

Literature Circle Guide to
JUST ELLA by Margaret Peterson Haddix

Book Summary

Like every commoner in the land, Ella dreams of going to the ball and marrying Prince Charming. But after she is chosen to marry the prince, life with the royal family is not the "happily ever after" that Ella imagined. Pitiless and cold, the royals try to mold her into their vision of a princess. Ella's life becomes a meaningless schedule of protocol, which she fears she will never grasp. And Prince Charming's beautiful face hides a vacant soul. Even as her life turns to misery, the stories persist that Ella's fairy godmother sent her to the ball: How else could the poor girl wear a beautiful gown, arrive in a coach, and dance in those glass slippers? But there is no fairy godmother to help Ella escape the deadening life of the castle. Can she do it on her own?

Author Information

Margaret Peterson Haddix's best-selling novels include *Turnabout*, *Running Out of Time*, and *Among the Hidden*. Her work has been honored with the International Reading Association Children's Book Award, American Library Association Best Book for Young Adults and Quick Pick for Reluctant Readers citations, and several state readers' choice awards. Ms. Haddix lives with her family in Ohio.

Suggested Answers to Literature Circle Questions

1. What does Ella do at the very beginning of the story that Madame Bisset says she must never do again? Why does Madame Bisset object to what Ella has done?

At the beginning of the story, Ella recalls a morning when she lit her own fire rather than wait for the servants to do it for her. Madame Bisset explains that Ella must never do this because lighting the fire is a servant's job.

2. What important decision does Ella make before going to the ball? What does she hope will happen at the ball?

On page 64, Ella resolves "then and there that the ball was just a first step." She intends to use the ball as a means of leaving behind her life with Lucille and her stepsisters. She hopes to meet someone at the ball who is "capable of making me swoon."

3. Describe how Mary helps Ella escape from the castle. Why do you think Mary was willing to take this risk?

Mary helps Ella by stealing a shovel from the stable and passing it through the bars of the dungeon cell. Ella uses the shovel to dig out of the castle. Answers to the second questions will vary but should mention Ella's kindness to Mary. Also look for answers which speculate that Mary, who is aware of the prince's shortcomings, might be helping Ella because she understands Ella's reluctance to go through with the wedding.

4. Why is Ella mistaken for a peasant on her trip to Suala?

Ella is mistaken for a peasant because she has been walking for days, sleeping outdoors, and is therefore ragged and unkempt. She is also still suffering from the effects of her time in the dungeon.

5. Describe Prince Charming's attitude about helping the poor. What do his comments on page 27 say about the Prince as a person?

In response to Ella's suggestion that extra food be given to the poor rather than thrown away, the Prince says, "If it pleases you, I'll order that our table scraps be set outside the palace gate each evening...it matters not to me." Readers should infer that the Prince, while not necessarily mean-spirited, is generally indifferent or ignorant of the plight of others.

6. During her journey to Suala, Ella says she wishes she had visited Mrs. Branson before leaving the village. Imagine you are Mrs. Branson and Ella has come to you for advice. What advice would you give Ella to help her on her journey?

Readers should free to use their imaginations. However, answers should refer to Ella's memories of Mrs. Branson – a generous mother of ten children who always found a way to share bits of home-made bread with Ella. Ella also claims that Mrs. Branson was the source of the only mothering she ever received. The advice Mrs. Branson gives Ella should be consistent with what we know of her and be plausible in the context of the story.

7. How do the books on medicine and farming help Ella in Suala? If you had to leave your home and could only take two books, which books would you take? Briefly explain your choices.

Presumably Ella uses these books to grow food for the camp and to treat illness and injuries. Answers to the second question will vary and are not bound by the context of Ella's story.

8. Imagine you are Jed and the King has allowed you to lead a peace mission to Suala. What would you say to the leaders of Suala to persuade them to end the war?

One page 182, Jed says in a letter that he makes the case for peace to his own kingdom on the grounds that the war is draining the royal treasury. Look for answers that speculate that Jed might use a similar logic to appeal to Suala. Readers might also appeal to Suala with stories of suffering from the refugee camp. In either case, answers should be structured from Jed's perspective and be consistent with what he has seen and experienced and with what he considers important.

9. How would you describe Ella's feelings about Lucille? Use evidence from the text to support your description.

As she is in the fairy tale, Ella's stepmother is cruel, selfish, and demanding. As a result, Ella despises Lucille. On page 21, Ella says of Lucille, "certainly she was no substitute for a mother." On page 43, she laments how Lucille used to manipulate

her father “with a kiss and a breathy whisper....” Ella resents Lucille but she is clearly not afraid of her. On page 61, Ella says to Lucille, “You are older than me. You have more power than me. But you are not my better. How many times do I have to tell you that?” Answers should refer to scenes that describe Ella’s feelings about Lucille.

10. What do Prince Charming and Jed Reston have in common? Compare the two men, including their personalities and their feelings for Ella. What do you think Ella would say is each man’s strength and weakness?

Prince Charming and Jed Reston are similar in that they both find Ella beautiful. However, the Prince’s affection for Ella is superficial; he does not appear to appreciate her inner qualities whereas Jed seems to understand Ella’s “sense of humor, courage, perseverance, and intelligence.” Ella appreciates that Jed is straightforward, informal, and someone she can talk to. She believes that his well-reasoned thought process would make him a good adviser. However, she is frustrated by his moodiness and describes him as a thinker and not a man of action; although, ultimately, Jed does follow through on his wish to start a refugee camp. Ella initially admires the Prince’s good looks and confidence. She also appreciates that he is able to see her stepmother and stepsister for who they really are. Over time, however, Ella realizes the Prince is a shallow, simple man who lacks the ability to think for himself.

11. Reread Ella’s description of the ball beginning on page 62. Describe one way in which this description differs from the fairy tale version of Cinderella and one way in which it is similar.

One primary difference between Ella’s ball and the ball in the fairy tale is that no magic is involved in Ella’s case. The dress she wears belonged to her mother; she is driven to the ball by a friendly coachman; and the glass slippers are procured in town from an arrogant glass blower. There are similarities, however. Ella has to leave by midnight, she dances all night with the Prince, and the glass slipper she leaves behind is the key to the Prince finding her the next day.

12. Near the end of the story, we learn Ella is considering studying to be a doctor. Do you think she would make a good doctor? Why or why not? Use evidence from the text to support your argument.

The first evidence that Ella might make a good doctor comes on page 11, when she helps to save the life of Lord Reston, who suffers an apparent heart attack. Readers might also mention the fact that Ella thrives in her capacity as the refugee camp’s “medical and agricultural adviser.”

13. On page 56, Ella says that on the night of the ball “I’d changed my life all by myself.” Do you agree with this statement? Be sure to include examples from the story in your answers.

There are arguments to support either case. On the one hand, Ella does take the initiative to get herself to the ball in such a manner that she catches the eye of the prince, leading to the end of her unhappy life with Lucille. On the other hand, her

success depends partially on the generosity of others and partially on good fortune; her beauty happens to meet the high standards of the royal family who are eager to find a worthy bride for the prince.

14. On her journey to Suala, Ella overhears two soldiers telling the fairy tale version of Ella's story to a peasant. Later, Ella wonders "why did everyone like that story so much when it wasn't true? Why was everyone so eager to believe it?" In your own words, explain why you think the version of the story the soldiers told was so popular.

On page 80, Ella asks Jed why people believe the rumors about her fairy god mother when they are clearly not true. Jed responds, "Nobody can stop those rumors. People would rather believe in fairy godmothers and...and...well, divine intervention, if you will—than to think that you took charge of your own destiny." Even if readers don't refer to Jed's reasoning that sometimes fiction is easier to believe than the truth, answers should include some discussion about the value of fairy tales and storytelling.

15. Why do you think the author chose to end the book with Ella and Jed in separate places? If you could continue the story, would you bring the two characters together again? Why or why not?

Look for answers that mention that the ending is inconsistent with typical fairy tale endings. This ending is in keeping with one of the themes of the story – that though life is not a fairy tale, happy endings are still possible.

Note: These questions are keyed to Bloom's Taxonomy as follows: Knowledge: 1-2; Comprehension: 3-5; Application: 6-8; Analysis: 9-10; Synthesis: 11-12; Evaluation: 13-15

Activities

1. In the story you just read, we learn that Cinderella did not need any magic to get to the ball. Instead, there are real-life explanations for the slippers, the coach, and for why Ella needed to be home by midnight. Think of other fairy tales that you know. Choose a scene in which something appears to happen by magic and rewrite the scene with a real-life explanation, as the author did with Cinderella's trip to the ball.

See question 11.

2. Choose a character from the book and draw a picture of this person. What is he or she wearing and doing? Is this character happy or sad? Compare your drawing to a friend's drawing. How are your pictures similar? How are they different?

3. At the end of the story, Ella reads a letter from Jed. Imagine you are Ella. Write a letter back to Jed letting him know how things are going at the camp and what your plans are for the future. Are you still thinking about becoming a doctor? Do you have any questions about people back at the castle?

Other Books by This Author

Don't You Dare Read This, Mrs. Dunphrey, Simon Pule (June 2004)

The Girl with 500 Middle Names, Aladdin Library (June 2001)

Running Out of Time, Aladdin Library (June 2000)