

Literature Circle Guide to  
THE WHIPPING BOY by Sid Fleischman

**Book Summary**

Jemmy, who once made a meager living catching rats in the sewers, is now living in the king's castle as the whipping boy for Prince Horace, commonly known to the citizens of the kingdom as Prince Brat. Whenever the young prince misbehaves or fails his lessons, Jemmy is punished in his place, for it is illegal to spank the heir to the throne. When the prince decides to run away, he demands that Jemmy accompany him, so the two boys with nothing in common run away together. Once in the woods, Jemmy and Prince Brat are taken captured by two scoundrels, Hold-Your-Nose Billy and Cutwater. The scoundrels plot to use Jemmy, whom they assume is royalty because he can write, as a hostage to obtain ransom money and jewels from the king. When the two boys finally escape from the scoundrels' hut (after Prince Brat has double-crossed Jemmy), they find themselves lost in the forest. With the help of Captain Nips, seller of hot potatoes, and Petunia, the dancing bear, the boys finally escape from danger and find their way back to the city. Back in the city, Prince Brat begins to appreciate Jemmy's abilities, courage, and friendship, and when the two eventually return to the castle, the prince has resolved to be a true friend to Jemmy and quit his spoiled, selfish ways.

**Author Information**

Sid Fleischman grew up in San Diego during the Great Depression, and as a boy, he wanted to be a magician when he grew up. After high school, he traveled as a vaudeville entertainer, and eventually joined the U.S. Naval Reserve during World War II. After the war and graduation from college, Fleischman worked as a reporter in San Diego and eventually turned to writing fiction. He began writing children's books when he had young children of his own, and in recent years he has divided his time between writing screenplays and children's books. Fleischman has written over 35 books, many of which have been made into motion pictures, and in 1986 he won a Newbery Medal for *The Whipping Boy*. Today he lives and writes in Santa Monica, California near the Pacific Ocean.

**Suggested Answers to Literature Circle Questions**

1. Prince Horace is known as Prince Brat by everyone in the kingdom. What are some of the things he does to earn this nickname?

**He plays many jokes at the expense of others; for example, tying the wigs of noblemen to their chairs and greasing the saddles of the knights. He is insolent and mocking towards his tutor, Master Peckwit (p. 5). He refuses to learn from anyone, and makes demands from everyone around him.**

2. Describe the whipping boy in the novel. Who is he? What is his job?

**The whipping boy is Jemmy, who formerly lived on the city streets and caught and sold rats to survive. Now Jemmy is the prince's whipping boy; he substitutes for**

**Prince Brat whenever the prince deserves a spanking, and he infuriates the prince by never crying when he is spanked (p. 4). Jemmy lives in fear of displeasing the prince or the king, and possibly losing his life, and he dreams of his past carefree lifestyle.**

3. What happens as soon as Prince Brat and his whipping boy try to run away from the kingdom?

**They are captured by two cutthroats, Hold-Your-Nose Billy and Cutwater. The bandits hold the two boys hostage in their hut in the forest while plotting how they will demand a ransom from the king.**

4. In *The Whipping Boy*, the author spins a fantastic tale of adventure using language that is funny and exaggerated. Select your favorite passage where the author has described characters or events in a funny or exaggerated way, and read it out loud to your literature circle. Then, as a group, discuss what you liked most about the author's approach. Tell why.

**Students' answers will vary. The multiple layers of humor in this story will appeal to readers of all levels, and students should be prepared to explain why they found a particular passage humorous.**

5. How are Prince Brat and Jemmy different from one another at the beginning of the novel? Create a list of personality traits for each character and compare them. Then discuss how each character's background helped shaped their personalities.

**Jemmy is tough, uncomplaining, and strong, as a result of his harsh childhood and years of having to fend for himself. He doesn't cry or flinch when spanked, and he shows courage in even the direst situations. He has many friends from his rat-catching days. As a result of his time spent in the castle, he has learned to read and write well. The prince, on the other hand, has been spoiled since birth, and he has never had to take any responsibility for himself. The prince is willful and defiant. He has been granted his every whim as the son of the king, and so he is known for being spoiled, mean-spirited, and selfish. He doesn't have any friends, until Jemmy, because of his selfish ways, and he has little knowledge of how the world works beyond the castle walls. He is also completely illiterate, because he has refused to learn anything from his tutor.**

6. What causes Hold-Your-Nose Billy and Cutwater to believe Jemmy is the real prince? What effect does this have on Prince Brat?

**When the bandits order Prince Brat to write a ransom note to his father, he must admit that he doesn't know how to write. The bandits can't believe that a real prince doesn't even know how to write his own name, so they assume that his companion Jemmy – who can write – is the real prince. Prince Brat is infuriated that Jemmy “the ratty street orphan” is mistaken for himself.**

7. What is Jemmy's scheme to escape from Hold-Your-Nose Billy and Cutwater and why does he think it will work? Why doesn't the prince go along with Jemmy's plan?

Since the outlaws think that Jemmy is the real prince, Jemmy plots to have the real prince (whom the outlaws believe to be the whipping boy) deliver the ransom note to the king. This way Prince Brat will be free, and Jemmy will have fulfilled his duties to serve the prince. The prince refuses to go along with the plan, partly because he is furious to be mistaken for a common whipping boy, and partly because he is not yet ready to return to the castle (p. 34).

8. As they are trying to escape, Prince Brat and Jemmy get lost in the woods. Describe a time when you got lost. What happened? How did you feel? How did you manage to find your way?

**Students' answers will vary.**

9. Imagine the prince has been asked to write a column for the local newspaper about what he has learned about life outside the castle walls. What would the prince write in his column?

**The life the prince experienced during his adventure with Jemmy was full of surprises, excitement, and eccentric personalities. The prince runs into a host of unusual characters: the two outlaws, Captain Nips, Betsy and her dancing bear Petunia, so he would no doubt write about the fascinating new people he met. He might also describe the importance of education and common sense in the world outside the castle walls. He might write about how he learned to get along with others and be a good friend.**

10. Prince Brat and Jemmy learn a great deal about each other from their experiences in this novel. What do they learn? How does this knowledge affect their relationship? Give three specific examples.

**Jemmy learns that even someone as selfish as Prince Brat can grow and change. He learns that he can trust the prince and that the prince really does have the capacity for friendship. Prince Brat learns that Jemmy is courageous and very quick, especially when in danger. He learns to value Jemmy's loyalty, and he learns that it pays to be agreeable and kind. He also comes to value hard work. As a result of their increased understanding of each other, the boys' relationship becomes a true friendship.**

11. Prince Brat changes a great deal from the beginning of the novel to the end. How does he change? Give three specific examples.

**Prince Brat learns what friendship means when he begins to trust and respect Jemmy. He witnesses Jemmy's loyalty and self-sacrifice, and he begins to be less self-centered through Jemmy's example. He begins to value learning, since he is ashamed when it is clear that his whipping boy is far more literate than he is. He begins to take responsibility for himself – agreeing at the end of the novel to behave himself and do his own lessons. He also learns how common people live, and gets a sense of real-life justice.**

12. In the novel, Prince Brat is alone with his father when he explains why he ran away and how his friends helped him return safely. What might Prince Brat have said to his

father so the king would forgive them? What could the king have told the prince to help him act more responsibly? Write a sample dialogue of what the two would say to each other.

**Prince Brat must have told his father that he was genuinely sorry for his past behavior, and he must have convinced his father that he was ready to change. He may have had to plead with his father not to have Jemmy punished, as this was the custom, and instead promised to live up to a certain standard. He may have tried to explain to his father why he wanted to be friends with Jemmy and what he had learned by living outside the castle walls. The king may have demanded an explanation of what happened during the boys' absence. He would want his son to convince him that he was truly ready to be more responsible and obedient.**

13. Jemmy wants to stop royal households from keeping whipping boys. Compose a list of reasons Jemmy will use to convince royal families to stop using whipping boys.

**Jemmy might suggest that the practice of using whipping boys is generally ineffective, since the offender is not punished and therefore doesn't learn from his mistake. He might also suggest that the practice is unjust, since an innocent person is punished in place of a guilty one. He might also suggest that corporal punishment in general is an inappropriate consequence.**

14. Jemmy has the opportunity to leave the prince behind several times in the book but chooses not to, even though the prince has betrayed him. What would you have done if you were in Jemmy's shoes and were faced with this decision?

**Many students will admit that in Jemmy's position, they would have left the prince behind, since the prince had acted cruelly to Jemmy so many times in the past. By leaving the prince, Jemmy would have faced the possibility of serious punishment or death, if discovered, and this fear motivated him to continue traveling with the prince. Jemmy also realizes that because of the prince's life of privilege, the prince is poorly equipped to live on his own, and his survival does depend on Jemmy's protection.**

15. At the end of the book, the king says: "If you boys decide to run away again, take me with you." Why do you think the king says this? What does this tell you about the king?

**Perhaps the king, like his son, wishes to see more of the world, especially the way the common people live. From the experience of Prince Horace/Prince Brat, we learn how isolating and limiting the life of a prince in a palace is, and it is likely that the king wishes for broader experience and better relationships. The king probably recognizes the way his son has changed for the better as a result of his experiences outside the castle walls, and he wants to experience the same for himself.**

## Activities

1. Pick a passage from the book that creates a picture in your mind. Write it down, including page number and paragraph number. Then illustrate the passage on a separate sheet of paper. Have each person in your group tell what he or she sees in the illustration.

**Students' responses will vary. Students should be prepared to read their chosen passages aloud, and explain why they chose them, in addition to sharing their illustrations.**

2. Find the classic tale *The Prince and the Pauper*, and read it. How is this tale similar to *The Whipping Boy*? How is it different?

**This classic story by Mark Twain is one of his most accessible novels, and it is also available in abridged versions for children. The basic premise of the story is very similar to that of *The Whipping Boy*: the identities of a poor commoner and a prince are switched. In Twain's story, the boys (who look so similar to each other that even their parents can not tell them apart) choose to change places so that they will each gain a new perspective on life, and they both gain understanding of the world through the exchange. In *The Whipping Boy*, however, the identities of the two boys are confused through a mistake, and as a result of their adventure together, the boys grow to become friends and trust each other.**