

Literature Circle Guide to THE TIGER RISING
by Kate DiCamillo

Book Summary

The Tiger Rising is the tale of 12-year-old Rob Horton who finds a caged tiger in the woods behind the Kentucky Star Motel where he lives with his dad. The tiger is so incongruous in this setting that Rob views the apparition as some sort of magic trick. Indeed, the tiger triggers all sorts of magic in Rob's life--for one thing, it takes his mind off his recently deceased mother and the itchy red blisters on his legs that the wise motel housekeeper, Willie May, says is a manifestation of the sadness that Rob keeps "down low." Something else for Rob to think about is Sistine (as in the chapel), a new city girl with fierce black eyes who challenges him to be honest with her and himself. Spurred by the tiger, events collide to break Rob out of his silent introspection, to form a new friendship with Sistine, to develop a new understanding of his father, and most important, to lighten his heart. This novel is about cages--the consequences of escape as well as imprisonment. The story and symbolism are clear as a bell, and the emotions ring true.

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. According to DiCamillo, *The Tiger Rising* is "considerably darker" than her Newberry Honor-winning first novel, *Because of Winn-Dixie*, but she adds, "There's light and redemption in it."

Suggested Answers to Literature Circle Questions

1. This story takes place in and around a motel in Lister, Florida. Describe the setting and what Rob Horton and his father are doing there.
Rob and his father live in the Kentucky Star, a motel in the rural outskirts of a small town. Rob explains to Sistine that he and his father relocated from Jacksonville so that they could move on after the death of Rob's mother. (p. 58)
2. Does Rob think things through? How does he do this? Does his way of thinking affect his actions toward his father, the Threemonger brothers, and his school situation?
**Rob thinks things through by making a plan to control his thoughts and feelings. He pushes his thoughts deep inside of him like the suitcase he packed when he left Jacksonville. (p. 3) This affects his actions toward his father in that he doesn't talk to his father at all about his feelings. When the Threemonger brothers bully him on the bus, he follows his plan which is to show no feelings so they get bored and leave him alone. In school, he follows that same policy of not speaking. When the principal tells him that he will have to stay home until his rash clears, Rob does not argue or respond, except to say, "Yes, sir."
(p. 15)**

3. Where was Rob's first meeting with Sistine? What happened during the first meeting? **Although Rob saw Sistine when she came on the bus in the morning (p. 7) . . . and again when she introduced herself in his homeroom (p. 11) . . . they meet for the first time when she sits next to him on the school bus. (p. 22) Sistine reveals that she hates this new town and school and Rob immediately changes the way he normally acts toward other people. He breaks his policy of not saying anything when he tells her about the Sistine Chapel. (p. 23) Sistine tells Rob that she will bring him his homework while he is out of school even though Rob doesn't want it.**

4. Why was the discovery of the caged tiger so extraordinary to Rob? How did its discovery help him at the beginning of the story? At the end of the story?

Rob considered himself lucky to have found the tiger. (p. 1) The thought was so exciting to him that it helped him "keep his suitcase closed." (p. 4) In the beginning of the story, talking to Sistine about the tiger strengthens their relationship. Throughout the story, the caged tiger represents the feelings and dreams that Rob has pushed deep down inside of him. By the end of the book, when Rob and Sistine release the tiger, Rob confronts his father with all the feelings he has bottled up inside. His father is finally ready to talk about his own grief, as well. (p. 107)

5. When Rob first tells Sistine about the tiger, her answer is "Where?" Rob feels that he picked the right person to tell about the tiger. What do you think Sistine's answer reveals about her?

Sistine believes Rob right away and doesn't tease him. He wanted to tell someone who wouldn't doubt him (p. 38), and he found that person in Sistine. Sistine's answer reveals that she is different from the other students at school with whom Rob chooses not to speak. Like Rob, she needs a place to put her hopes and dreams.

6. It is clear from the beginning of the story that Rob doesn't relate to other kids in or out of school. Why do you think "words fall out of his mouth" when he is with Sistine? Why do you think that he and Sistine become friends?

Sistine is easier to talk to because she is an outsider, like he is. Later, Willie May points out what a good pair they are; Rob is full of sadness and Sistine is full of anger. (p. 81) They become friends because they can talk to each other and they have similar experiences: the loss of a parent, living in a new place and being unusual. Sistine makes Rob feel happy for the first time since his mother died. (p. 52)

7. Think about the actions of the bus driver, Mr. Nelson; the school principal, Mr. Phelmer; and the owner of the motel, Beauchamp. Did they act as responsible adults toward Rob? Explain.

Mr. Nelson acts irresponsibly when he allows Rob to get bullied on the bus and acts as though he doesn't realize what is happening. (p. 6) Mr. Phelmer, the principal, doesn't try to understand Rob and seems uncomfortable talking to him. He corrects himself when he says "parents" and changes it to "father," but he seems to view Rob as a problem that he wishes would just go away. He doesn't even attempt to call Rob's father and instead sends Rob home with a note saying that Rob's father can talk to him if he wants to. (p. 16) Beauchamp, the owner of the motel, is the most irresponsible toward Rob. He puts Rob in danger by paying him a small amount of money to secretly feed the tiger because he is

afraid to do it himself. (p. 74)

8. Rob asks Willie May if she thought it was bad to keep animals locked up. What was her opinion? Would you agree or disagree? Why?

Willie May had mixed feelings about keeping animals in cages. She recalled a story of her father giving her a beautiful parakeet in a cage when she was a young girl, and when she released it her father beat her and told her it was cruel to set it free because it couldn't survive on its own. (p. 62) Students' responses will vary depending on their opinions, but they should weigh the consequences of freeing a caged animal.

9. In what ways does Willie May play a key role in the lives of Rob and Sistine?

Immediately, Willie May recognizes what an interesting match Rob and Sistine are: "Ain't that just like God...throwing the two of you together?" (p. 81) Willie May gives them advice and is someone they can confide in. Willie May seems to understand people so well that Sistine calls her a prophetess. (p. 82)

10. Rob changes greatly from the beginning of the story to the end. Give three specific examples of those changes.

The change begins slowly as Rob becomes friends with Sistine. One of the first examples of how Rob's character is changing is when he changes his policy of not speaking (p. 23) when he first sits with Sistine on the bus. He changes his vow not to wish for things when he chases Sistine rather than believing that he really doesn't care about her friendship. (p.48) After Sistine leaves that day, he chants his mother's name, which is the beginning of his opening up and letting some of his grief come to the surface. (p. 60) When he confronts Sistine with the "truth" that her father isn't coming to get her, it represents another example of how his character is changing. (p. 96) Finally, Rob realizes that he knows things that he didn't even realize he knew. (p. 101) This is the culmination of his change in character as he is becoming more aware of his own thoughts and feelings.

11. Did the tiger have to be killed? If so, why or why not?

Students' responses will vary. Once the tiger was released, he had to be killed to protect the children or anyone else that was in the vicinity. Unlike the earlier incident when Rob recalls his father killing a bird just because he could, Rob's father kills the tiger in his desire to protect his son. Practically speaking, the police, or local animal control should have been called to protect the life of the tiger. This incident of killing the tiger is difficult to understand, because throughout the book the tiger seems to represent the caged up feelings of Sistine and Rob. When they finally release the tiger, readers may expect the tiger to run away with Sistine saying, "That was the right thing to do." (p.105) But when they release him, Rob remembers Willie May's green parakeet. Just as releasing the tiger has consequences, so does allowing your anger and sadness to finally surface after being bottled up. In this way, the tiger had to be killed so that Rob and Sistine could fully come to grips with their feelings. Rob's father needed to be a part of this because he was the person who instructed Rob to keep his feelings bottled up on the day of his mother's funeral.

12. When Rob looks at his father's hands, he calls them "complicated hands." What does he mean by this? Do you think most parents' hands are complicated? Explain.

Students' responses will vary according to their experiences. Rob calls his father's hands "complicated hands" because they did so many different kinds of things. Although they were the same hands that put medicine on Rob's legs and held him when he cried, they were also the hands that shot the tiger and who hit him on the day of his mother's funeral. (p. 114) Students may recognize that most parents have conflicting responsibilities of dealing with their own thoughts and feelings as human beings as well as trying to protect and care for their own children. As in the case of Rob's father, it was hard for him to deal with the loss of his wife, but he also had to help Rob deal with the loss of his mother.

13. If you asked Rob at the end of the story what happiness is, how would he answer you?

On the first night that he spends time with Sistine, he feels happiness for the first time: "Rob remembered the name of the feeling that was pushing up inside of him, filling him full to overflowing. It was happiness." (p. 52) He didn't recognize it at first because it had been so long since he had felt that way. At the end of the book, he has allowed his sadness to surface, so he actually had room in his heart to feel happiness. On the last pages, he is waking up from a hopeful dream where he is sharing beautiful experiences with Sistine and smiling. He may define happiness as sharing one's feelings with a good friend and appreciating the beautiful things in life together.

14. Would you say that *The Tiger Rising* is an appropriate title for this story? Why or why not?

Students' responses will vary based on how they interpret the major theme of the story. Willie May refers to the tiger rising up and it reminds Rob of her telling him that his sadness needed to "rise up" to clear the rash on his legs. (p. 97) Throughout the book, the caged tiger is a metaphor for Rob's bottled up feelings. *The Tiger Rising*, then, is quite an appropriate title because Rob's character changes as he begins to deal with the feelings that rise up and finally come to the surface at the close of the book.

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. Sistine says that looking at the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel is like looking at fireworks. What in your life makes you think of fireworks? It might be a painting, an object, a scene in nature, or an event. Share your thoughts with classmates by giving an oral or written description, or showing a drawing or photograph.

This activity can be used to link the book to art appreciation activities. Students can explore and question how artists can create pieces of work that inspire the viewers.

2. The tiger is a strong, beautiful animal that is endangered. Find out more about tigers and the efforts to save them. Create a poster about this powerful animal.

This activity can link to science activities on endangered animals, and further writing projects on creating informational writing pieces.