

## Literature Circle Guide to *The White Giraffe* by Lauren St. John

### **Book Summary**

The night Martine Allen turns eleven years old is the night her life changes completely. Martine's parents are killed in a fire, so she must leave her home to live on an African wildlife reserve with a grandmother she never even knew she had. When Martine arrives, she hears tales of a mythical animal living there—a white giraffe. They say no one has ever seen the animal, but it does leave behind footprints. Her grandmother insists that the white giraffe is just a legend, but then, one stormy night, Martine looks out her bedroom window straight into the eyes of the tall silvery animal. Could it just be Martine's imagination, or is the white giraffe real? And if so, why is everyone keeping its existence a secret?

### **Author Information**

Lauren St. John lives in London, England, and is a well-respected biographer and sports journalist. She grew up in Zimbabwe, Africa, where she had a pet giraffe, along with numerous dogs, horses, and warthogs. Her childhood surroundings inspired *The White Giraffe* and her recent memoir, *Rainbow's End*. This is her first book for young adults.

### **Suggested Answers to Literature Circle Questions**

1. What country does Martine live in when the book begins? Where does her grandmother live? **At the beginning of the book, Martine lives in England. Her grandmother lives in South Africa.**
2. Identify three animals that live on the game reserve at Sawubona. List one fact you learned about each of these animals. **On p. 30, Tendai lists many of the animals on the game reserve. "Twelve elephants . . . eight ostriches, one hundred and fifty springboks, ten wildebeest, eighteen kudus, twenty zebras, six lions, four leopards, seven warthogs . . . baboons . . . waterbucks." Some facts Martine learns about these and other animals are: Kudus have spiral horns (p. 89); bush babies have a long tail and sharp claws for climbing (p. 47); the cobra is one of the most poisonous snakes in Africa (p. 58); giraffes can reach speeds of up 35 miles per hour (p. 140).**
3. According to Grace, what is "the gift" that Martine possesses? Describe one way in which Martine uses this gift during the story. **On p. 149, Martine's grandmother tells her, "Grace came to tell us that she'd had a vision that you were the child in the African legend, the one who has power over all the animals." Martine uses this power in chapter 11, when she heals the goose, and again in chapter 13, when she heals the kudu.**
4. Based on what you read in chapter 16, why does Martine think the poachers must have close ties to Sawubona? **On p. 113, Martine thinks, "For the poachers to have known of the white giraffe's existence, they must have had close ties to Sawubona."**

5. In chapter 5, why does Tendai tell Martine that he shouldn't have taken her to see Grace? **Tendai regrets taking Martine to see Grace because he knows Martine's grandmother, who has had a falling out with Grace, would object. More specifically, Martine's grandmother likely fears that Grace will tell Martine about the prophecy.**
6. Late in the story, what two objects are stolen from Martine? What happens as a result of these objects being stolen? **The two objects stolen from Martine are the whistle and a watercolor of a white giraffe. The sketch of Jemmy was proof of the white giraffe's existence. The whistle made it possible to draw Jemmy from his sanctuary. Although the sequence of events connecting the disappearance of the two objects to Jemmy's removal from the game reserve are not laid out, the guilty look Martine sees on the faces of the Luke and Lucy Van Heerden suggests they were involved.**
7. Imagine you have come to live at Sawubona for a while. What do you think you would enjoy most about your life there? What would you enjoy least? **Answers will vary but should reference specific aspects of life at Sawubona.**
8. When Martine first meets Alex du Preez, she doubts that he has empathy with animals. Using examples from the text, identify a character in the book who you think *does* have empathy with animals and explain why you chose this character. **Possible characters to choose from include: Martine's grandmother, who runs a game reserve for injured or threatened animals; Tendai, the game warden who removes snares designed to trap animals and who shares his considerable knowledge about the animals with Martine; Samson, who helps care for the injured animals; and Martine, who heals animals with her bare hands and risks her life to save the white giraffe.**
9. On p. 97, Martine overhears one of the poachers saying to his companion, "If we don't deliver this thing very soon, M . . ." Based on what you learn later in the book, who do you think "M" is? **Although it is never revealed, one reasonable guess is that M is short for Mayor Washington, who is implicated in the scandal surrounding the theft of exotic animals from the game reserve.**
10. Reread the description of Martine's dream in the first chapter. How is this dream connected to later events in the story? Why do you think the author chose to begin the book with this dream? **The dream Martine has in the first chapter foretells the incident with the Egyptian goose in chapter 13, in which Martine discovers that she really does have a gift. Answers to the second part of the question will vary. Look for readers who recognize the importance of visions and prophecies in the story. Other readers may recognize that the author is using a common device, foreshadowing, to hint at what will happen to Martine later in the book.**

11. In chapter 20, Gwyn Thomas explains that Martine had been kept away from Sawubona to protect her from hardship and danger. What do you think might have been different if Martine had never come to Africa? **Readers can point to numerous events that might not have happened if Martine had never come to Africa. The white giraffe might have been captured and shipped overseas. Gwyn Thomas and Grace might never have reconciled. The mystery surrounding the death of Martine’s grandfather might have remained unsolved. And Martine might never have gained the confidence and sense of self that came to her during her time at Sawubona.**
  
12. At the beginning of chapter 8, the narrator says that in her early days at Sawubona, Martine “felt as if she were undergoing some sort of test, almost as if she was being prepared for something.” In your own words, explain what you think the challenges of Sawubona are preparing her for. Be sure to describe how Martine changes during her time in Africa. **During her first days in Africa, Martine describes feeling isolated. She has lost her parents and is under the care of a woman who seems not to want her around. Additionally, she does not fit in at school and is faced with questions about her own past. She overcomes these challenges by pursuing her friendship with the giraffe despite the dangers of sneaking into the reserve alone at night. This requires courage, compassion, and cunning—three traits she exhibits when she rescues Jemmy. Therefore, look for answers that connect these changes in Martine—increased confidence and a sense of purpose—with her ultimate accomplishment, defying the smugglers and returning the giraffe to the game reserve.**
  
13. On p. 152, Gwyn Thomas says that she does not know why Veronica changed her will. First describe what Veronica changed in her will. Then explain why you think she changed her mind. **Also on p. 152, Gwyn Thomas says that she and Veronica (Martine’s mother) had always agreed that Gwyn Thomas would not be Martine’s guardian if her parents died. But Veronica changed the will to make Gwyn Thomas Martine’s guardian after all. Answers will vary, but readers should indicate they understand why Veronica and Gwyn Thomas agreed to keep Martine from South Africa in the first place; that is, because Grace predicted great danger (along with power) for the newborn Martine. Therefore, readers might speculate that Veronica’s fear of the prophecy had diminished over the years—or that she decided it was not wise to keep Martine from her fate.**
  
14. Early in the story, Grace tells Martine, “Be very careful. The gift can be a blessing or a curse. Make your decisions wisely.” First explain whether you think the gift is a blessing or a curse for Martine. Then using examples from the text, explain whether you think Martine makes her decisions wisely. **Evidence to support an argument that the gift is a blessing includes the ability to heal animals and the ability to ride the white giraffe. Also look for answers that indicate an understanding of the deeper blessings that came with the gift; specifically,**

that it led to newfound self-confidence and to a friendship with Jemmy. Readers who argue that the gift is a curse should refer to the dangers and responsibilities that come with it. For Martine, this means risking her life to save the giraffe. Additionally, tragedy was required for the prophecy to come true—it was the death of her parents that brought Martine to Africa. Readers can also argue for or against the idea that Martine made her decisions wisely. For example, she ultimately trusted the right people and successfully saved Jemmy from the smugglers. However, her arguable poor decision-making—bringing the whistle and the watercolor to school—may have helped jeopardize the giraffe in the first place.

15. According to Grace, Martine and the white giraffe are “twin souls.” Based on what you know about the relationship between Martine and Jemmy, do you think this is an accurate statement? If so, describe one way in which Martine and Jemmy are similar. If not, explain why you disagree with the statement. **Most readers will likely agree with the statement. Martine and Jemmy are both orphans who seem to spend a lot of time alone. Additionally, Jemmy and Martine are linked by the prophecy. Also, both could be considered courageous, as Martine and Jemmy each save the other’s life at one point in the story.**

*Note: These questions are keyed to Bloom’s Taxonomy as follows: Knowledge: 1–3; Comprehension: 4–6; Application: 7–8; Analysis: 9–10; Synthesis: 11–12; Evaluation: 13–15.*

### Activities

1. Using both your imagination and what you read in the book, write a short history of the Secret Valley. Be sure to consider Martine’s questions on p. 104. Who first discovered the Secret Valley? Have any other human beings ever been there? Does anyone besides Martine know it exists?
2. Think about the many animals that the narrator describes in the book: giraffes, kudus, hippos, bats, etc. Choose one of these animals. Then, based on the author’s descriptions, create a drawing of that animal. Compare your drawing to a classmate’s drawing. How are they similar? How are they different?
3. Imagine you are Martine and several months have passed since the end of the book. Write a letter to your teacher in England, Miss Rose. Tell her what has happened in your life since rescuing the white giraffe. Be sure to tell her about at least one important person in your life in Africa, such as Tendai, Grace, Ben, or even Jemmy.

