book; SLJ Best Book; State Award; VOYA Award/Honor

Topics: Fairy Tales, Fairy Tales (All); Family Life, Daughters; Family Life, Mothers; READNOW - Demco Media Turtleback Books, Demco Media - Read Now Grades 9+; READNOW - Perma-Bound, Perma-Bound - Read Now Grades 6-8; READNOW - Perma-Bound, Perma-Bound - Read Now Grades 9+; READNOW - Renaissance Learning, RLI - High School (Theme: Tough Decisions); Recommended Reading, Children's Literature Choice

Main Characters

Count Konrad a young nobleman who falls madly in love with Rapunzel

Father Konrad's father, who hopes to arrange a profitable marriage for Konrad

Mother a barren woman who becomes a witch in order to receive a child to raise

Rapunzel (Zel) a loving, spirited young girl who is raised by a witch

the smith the blacksmith who takes care of Meta; he likes Zel and gives Konrad information about her

Vocabulary

banishment a state of being forced out of an area; exile

cobbler a person who repairs or makes shoes and other footwear

gibberish nonsense words

resume begin again; continue after stopping

thistles plants that have prickly leaves

Synopsis

Shortly before Zel's thirteenth birthday, Mother brings Zel to town. While Mother buys birthday presents, Zel helps the local smith tend to a young count's horse. The count, Konrad, is smitten by Zel and offers to repay her. She requests a fertilized egg for a barren goose that nests near her alm home. Konrad goes to search for the egg, but Mother returns to take Zel shopping before he comes back. Konrad is forced to leave the egg with the smith, who later gives it to Zel. Konrad particularly resents the situation because he cannot stop thinking about Zel.

At home, Mother is happily preparing for Zel's birthday until she realizes that Zel is dreaming of married life. Knowing that Zel must choose to be with Mother forever in order to seal the pact Mother has made with the devils, Mother whisks Zel away to a tower in the forest.

In the meantime, Konrad is convincing his parents that he cannot marry the woman his father has chosen. He embarks on a two-year search to find Zel. Once he accidentally finds Mother in her home on the alm, but he does not realize it until he has already left and Mother has rearranged the forest. Just as Konrad is giving up his searching, he finds Zel's tower. He watches Mother climb Zel's magically created braids in order to enter the tower. After Mother leaves, he has Zel drop her braids, and he joins her in the tower. He professes his love and promises to return with tools to help her escape the tower.

Unfortunately, Mother returns first. When Zel admits her love for Konrad, Mother knows she will lose Zel. She severs Zel's braids, and the trees carry Zel

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away. Konrad returns to find Mother alone in the tower. When Mother sees his grief, she tries to save him by growing the brambles to cushion his fall from the tower after the braids attack him. Mother dies.

Zel is carried to a distant village where she raises the twin girls she has from Konrad. Despite being blinded from the fall, Konrad eventually finds Zel, and her tears heal his eyes. They live happily ever after.

Open-Ended Questions

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

Initial Understanding

Why does Mother ruin the hat, the shoes, and the linen dress?

Mother wants to buy gifts for Zel, but she does not have any money. She magically causes the objects to ruin themselves so that the proprietors will throw the objects out or give them to her. She plans to order the objects to rejuvenate themselves later so that they are restored for Zel.

Literary Analysis

What does the egg symbolize to Mother?

Mother sees the egg as many things. She believes that it is an opportunity to show Zel that an adopted child can be loved as dearly as one's biological child. She also sees the egg as a symbol of Zel's innocence and faith in goodness. When the egg is rejected, she curses Konrad for giving her a gift that may make Zel question her relationship with Mother.

Inferential Comprehension

When Mother sees Konrad's face after he realizes that Rapunzel is gone from the tower, she says that Konrad is her soulmate. What does she mean?

Mother knows that Konrad cares as much about Rapunzel as she does. She also knows that losing Rapunzel is causing him to suffer as deeply as she is suffering and that he is willing to do anything to regain Rapunzel.

Constructing Meaning

How can the reader tell that keeping Zel locked in the tower is destroying Mother?

Mother is tormented by her own treatment of Zel. She is particularly horrified when she slaps Zel. Her need for Zel to choose escalates, and she alternates between attempting to pamper Zel and treating her abusively. She has moments of great weakness and often feels that her strength is being sapped. She also has increasing difficulty in controlling herself.

Teachable Skills

Comparing and Contrasting This story is based on the fairy tale of *Rapunzel*. Have the students read the original fairy tale and then have them compare how the stories are different and how they are alike. Have them use details from the book to support their ideas.

Extending Meaning Even at the end of this story, Zel feels that Mother was a good parent to her. Have the students make a list of ways in which Mother is good and ways in which Mother is abusive. Then have them evaluate Mother as a parent.

Understanding the Author's Craft This story contains many instances of foreshadowing. Have the students identify two or three examples of this and give a brief explanation of what is being foreshadowed in each example.

Identifying Persuasive Language Mother never truly explains her motives to Zel. Have the students consider what Mother might have said to persuade Zel to make the choice she wanted.

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Have them write a dialogue in which Mother succeeds in persuading Zel to stay with her.