

Literature Circle Guide to BECAUSE OF WINN-DIXIE
by Katie DiCamillo

Book Summary

Ten-year-old Opal Buloni has just moved to a small Florida town with her father. She's feeling lonely in her new location, and disconnected from her father, who is a busy preacher, until she adopts a stray dog she names Winn-Dixie, after the supermarket where she found him. With the help of Winn-Dixie, Opal begins to make new friends with a host of eccentric people in her small town, and she also begins to learn about her mother, who abandoned the family when Opal was just three years old. As a result of her deepening friendships and improved relationship with her father, Opal comes to accept the inevitable sorrow that comes with life, and finds acceptance and joy in her new community.

Author Information

Kate DiCamillo was born in Philadelphia and spent her childhood in Florida. As a child she suffered from chronic pneumonia, and early on learned to entertain herself by reading. When she was in her twenties, she worked in a book warehouse where she discovered a new love for children's books, and began writing her own. DiCamillo says, "I wrote *Because of Winn-Dixie* because I was homesick for Florida (I live in Minneapolis) and because I wanted a dog and couldn't have one (I lived in an apartment building that didn't permit them)." She describes *Because of Winn-Dixie* as "a hymn to dogs, friendship, and the South." In 2004 she won a Newbery Medal for *The Tale of Despereaux: Being the Story of a Mouse, a Princess, Some Soup, and a Spool of Thread*.

Suggested Answers to Literature Circle Questions

Use these questions and activities that follow to get more out of the experience of reading *Because of Winn-Dixie* by Kate DiCamillo.

1. Opal's dog is called Winn-Dixie. Tell why Opal decides to give her dog that name. **When Opal first meets the dog, he is a stray in the grocery store Winn-Dixie, and a manager is threatening to call the pound. To save the dog from the pound, Opal claims him as her own and names him the first thing that comes to her mind: "Winn-Dixie" (p. 10).**
2. What words does Opal use to describe Winn-Dixie when she first sees him? Of these qualities, which one causes Opal to adopt Winn-Dixie despite the way he looks? **She describes him as "big" and "ugly," and says, "He looked like he was having a real good time" (p. 9). He was large but skinny, with bald patches all over himself. It is his smile that makes Opal want to keep him. She says, "It's hard not to immediately fall in love with a dog who has a good sense of humor" (p. 12).**

3. As Opal gives her new dog a bath, she tells him they are a lot alike. In what ways are Opal and her dog alike?

Neither Opal nor the dog knows their mother; both are “almost like orphans” according to Opal (p. 21). Also, both are newcomers in a strange place.

4. What sort of relationship does Opal have with her father, the preacher, at the beginning of the book? How does their relationship change by the end of the book?

At the beginning of the book, Opal’s relationship with her father is somewhat formal and distant. Opal knows very, very little about her mother, whom her father still loves, because he has never shared this information with his daughter. Opal describes her father as being “like a turtle, hiding all the time inside his shell” (p. 67). By the end of the book, Opal’s father is more open with his daughter, sharing his pain about his wife’s abandonment and feeling more free to express his love for his daughter (pp. 166-167).

5. At Opal’s urging, the preacher tells her ten things about her mother, one for every year of Opal’s life. Describe Opal’s mother on the basis of those ten things.

Opal’s mother was a lively woman with a great sense of humor. She loved being outside, running and growing a garden, and she loved stories, especially funny ones. She wasn’t very domestic, and she didn’t enjoy being in the spotlight role of pastor’s wife. She coped with her frustration by drinking, sometimes too much, and this caused a lot of conflict with her husband. Above all, she loved her daughter (pp. 26-29).

6. At one point Opal says, “Just about everything that happened to me that summer happened because of Winn-Dixie.” What happens to Opal that makes her say this? Give examples from the book to support your answer.

Because of Winn-Dixie and his friendly ways, Opal makes friends with Miss Franny, the town librarian, and she gets her first job at Gertrude’s Pets, to make money to buy Opal a collar. She also meets Gloria Dump, another friend, by following Winn-Dixie into her yard. And she gets invited to the birthday party of Sweetie Pie Thomas. Before finding Winn-Dixie, Opal was lonely, a stranger in a new town, but with her dog’s help, she acquired a whole new group of friends for herself in Naomi.

7. Opal is an only child. Her mother left the family when she was only three, and her father moves from church to church. How has Opal been affected by these family changes?

Moving from place to place has left Opal without roots in a community, and when she moves to Naomi, Florida, she feels very lonely. She still feels a great sense of loss from missing her mother, and she has trouble trusting others. She also feels isolated from her own father, who is still struggling with his own grief and who has never talked to his daughter about her own mother.

8. For a variety of reasons, Opal feels like an outsider in her new town. Describe a situation when you felt like an outsider. Then compare your experiences with Opal's. **Students' responses will vary. Opal's situation is complicated because she is alone in her time of transition, since her father is somewhat disconnected from her and she doesn't have other family members.**

9. Winn-Dixie brings comfort and joy to a lot of characters in this story. Write the name Winn-Dixie in the center of a piece of paper with a circle around it. Then draw several lines out from the center, like spokes in a wagon wheel. At the end of each line write the name of a character whose life Winn-Dixie touched. What do these characters have in common?

Students will notice that Winn-Dixie helps Opal make friends and provides companionship. In many ways, Winn-Dixie is like the glue binding the characters together, helping to forge friendships and create community. For example, Winn-Dixie "encourages" Opal to ask her father about her mother, and this increases the communication between father and daughter (p. 23). Later, the preacher's care and concern for Winn-Dixie help Opal recognize that she loves her father (p. 78).

10. Opal describes her friend Gloria as the best adult she knows. In what ways does Gloria act like the mother that Opal doesn't have? How do Gloria's qualities bring Opal closer to her *real* mother?

Gloria Dump's home is a place of comfort and refuge for Opal. Also, Gloria seems to want to help Opal feel a connection with her real mother. For example, she suggests that Opal try to grow a tree, to see if she has her mother's green thumb (p. 69). Right from the beginning, she seems to accept Opal unconditionally, asking her questions about her life and withholding any judgment.

11. Opal wants to make Sweetie Pie happy by coming up with a theme for Gloria's party. What theme might Opal choose and why?

Sweetie Pie, who desperately wants a dog of her own and who loves Winn-Dixie, suggests the theme be "dogs" (p. 141), and Opal agrees. Sweetie Pie brings pictures of dogs she has cut from magazines to tape to furniture at the party (p. 146).

12. Opal wants to write her mother a letter telling her what she has learned over the summer because of Winn-Dixie and all her other new friends. What are some of the things Opal could say to her mother?

Students' responses to this question will vary. With her new friends, Opal has made a new community for herself, and she has learned to appreciate her father. She misses her mother less, because her father has become more open in sharing his memories with his daughter. She learned to be more open-minded in choosing friends, as shown by her willingness to get to know the Dewberry brothers and Amanda. And she has learned to accept the inevitable times of sorrow that happen in life along with the times of joy.

13. After the party, Opal goes to Gloria's mistake tree and tells her mother she won't miss her as much because her heart feels full. How has Opal's life changed to make her feel this way?

Opal feels connected to her father in a new way, since he has begun to talk about Opal's mother and be more honest with his daughter. She has new friends –a community of people she has grown to love. She is also newly aware that people besides herself have survived sorrows and disappointments like her own, people like her father and Amanda Wilkinson.

14. In the story, Frannie compares life to a Littmus Lozenge, because the sweet and sad are often mixed up together. Do you agree with this point of view? Explain your answer.

This question touches on a major theme in the novel, and students will have a variety of thoughts on this topic, based on their own experiences.

Note: These Literature Circle questions are keyed to Bloom's Taxonomy as follows: Knowledge: 1-3; Comprehension: 4-6; Application: 7-8; Analysis: 9-10; Synthesis: 11-13; Evaluation: 14.

Activities

1. Write a list of ten qualities that describe who you are. As models, use the lists describing Opal's mother and Winn-Dixie.

See pp. 26-30 and 162-163 for the model lists. As a follow-up, discuss how such a list both reveals and conceals a person's real self.

2. Imagine Miss Frannie the librarian has asked you to tell a story about something amazing that happened to you. Think about something that's happened in your life that would make a great story. Then write your story and share it with the group. Make sure your story has a beginning, a middle, and an end.

This activity would be a good launchpad into writing personal narrative essays, using Opal's story as a model. Students could be encouraged to use dialogue to advance their stories like DiCamillo does.

3. Opal wants to create a dog-care handbook for her class based on her experiences caring for Winn-Dixie. What would the handbook say? Create a handbook and make sure to include tips on feeding, grooming, and other important information.

As a first-time pet owner, Opal didn't have a dog-care guide to figure out how to care for Winn-Dixie, and with this activity students with dogs will enjoy sharing their knowledge about pet care.