

Literature Circle Guide to  
THE TALE OF DESPEREAUX by Kate DiCamillo

**Book Summary**

Despereaux Tilling is a mouse who loves music, stories, and a princess named Pea. Roscuro is a rat who lives in darkness but covets a world filled with light. Miggery Sow is a slow-witted serving girl with a simple, impossible wish. These characters embark on a journey that leads them down into a horrible dungeon, up into a glittering castle, and ultimately, into each other's lives.

**Author Information**

Kate DiCamillo was born in Philadelphia, moved to Florida when she was five years old, and currently lives in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Her books for children include *Because of Winn Dixie*, a Newbery Honor Book (2001), *Tiger Rising*, A National Book Award Finalist, and *The Tale of Despereaux*, winner of the Newbery Medal (2003).

**Suggested Answers to Literature Circle Questions**

Use these questions and the activities that follow to get more out of the experience of reading *The Tale of Despereaux* by Kate DiCamillo.

1. List three mice rules that Despereaux breaks in the beginning of the story. What punishment does he receive from the Mouse Council? *The three "mice rules" that Despereaux breaks are: 1) revealing himself to a human 2) speaking to a human 3) making physical contact with a human. As punishment, Despereaux is banished to the dungeon.*
2. Why isn't Miggery Sow afraid as she stands in the dungeon with Gregory's meal? *On pages 158-160, the narrator describes a series of sounds and smells which typically terrify those who descend into the dungeon. Because Miggery has limited senses of smell and hearing, she does not hear or smell these sources of fear. Therefore, she is not afraid.*
3. What does Botticelli tell Roscuro will happen if he goes up into the light? Was his prediction accurate? Explain your answer. *On page 96 Botticelli tells Roscuro, "do not go up into the light. You will regret it." Readers should be able to make a case that he is both right and wrong. Either answer is correct. On page 113, the narrator explains that the look the Princess Pea gave Roscuro after he fell into the queen's soup, "broke his heart." However, ultimately, Roscuro redeems himself by leading Despereaux, Miggery, and the Princess Pea out of the dungeon and, as a reward, is brought upstairs to dine in the light. In that respect then, Roscuro's decision to go to the light had positive consequences.*
4. Describe Despereaux's dream about the Knight. How does the dream help Despereaux on his quest? *Despereaux's dream is described on page 181. When Despereaux realizes the suit of armor is empty because he is the Knight, the dream gives him courage on his quest.*
5. Despereaux encounters the Cook on two occasions. How is the cook's attitude toward Despereaux different during their second meeting? What do you think is the reason for the change in her attitude? *When Despereaux first encounters the cook on page 176, she moves to kill him but is only able to cut off his tail. Later, when Despereaux passes through the kitchen on the way to the basement, the cook offers him soup. Answers to the question about*

*the change in her attitude will vary but should touch on the fact that the disappearance of the Princess has had an effect on everyone in the castle.*

6. Describe the relationship between Miggery Sow and the Princess Pea. What do they have in common? What are their differences? *When the Princess Pea and Miggery Sow first meet on page 146, their relationship is one of servant-mistress. However, Miggery Sow first saw the Princess Pea many years before and has wanted to be a princess ever since. A friendship of sorts ensues. For example, the girls learn they are the same age. Miggery Sow does eventually come to the Princess Pea's chambers with a knife and participates in the kidnapping but she does so having been manipulated by Roscuro. Though she is jealous of the Princess, she does not think any harm will come to her. Ultimately, the most important thing the girls have in common is that they both miss their mothers. In the end, the relationship could be described as sisterly. Miggery Sow and the Princess differ greatly in social position, wealth etc as well as in intellect. Miggery Sow is described as dim witted.*
7. Which characters help Despereaux overcome the challenges he faces on his quest to save the Princess Pea? How does each character help him? Imagine Despereaux meets you on his way to the dungeon. Using your knowledge of the dungeon, what advice would you give Despereaux to help him succeed? *Two characters in particular help Despereaux. First, on page 216, the threadmaster gives Despereaux a spool of red thread to use to avoid becoming lost in the dungeon. He also gives Despereaux a needle to use as a weapon. On page 233, the cook gives Despereaux soup which presumably nourishes him. Answers to the final part of the question will vary but should involve circumstances plausible within the context of the story and within a castle.*
8. Imagine you have broken a rule and have been banished from your community. What would you miss most? If it meant you could return to the community, would you say you were sorry, even if you felt you had done nothing wrong? *Answers will vary but should convey an understanding of Despereaux's circumstances and his reasons for not saying he was sorry – that is he felt he had done nothing wrong. The purpose of the question is to challenge the reader to weigh the importance of principle in difficult decisions.*
9. Miggery Sow tells several characters that she is going to be a princess. Which characters does she say this to? Compare and contrast their reactions to Miggery's statement. What does each character's reaction tell us about him or her? Use evidence from the text to support your answer. *Miggery says this to six characters. On page 137, her uncle's sarcastic response reveals him to be heartless and uncaring. On page 143, the soldier humors Miggery but states plainly that nobody cares. On page 150, the Princess Pea gives Miggery a "quick, deep look" and says nothing. Readers should infer that the Princess Pea is a guarded person who is not quite sure what to make of Miggery. On page 151, Louise, a head servant says, "don't make me laugh." On page 164, Gregory calls her dream "foolish" but refers to his own dream of eating soup, revealing him to be a person with wants as well. On page 170, Roscuro tells Miggery there is a way to make her a princess. Since this the reader should recognize that Miggery becoming a princess is improbable, Roscuro's response indicates that he is lying for his own good.*
10. In the beginning of the story, Despereaux reads a fairy tale to himself in the library. In what ways is the book you just read like a fairy tale? In what ways is it like real life? *Answers will vary depending on each reader's sense of what a fairy tale is but there are several common elements in the story and in the tale Despereaux reads on page 24. Look for answers which mention a princess, a brave knight, and a happy ending.*

11. Imagine you are Lester at the moment the Mouse Council votes to banish Despereaux to the dungeon. What, if anything, would you say to convince the council not to send Despereaux away? Why do you think Lester remained silent? *The question should challenge readers to see matters from Lester's perspective. Answers should convey that readers understand Lester's reasons for not speaking up, that is, that he believed strongly in the mice rules. Readers do have an opportunity to diverge from the storyline by imagining that Lester did speak in his son's defense. In these cases, look for arguments which remain faithful to the context of the story.*
12. Roscuro tells Miggery Sow that aspirations are "those things that make a serving girl want to be a princess." Choose three characters from the story and describe their aspirations. Which character's aspirations do you admire most? Least? *Miggery Sow wants to be a princess. King Philip wants to avenge his wife's death by banishing rats, soup, and spoons etc. Despereaux wants to be brave for the princess. Roscuro wants to be in the light but also wants to avenge his own treatment at the hands of the King and the Princess Pea. Boticelli wants to torment others. The cook wants to make soup. Answers to part two of the question will vary.*
13. Did you like the way the story ended? Why or why not? Use examples from the text in your answer. Now imagine the Kingdom one year after the story has ended. Do you think anything has changed? *In discussing the ending, readers should weigh in with their feelings about The Princess Pea's decision to allow Roscuro upstairs, the reunion of Miggery Sow with her father, and Despereaux's friendship with the Princess (as opposed to love, which motivated him to break the mice rules and then rescue her from the dungeon). Answers to the final part of the question will vary but should be appropriate in the context of the book and its characters.*
14. Now that you know more about Despereaux, think back to the moment of his birth when his parents and siblings first laid eyes on him. What was unusual about him? Do you think the author gave Despereaux these unusual traits for a reason? What might these features symbolize about Despereaux's character? *Despereaux was characterized by three unusual traits at birth: 1) large ears 2) open eyes 3) small body. Answers to parts two and three of the question should convey an understanding of basic symbolism. For example, the open eyes could be said to symbolize that Despereaux was able to see or perceive things that other mice were not, such as the beauty of a princess.*
15. Reread the author's explanation of Roscuro's full name, Chiaroscuro, on page 85. Do you think the author chose a good name for this character? If so, support your argument using evidence from the text. If not, suggest another name and explain your reason for doing so. *On page 85 the narrator explains that Roscuro's name means the arrangement of light and dark together. Readers should recall that rats are not supposed to like light, yet Roscuro is drawn to light as a result of Gregory lighting a match in his eyes. On a deeper level, look for answers which infer that light and dark can be associated with good and evil and that Roscuro embodies some of each. He does torment several characters, yet he ultimately leads Despereaux et al to safety – though that act is not selfless by any means.*

*Note: These questions are keyed to Bloom's Taxonomy as follows: Knowledge: 1-3; Comprehension: 4-6; Application: 7-8; Analysis: 9-10; Synthesis: 11-13; Evaluation: 14-15*

## Activities

1. When Despereaux returns to the dungeon to rescue the Princess Pea, he tells himself a story to cheer himself up. Imagine you are going to write a story to cheer yourself up. Where would the story take place? Who would be the main characters? How did these characters meet? *Despereaux tells himself the story on page 237. The story is very simple and directly reflects his own life. Look for answers that include a setting, a main character, and a storyline that brings him or her in contact with other characters.*
2. On page 149, the Princess Pea explains to Miggery Sow that she has made a tapestry showing the history of her world. Using reference books, see if you can find any famous tapestries from history. Then, just as the Princess Pea did, draw a history of your world. Include two people close to you and show each person doing a common activity. *In the Princess Pea's tapestry, her father is playing guitar and her mother is eating soup. In other words, each person is doing something he or she enjoys. Readers should feel free to mimic the Princess Pea's approach but with activities and people from their own lives.*
3. At the end of the story, we learn that Miggery Sow has been reunited with her father. Imagine Miggery comes back to the castle to visit the Princess Pea one year later. Now that you know what these characters are like and how they speak, write a scene showing Miggery and the Princess together again. What room are they in? What do they talk about? Is anyone else with them? Be sure to show how you think each character may have changed over the year. *The purpose of this activity is to test readers understanding of the characters and setting of the book. Readers should be able to characterize the general layout of the castle: dungeon, kitchen, banquet hall, princess's room etc... Likewise, readers should have a basic grasp of how Miggery Sow and the Princess speak and what they might say or do.*