

Literature Circle Guide to
THE ZEBRA WALL by Kevin Henkes

Book Summary

Ten year-old Adine Vorlob is excited to be a part of her family's preparations for the new baby. She and her four younger sisters, Bernice, Carla, Dot, and Effie, are painting a mural in the nursery for the new baby and making a list of possible baby names on the refrigerator door. Adine is thrilled to be having a new sister or brother, but she is dreading the arrival of her eccentric Aunt Irene, who will be staying with the family until Mrs. Vorlob is recovered from the birth. Adine is constantly worried that her aunt will embarrass her with her flamboyant ways and her strange fascination with all things related to cats. Surprising everyone, the Vorlob baby arrives a month prematurely, and he is a boy. More difficult for Adine to deal with is the continued presence of Aunt Irene, who has moved into Adine's own bedroom. Slowly Adine develops empathy and an increased appreciation for family connections, and comes to accept her aunt.

Author Information

Kevin Henkes grew up in Wisconsin, and began drawing at an early age. The early encouragement he received helped solidify his love for his work, and at age nineteen he traveled to New York City, hoping to find a publisher for his drawings. He has worked as a writer and illustrator ever since. Today he lives in Madison, Wisconsin, with his wife and son. Besides his novels, he is known for his picture books with mouse characters, including *Owen*, a 1994 Caldecott Honor Book; *Lilly's Purple Plastic Purse*; and *Julius, the Baby of the World*.

Suggested Answers to Literature Circle Questions

1. In the beginning of the story, what kind of preparations has the Vorlob family made for the new baby?

The Vorlobs have painted the baby's bedroom fuchsia and begun a mural wall covered with pictures of things beginning with the letter "f."

2. What kind of names does Mrs. Vorlob like?

She doesn't like names that she thinks are "hoity-toity" or snobby. Rather, she likes names that are "simple and to the point" (p. 71).

3. On the day she stays home "sick" from school, Adine accidentally overhears a phone conversation that Aunt Irene is having with a friend. What does she learn about her aunt's feelings toward her nieces in this conversation?

Aunt Irene tells her friend that she doesn't know what she would do without her sister's family, and that her nieces "are the kids I never had" (p. 130). Adine realizes for the first time just how much her aunt cares about her and her sisters.

4. Sometimes Adine is embarrassed and irritated by her parents. What are some of the things her parents do that frustrate her?

Mrs. Vorlob wears flannel shirts and short hair, and Adine wishes she would dress more femininely (p. 8). Both parents dress in matching outfits, including sateen Milwaukee Brewers outfits, to attend a school function (p. 7). For entertainment, Mr. Vorlob drives the family car around in an expensive neighborhood, honking the car horn and waving at strangers (p. 105).

5. What does Aunt Irene look like, and how does she act?

Aunt Irene is “gruff and large and loud and strong” (p. 21). She has a “slight, but prickly, mustache and stale, gamy breath” (p. 22). She dresses in clothing printed with cats, carries a cat purse, and wears cat earrings (p. 23). She loves to entertain her nieces by puffing cigarette smoke out of her nostrils and pretending she’s a freight train (p. 22).

6. How does the Vorlob family celebrate the day that Baby Vorlob comes home from the hospital? How do the older Vorlob children feel about having a new baby brother in the house?

The family celebrates with a large breakfast, complete with M&M pancakes and scrambled eggs that Aunt Irene has attempted to dye blue in honor of the new baby boy. They are delighted to be together again, and have their mother home. The older children are thrilled to have a new baby brother, one more person to share the family joy. Adine thinks that “to have a new brother made the circle of her life larger” (p. 57).

7. Do you think it is better to be the firstborn child in a family, the middle child, or the baby of a family? Explain your answer.

Students will have a variety of opinions on this question. Adine would likely answer that it is best to be the firstborn; see answer for question 11.

8. How would you react to the news that your parents are having a new baby? Would you be excited by the news? How would your response compare to Adine’s?

Students will note that Adine is completely positive about the new baby both before and after his arrival. For Adine, the only negative aspect of the new baby is that his arrival is accompanied by her mother’s absence and Aunt Irene’s visit.

9. Adine, Bernice, and Carla come up with a plan to create a series of unflattering drawings of Aunt Irene. What feelings does Adine have about this plan? Why does she eventually hide the drawings from Aunt Irene?

Though Adine liked the idea at first, once she started drawing, she felt badly about the plan (p. 83). Adine is conflicted: Though she is often annoyed and embarrassed by her aunt, she feels a small amount of sympathy for her, and she doesn’t want to be cruel. Once completed, the drawings seem too mean, “like something Gary Wilker [the class bully] would do” (p. 84). Eventually Adine’s remorse about what they had done outweighs her frustration toward her aunt, and she decides to hide the drawings.

10. More than anything, Adine fears storms. How does she respond when a storm comes? Why do you think she feels this way? Do you think she learns anything when Aunt Irene shows her how to make a “storm in a teacup” (p. 137)?

Adine fears storms, “especially the kind that sprang up unannounced after everyone was asleep. They paralyzed her with their thunder and lightning and wind” (p. 47). Storms cause Adine to feel terribly anxious, but she keeps her fears to herself (p. 99). During a storm, she feels out of control and powerless, overwhelmed by the display of nature’s power. During one storm, she imagines herself as a tiny leaf that she notices blowing across the yard, “tiny, tossing and turning, powerless against the wind” (p. 100). When Aunt Irene shows her how to make a storm in a teacup, Adine is amused by just how much like a real storm it appears, yet the storm in her teacup is entirely within her control (p. 137). Learning to make a storm in a teacup leads Adine to confess to her aunt just how much she fears storms, and Adine begins to feel close to her aunt for the first time (p. 138).

11. How do you think growing up as the firstborn of six children will affect Adine? Does she seem like a typical firstborn child?

Students may notice that Adine is in many ways a typical firstborn: responsible, helpful, and close to her parents. She seems very secure in her place in the family, and she treasures a close relationship with her mother. She is happy to accept the extra responsibilities that come with being firstborn, and when Aunt Irene arrives on the scene to take charge, Adine feels that her special place in the family has been usurped by her aunt.

12. Adine realizes that her feelings for her aunt are “a jumbled mess, just like the ‘junk drawer’ in the pantry” (p. 94). In your own words, explain what this simile means.

When Adine’s friend Denise mocks one of Aunt Irene’s cat blouses, Adine is surprised by how defensive of her aunt she feels. Though Adine and her sisters have made fun of Aunt Irene’s cat motif clothing, Adine bristles when someone outside the family does the same. In spite of her frustrations, Adine does feel some family loyalty toward her aunt, as well as some sympathy, realizing that Aunt Irene is lonely and upset by her divorce.

13. Why is Adine so frustrated by Aunt Irene’s presence in the home? Give at least three reasons why Adine wishes her aunt would go home.

Irene is frequently embarrassed by her aunt. Irene especially despises her aunt’s smoking and her love of cat clothing and home accessories. Also, Irene feels jealous of Aunt Irene’s relationship with her mother, especially when her mother has just returned home from the hospital (p. 66). Aunt Irene has moved into Adine’s bedroom with all her personal belongings, and she even smokes in Adine’s room. Often Aunt Irene is bossy and controlling, doing things like changing the television channels without asking.

14. Do you think Aunt Irene would welcome advice on how to improve her relationships with her sister’s children? If you could give Aunt Irene some gentle advice about how to win over her nieces, what would you say?

Aunt Irene does not seem especially open to advice, so any advice that was given would have to be strategic. Students might caution Aunt Irene to be more considerate of her nieces, to pay more attention to their needs and the family's way of doing things. Students might advise her to listen more and talk less, to be less overbearing, and to be extra careful not to do or say anything to embarrass her nieces.

15. To Mrs. Vorlob, names are very important; in fact, she doesn't give Baby Vorlob a name until he is several months old. In Aunt Irene's opinion, names don't matter too much. What do you think? Does a person's name affect who he or she becomes? Do you think you would be a different person if your parents had named you differently?

Students will have many different responses to this question, and many different opinions about whether or not their individual names fit them. To Adine and the Vorlob family, names are very important. Students may note that the improved relationship between Adine and Aunt Irene is underscored in the final chapter of the book when Adine grabs her aunt's hand and says, "Adine, Irene – they *do* almost rhyme" (p. 146).

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: 14-15.

Activities

1. Choose one scene with conversation between the characters in this novel to illustrate in a comic strip or storyboard style, using balloons for the characters' dialogue. Try to draw your characters according to the author's descriptions, and try to capture the mood in the scene with your drawing.

This assignment encourages students to pay close attention to Henkes' realistic dialogue and then re-create a scene in a visual form. Students might also be asked to compare what each character is thinking to what he or she is saying out loud.

2. Take a survey of classmates your age, asking what the ideal number of children in a family is. As you talk to classmates, ask them to give reasons for their answers. Tally your results, and create a pie chart or bar graph to show your survey results. Be ready to share your findings with your class, and also explain how you imagine Adine would answer your survey.

This assignment gives students experience in conducting a survey and creating a graph or chart to display the results. Most students have strong opinions about the ideal number of children in a family and have much to say in response to the survey. The results of this assignment would provide an excellent topic for class discussion in which students could share their own experiences and observations about the topic.

3. For a baby or toddler you know, create a poster-size mural like the ones the Vorlobs made for each of their daughters. Use colorful drawings to make your mural exciting, and share it with the child. What is his or her reaction to your mural? Write about how the child responds to your gift.

This activity gives students the opportunity to connect to the story by participating in creating a mural like the Vorlobs' murals. By sharing their drawing with a small child, students have the opportunity to observe and write descriptively about the child's reaction.

Author's Web Site: www.kevinhenkes.com

Other Novels by This Author

Olive's Ocean, HarperCollins, 2003

The Birthday Room, HarperTrophy, 2001

Protecting Marie, Puffin, 1996

Sun & Spoon, Puffin, 1998

Two Under Par, Puffin, 1997

Words of Stone, Puffin, 1993