

Family book club



Telegraph Weekend Family Book Club discussion notes: The Black Book Of Secrets (Published: 07/10/2006)

Competition

The Black Book Of Secrets

These notes suggest a number of ways in which reading groups might use F.E. Higgins's novel, The Black Book of Secrets, to stimulate enquiry and discussion.

Are You Sitting Comfortably?

In the introduction to the book (page xii), the author FE Higgins writes about finding Joe Zabbidou's Book of Secrets and Ludlow Fitch's Memoirs, rolled up inside a wooden leg. What do you feel about this revelation? Does it get you in the mood for reading the rest of the book? Do you think it adds to the drama and excitement?

Hold On Tight

They always say the first page of a book should grab your attention; this one grabs it with both hands and gives it a sharp tweak! So how does the author do it? Well, think how little you knew about Ludlow Fitch's life at the start of the page, and think how much you know by the end of it!

advertisement Ludlow Fitch – What Do You Think

Do you like Ludlow? What do you imagine he looks like? And do you think his unhappy past (nightmare parents, life of crime) justifies his occasional betrayals of Joe (eg, reading the Book of Secrets with Polly) ?

Tooth Pulling

Yes, the description of what Barton Gumbroot tries to do to Ludlow is horrifying, but that sort of thing did used to happen in real life (a long time ago, thankfully). You'll find the author (who used to be a teacher!) has written a little historical essay about that, on page 291, (On The Business of Tooth Pulling) along with other notes on Bodysnatching (where criminals used to dig up dead bodies so that doctors could dissect them for research purposes). Originally, these essays appeared in between chapters in The Black Book of Secrets, but then the publishers decided to put them at the end of the book because they said it interrupted the flow of the story. Do you think they were right?

Joe Zabbidou – Man or Superman?

Is he a mere human, or does he have supernatural powers? Do you get the impression that Joe knows exactly what Ludlow has been up to, and when he's done something wrong or naughty? And do you, like the villagers, get cross with him because he won't get rid of the horrible Jeremiah Ratchet for them?

The Names, The Names

Nearly all the characters have names that fit either their personality or their job. For example: Elias Sourdough, the baker, Horatio Cleaver, the butcher, Perigoe Leafbinder, the bookseller, Lily Weaver, the weaver Do you like the way the author has done this? Do you think it makes the book better? What effect do you think it has?

The Latin

No doubt about it, Joe Zabbidou is a big fan of Latin. "It's the language of precision", he says, and as a result, there's bits of Latin dotted throughout this book. Do you like this, or does it annoy you? Have you been able to translate all the phrases? For example, "Verba Volant, Scripta Manent", which means "Words Fly Away, But Written Things Remain". Or "Quae Nocent, Docent" – "Things That Hurt You Also Teach You".

Goodies or Baddies?

It's pretty clear that Jeremiah Ratchet's evil, isn't it? But what do you think about the villagers? We know from their secrets that they've all done wicked things in the past, and we see for themselves how unfairly and cruelly they turn against Joe, claiming he's made all sorts of promises when in fact he's done nothing of the sort. But would you describe them as evil?

Whodunnit?

At one stage, we are led to believe that the butcher Horatio Cleaver may have killed Jeremiah Ratchet, by making him a poisoned meat pie. Eventually, though, we discover that Jeremiah brought about his own end, by holding Saluki the frog when warned not to. Did you realise this all along? Or did it come as a surprise? And do you think Ludlow is right to call Joe a murderer, for not actually explaining that contact with Saluki could be fatal?

Ludlow – Cut Out For The Job?

Do you think Ludlow will make a good Secret Pawnbroker? And did you find the Hall of Secrets (Atrium Arcanorum) believable, or a bit too fantastic?

The Author

Does it surprise you to find out that the author, FE Higgins, is a woman (she's called Fiona, and has a little daughter called Beatrix, to whom she dedicated the book)? Do you think you would have approached the book differently if you had known this? Do you think a book like this sounds better if written by a man? Or don't you think it makes any difference?

More?

Already FE Higgins has written a follow-up to The Black Book of Secrets, for which she paves the way on pages 284-285 ("A Note From FE Higgins"). It's called The Bone Magician, and she says it isn't going to be a sequel, but a "paraquel", which is her word for a story which features many of the same characters, but takes place in a parallel time, in a place where the name has been updated from Pagus Parvus to Pachspass. Sequel, paraquel, or plain follow-up – would you want to read it?

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