

The Tale of Despereaux

The Tale of Despereaux by Kate DiCamillo – with its appealing characters, engaging plot, and rich themes – offers an ideal opportunity to teach children about values, storytelling and critical thinking. These teachers' notes aimed at primary school children will encourage thought and engagement with the text.

The Tale of Despereaux is about a mouse who is in love with music, stories, and a princess named Pea. Despereaux embarks on a journey that leads him into a horrible dungeon, up into a glittering castle and into the lives and hearts of others. Kate DiCamillo credits a friend's son for inspiring the story that earned her the coveted 2004 Newbery Medal. She recalls: "My best friend's son asked me if I would write a story for him. 'It's about an unlikely hero,' he said, 'one with exceptionally large ears.' 'What happens to this hero?' I asked. 'I don't know,' he said. 'That's why I want you to write the story, so we can find out.'"

The Tale of Despereaux has enchanted children and adults around the globe. With more than two million copies in print and now a major motion picture this story will continue to delight generations of readers.



Before reading *The Tale of Despereaux* make a table with three columns and the three headings "Text to self", "Text to world", "Text to text". Label the table "My Connections" (you may like to distribute this as a worksheet or use a board at the front of the class). While reading *The Tale of Despereaux* find parts of the text that connect to self (is there something in the story that's like me?), to world (are there things happening in the story that are also going on around me?) and to text (is there something in this story that's like another story I've read?). Write down the page numbers on which they occur.



To help students understand the themes and deeper issues of *The Tale of Despereaux*, re-read the parts of Book the First, where Kate Di Camillo uses images of light (e.g. pp 13, 20-21, 56, 81). Engage students in a discussion about what they think light might mean in the story. Goodness? Beauty? What does dark mean? Does Despereaux really have a black heart? Have the students write about what light means to them.

Have a discussion on what it means to conform. When is it necessary and not necessary in the lives of the students and people they know or have read about?

book *The First* *A mouse is born*

Engage the class in a discussion about what it means to be a hero or heroine. Let students discuss what qualities their favourite heroes and heroines have. Who are their favourite heroes and heroines in real life, in the news, in other stories?

Ask students to find the definitions for the following words from Book the First; egregious (p 52), beleaguered (p 77), perfidy (p 45) and scurrying (p 20). Write a sentence for each word that uses it in context.

book *The Chiaroscuro Second*



In your town or city what kinds of things are done in the dark and in the light? On a board in front of the class, write headings for such categories as work, school, entertainment, play. Encourage students to list both good and bad things that happen under each category.

Why do we need rules? Have a brief discussion about rules and laws. Do the students think all rules are good for everyone? Do some rules keep everyone safe? Ask students to write the rules for a game they might play, or the school rules.

Ask students to find the definitions for the following words from Book the Second; chiaroscuro (p 86), illumination (p 88), solace (p 99) and dire (p 117). Write a sentence for each word that uses it in context.

From Book the Second, choose a few short passages that associate light with good things, and dark with bad (e.g. pp 87, 91, 95, 116).

Engage students in a discussion about how dark and light apply to Roscuro.

Encourage discussion with the following questions:

Is Roscuro really a “black-souled thing”?

Does Roscuro enjoy torturing the prisoner?

Is Roscuro attracted to the same kind of light as Despereaux?

Do you think he will enjoy making the princess suffer?

Is Roscuro good or bad?

Is he the same as Botticelli?

Ask students to write about the mixture of good and bad in Roscuro. This can also be an activity that is drawn or painted.



book *The Third Gor! The tale of Miggery Sow*



Discuss how parents are obligated to provide for children, and what “extras” are provided by the parents of the students.

Ask students if they have ever wanted something so badly that they were willing to do something they shouldn’t to get it. Do they know anyone who has done something bad to get something they want?

In the library research castles. Make a sketch of a castle or floor plans of the castle of the Kingdom of Dor.

From Book the Third engage students in a discussion about how dark and light apply to Miggery Sow. Is Miggery’s attraction to light more like Roscuro’s or Despereaux’s? How are Miggery’s surroundings at the castle different from those of her former life? After the discussion, have students write their own thoughts about Miggery and her longing for light.

Ask students to find the definitions for the following words from Book the Third; clout (p 128), innumerable (p 139), olfactory (p 158) and aspirations (p 169). In discussion or groups write a sentence for each word that uses it in context.



book *The Fourth* *Recalled to the light*

What brings you comfort? Make a list of the things students come up with.

What does it mean to “hold a grudge”? How does it feel? What can you do about it?

Ask students to think of some everyday situations when they have been offended or hurt but really wanted to forgive someone. Write situations on the board. Ask students to role-play characters in an impromptu mini-drama.

Ask students to find the definitions for the following words from *Book the Fourth*; skedaddle (p 177), defiant (p 193), dappled (p 197), infringe (p 249). Write a sentence for each word that uses it in context.

Curriculum Connections

Maths

Design mazes on graph paper. Let students imagine they are finding their way in the dungeon. Suggest that they show the positions of the characters from *The Tale of Despereaux* during their time in the dungeon. Display students' mazes in the classroom.

In the schoolyard, let students draw mazes in chalk and try to find their way through.

Art

List all the characters from *The Tale of Despereaux* on a board. Explain that readers know about characters by what they say, look like, do, what others say and what the author writes. Ask students to choose a character (or assign students a character). Then ask students to refer to the text to find words that pertain to that character. Ask students to draw their character and then talk through their visualisation.

Invite students to discuss the following:

Was Despereaux's quest successful? Did the strength of his love help him? Did his love and determination change anyone's heart? Ask students to write a letter giving their thoughts and opinions. Students could begin with “Dear Readers,” and tell their classmates what they think. Or they could write a letter directly to Despereaux.



Science

In *The Tale of Despereaux* mice and rats seem quite different, but they also have some qualities in common. Ask students to research the scientific similarities and differences between mice and rats. You may assign specific topics to different groups e.g. physical appearance and characteristics, habitat, food, enemies and habits. Ask one group to find out what animals make up the rest of the rodent family.



Values

Discuss with students how Kate DiCamillo helps us to understand the characters in *The Tale of Despereaux*. On a board (or as a worksheet) write the following six values – trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness, caring and citizenship. Invite students to give their thoughts about how different characters in *The Tale of Despereaux* exemplify these qualities.

Ask students to answer the following questions on each topic. You may like to divide the class into groups to handle one topic each and then have students present a poster on that value and answering the questions.

Citizenship

How did the King, Despereaux and Roscuro cooperate at the end of the story?

How can you deal with unfair laws and rules, such as the Mouse Council's rules about mouse behaviour and the King's law against soup?

Caring

How do the following characters show acts of kindness in the book: Gregory, the Cook, Miggery, Despereaux?

How did Botticelli teach Roscuro to use compassion to torture the prisoners?

Why did Despereaux forgive his father? Would you?

How did the following people help others in need: the Threadmaster, Gregory, the Cook, Despereaux, Miggery?

Fairness

Many of the problems in the book start with characters being narrow-minded and prejudiced. What are some examples of this?

Was it fair for Roscuro to blame the princess? Was it fair for the King to banish Despereaux from the princess?

Trustworthiness

What did Botticelli do that was the opposite of honesty?

How did Botticelli and Roscuro deceive the prisoners?

How did the following characters betray their families: Despereaux's father, Despereaux's brother, Miggery's father and Miggery?

Responsibility

What obstacles did Despereaux have to surmount in Book the Fourth? Did the King think through his outlawing of soup?

Who else in the book acted before they thought about the consequences?

These notes were prepared by Walker Books Australia.

The Tale of Despereaux Classroom Ideas are a teaching resource for primary age students. They are intended to compliment the book *The Tale of Despereaux* by Kate DiCamillo.

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