

Literature Circle Guide to *Princess Academy* by Shannon Hale

Book Summary

High on the side of rocky Mount Eskel, far from the valleys where gardens are green and lush, where lowlanders make laws, Miri's family has lived forever, pounding a living from the stone of the mountain itself. For as long as she can remember, Miri has dreamed of working alongside the other villagers in the quarries of her beloved mountainside. But Miri has never been allowed to work there, perhaps, she thinks, because she is so small.

Then word comes from the valley that the king's priests have divined Mount Eskel to be the home of the prince's bride-to-be—the next princess. The prince himself will travel to the village to choose her, but first all eligible girls must attend a makeshift mountain academy to prepare themselves for royal lowlander life.

At the school, Miri soon finds herself confronted by bitter competition among the girls and her own conflicting desires to be chosen by the prince. Yet when danger comes to the academy and threatens all their lives, it is Miri who must find a way to save her classmates—and the one chance to leave the mountain each of them is determined to secure as her own.

Author Information

Shannon's mother says she was a storyteller from birth, jabbering endlessly in nonsensical baby talk. Once she could speak, she made up stories and bribed younger siblings to perform them in mini-plays until, thankfully, an elementary school teacher introduced her to the wonder of written fiction. At age 10, she began to write books, mostly fantasy stories where she was the heroine.

She continued to write secretly for years while pursuing acting in television, stage, and improv comedy. After detours studying in Mexico, the U.K., and a year and a half as an unpaid missionary in Paraguay, Shannon earned a bachelor's degree in English from the University of Utah. She received her Masters in Creative Writing from the University of Montana.

Suggested Answers to Literature Circle Questions

1. What are the origins of Miri's name?

Miri is named after the flower that "conquered rock and climbed to face the sun"

(p. 14).

2. Why does Miri work at home but Marda in the quarry?
Miri is told that she is too small to work in the quarry. At age 14, she was still smaller than girls years younger (p. 12). However, it is because Miri's mother was killed in a quarry accident when she was pregnant with Miri.
3. Why does Miri think Britta lies to Tutor Olana about not knowing how to read?
Miri has heard Britta read in the past. She thinks Britta pretends not to be able to read so she can later surprise Olana with her ability to learn quickly.
4. Describe the setting of the story. What are some key words that help to show the type of community it takes place in?
The setting of the story can be described with words such as "mountainous," "cold," and "windy." The community can be described with words such as "hardworking," "dedicated," and "close-knit." Answers will vary.
5. Early on, it is obvious that Miri is a special person. How do we know that? What are some examples of her character and wit?
We can tell Miri is special because of the way her family, friends, and the townspeople interact with her. She is given an enormous amount of respect.
Two examples of her character and wit are as follows:
Even though Olana does not want anyone speaking out, Miri defends herself and her classmates and is punished for it (p. 54); and, when the prince asks her to dance she denies him at first, as a joke (p. 212).
6. How does learning to read affect Miri—and the other girls around her?
Learning to read helps Miri understand how much she wants from her life; she and the other students begin to realize that harnessing the power of reading makes them that much more powerful and able to accomplish things in their lives.
7. Miri learns about quarry-speech throughout the course of the story. What is quarry-speech? Why is it so important in the community? And why is it so important to the

events of the story?
Quarry-speech is a form of communication that the quarry workers developed over many years to "speak with" one another in the quarry; it uses linder as a medium. It is vital to the community because it allows the workers a form of clear communication in the noisy and dangerous quarry. It is important to the events of the story because it allows Miri to realize quite a bit about herself, her community—and helps to save them all from the attack on the academy.

8. Miri says of the mountain and its many secrets, "I'll figure you out" (p. 90). What is it that she is looking to discover?
Miri says this just as she is beginning to understand quarry-speech. As she struggles to understand, she believes she hears the mountain laughing at her—and sees that as the beginning of a dialogue with the mountain and the first step to mastering quarry-speech.

9. Miri discovers a very new and different type of intelligence as she and her fellow classmates study together. She tells Marda, "You're smart" (p. 150). How does Miri define *smart* at this point in the story? And how does her understanding of the word change as the story goes on?
Because the girls have never been officially schooled, Miri is referring to book smarts. However, as the story progresses, Miri and the academy girls begin to understand that there are many different levels of intelligence, including intuition and emotional intelligence.

10. After leaving the academy, the girls approach Tutor Olana with a list of terms that she must accept upon their return. What are the steps the girls have learned to take in order to convince Tutor Olana? When you want to convince someone to do something, what do you do?
The girls follow Olana's rules of Diplomacy. They are: state the problem; admit your own error; state the error of the other party; invite mutual acceptance; illustrate the negative outcome of refusal and positive of acceptance; and,

although Miri forgets it when speaking with Olana, assert a deadline for acceptance.

11. Esa says of Katar, "Katar's a thornbush protecting a hare that's too skinny to eat" (p.

157). What does she mean? What type of person is Katar in the story and what do we learn about her past that makes her actions more understandable?

Throughout much of the story, Katar comes across as a bitter girl, very competitive and unhappy. Esa is referring to the fact that Katar is often dramatic and disappointed in the situations that happen around her. Like Miri, Katar's mother passed away while she was delivering her. Katar feels that her father resents her for it and longs to get away from Mount Eskel. Katar sees the academy as her only way out.

12. Miri helps her father—and all of the residents of Mount Eskel—understand that the lowlanders are taking advantage of their low prices for linder. Why is Miri nervous

to talk to the town about this? Miri is nervous to speak with them because so many years have gone by where the community has worked so hard for such little pay. Her ideas—and facts about the worth of linder—are very different than what they have believed. She is asserting herself as a leader with this discussion.

13. Miri, Katar, and Britta are very different girls. How do they compare to each other?

Create a chart for them and list the things that make them similar and different.

They are similar because they are all sent to the Princess Academy and are all struggling to learn and keep up. And, with the exception of the truth about Britta, they believe they are all from Mount Eskel and have been raised in a community that is centered on the quarry.

They are different because they each have a very different past. Miri finds out the truth about her mother in the story; Katar is very unhappy and we learn that it is because she feels trapped by her life and past; and Britta has been

living as a bit of an impostor and works very hard to keep her past quiet.

Answers will vary.

14. Pa is described to Miri as "a house with the shutters closed" (p. 176). What do you think that means? Do you agree? How does her father's nature influence Miri and how she sees the world?

This means, possibly, that even though Pa is a big man in stature, it is difficult for him to show his emotions, especially to Miri, whom he has tried to protect from the truth about her past. Because he wasn't honest with her about why she was never allowed to work in the quarry, he has influenced how she sees herself in the world, small and "useless."

Note: These questions are keyed to Bloom's Taxonomy as follows: Knowledge: 1-3; Comprehension: 4-5; Application: 6-7; Analysis: 8-10; Synthesis: 11-12; Evaluation: 13-14.

Activities

1. When they return to the academy, the students must convince Tutor Olana that she must allow them new freedoms. Choose an issue or a belief that's important to you and write an argument that will convince your classmates to agree.

Answers will vary.

2. Although Peder tells Miri that she does not need to sing in order to quarry-speak, she finds it helpful to maintain her concentration. Take some time to create your own form of quarry-speech. Is there a song connected to it? What is the memory that you'll use?

Answers will vary.

3. Draw a scene from the book—the girls lined up to meet the prince or, perhaps, the town working in the quarry. Be sure to use details from the story to help bring your picture to life.

Answers will vary.