



Maggie MacCORMACK AND THE WITCHES' WHEEL

Teacher's Guide

About the Book

Maggie is a ginger-haired, twelve-year-old orphan who has been passed from one foster family to the next all her life. She never knows where she'll end up, so she's become suspicious and very independent.

As the story begins, Maggie is placed yet again into foster care – this time into a much more welcoming family. But Maggie can't shake the feeling that something is a bit off about her new home. She slowly ends up having to toss everything she understood about herself and her life out the window. But by that time, things have gone awry – it's too late for her to run from the approaching danger.

Discussion Topics: Opportunities for Critical Thinking

The following questions can be asked orally, or they can be presented – in level-appropriate ways and in modified form – as the bases of short, written assignments. They are above all, meant as areas for critical discussion. They are also meant to stimulate thoughtful, receptive young adults to wonder about the nature of challenges they face as they mature – questions of loyalty, family and bonds of friendship; an unknown future and acceptance of a world they can only dimly know and the future of which they can have no knowledge at all; choice, agency, and consequentiality; the appearance of violence, death and decay in an otherwise nurturing environment (the forest, the family), and so on.

The questions below are not meant to be an exhaustive treatment, and are meant only to stimulate further questions for educators and readers in the humanities about the challenges that face the story's characters. Although we cite main characters and pivotal moments, we imagine discussions encompassing most, if not all, of the characters and situations in the novel.

1) Maggie has magic powers. What do you think her greatest non-magical strengths are? What are her vulnerabilities? How do Maggie's strengths compare with the Classical virtues, namely, courage, justice, temperance and wisdom?

2) Using her magic powers, Maggie can do almost anything she wanted to. Why does Maggie need and want a family? The woods need Maggie to survive, but why does Maggie's family need and want Maggie, beyond Maggie's ability to save the woods?

3) Many conflicts in the novel are settled by violence and many questions settled by authority figures who pre-empt questioning in favour of following rules. Might this be true of daily life outside the novel? If violence and authority (either the authority of experts or the authority of rules) have their place in life outside of the novel, recourse to violence and authority is almost always problematic and (certainly in the case of violence) almost always unacceptable. Yet violence and authority are essential to the novel. Why might we accept violence and the actions of authority figures in a novel that we might find highly questionable in our own lives outside of the novel?

4) Imagine being in Maggie's place. Would you have accepted Maggie's inheritance? Imagine good reasons that Maggie might have had to refuse her inheritance. Why do you think Maggie accepted her inheritance before knowing what the choice would require of her?

5) In what respects is Maggie's family a good family? What qualities does Maggie's family have that helped Maggie become a good young adult? Besides helping her mature, what other good qualities did Maggie's family have?

6) The author has described *Maggie MacCormack and the Witches' Wheel* as "a love letter to the imagination and to the Earth and her ecosystems". What other ways can you imagine of describing what the novel is, or is about? A coming-of-age story? A story about family ties? About tradition and duty and their grip upon the young? The persistence of trials and transformations? A lesson about the place of death, decay and violence? Of course, the meanings of the novel can be articulated using all these interpretations. Can you imagine other interpretations of the novel as a whole?

7) Recall this exchange between Maggie and her grandmother:

"The Scourge are evil incarnate – they just take on forms that look human. And the acolytes who follow them are corrupted by Scourge toxins, and just as vile."

"You've never lost sleep over what you've done?"

"We are the light. They are the dark."

"It can't be that simple [...]"

"We're at war. Shoot first, or die first."

"OK, Grams," said Maggie, directing Fiona's walking stick away from her chin with her fingers.

"I'll do it your way. I promise."

--*Maggie MacCormack and the Witches' Wheel*, 257-258.

While in the exchange above a sharp distinction is drawn between "light" and "dark", "good" and "evil", the woods and Carnac share a particular feature: neither are wholly beneficent and benign, and neither are wholly malign and malevolent. Bear in mind that Isobel is a problematic character, yet all the while accepted – embraced -- as a member of Maggie's family. Other characters and situations in the novel can also appear similarly ambivalent – neither wholly "good" nor entirely "bad". In what ways may it be true of, for example, Maggie or Fiona, or Mister Little? Given this ambivalence, how does the reader come to recognize – to "label" – a character as "good" or "bad"? How does the novel upset the reader's prejudgements about whether characters in the novel are malevolent or benevolent?

8) The passage of time, in the novel, is not just time passing as told by the clock. Cite instances in the novel of how characters experience time: instances in which they become aware of time or, in some cases, unaware of passing time... As well as the passage of time in the novel, events going forward, there is also cyclical time – recurrences and repetitions. What do these cycles tell us about the world of the novel?

9) The woods and dragons – both of which are central to *Maggie MacCormack and the Witches' Wheel* have a long history of symbolic meanings and are laden with cultural significance. The woods and dragons are not the only symbols in the novel with a long history – witches, shape-shifters, spirits whether good or evil, abound in popular and high literature. Readers of the novel can be assigned (in ways appropriate to their level and situations) to explore its many instances of symbolism and imagery – with reference for example, to the writings of Joseph Campbell, Carl Jung to mention only the most prominently popular. There is also in the novel symbolism of light, dark, under the ground, evanescent spirits, the symbolism of tests of character and endurance, etc. Are symbolic meanings still relevant in light of the dominance of technology and its progressive disenchantment of the contemporary world?