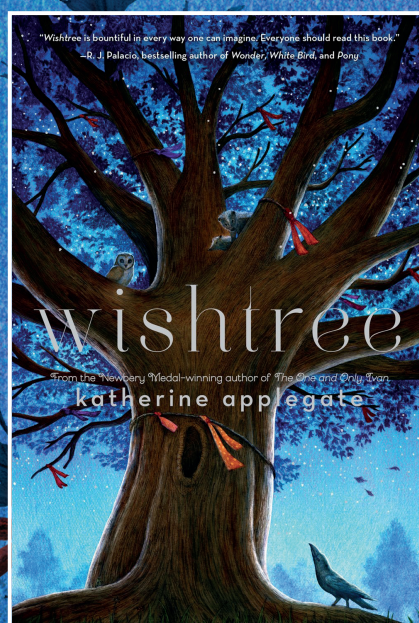
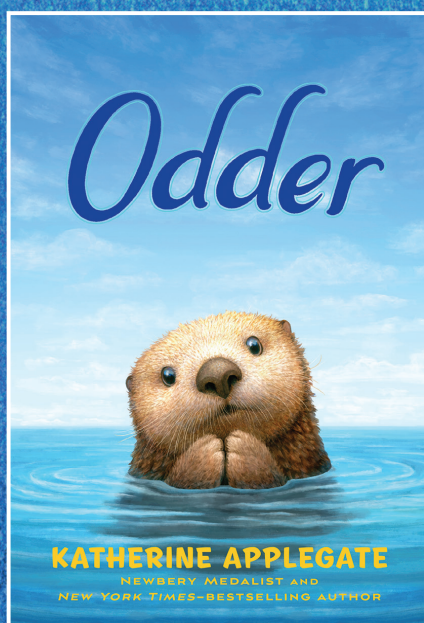
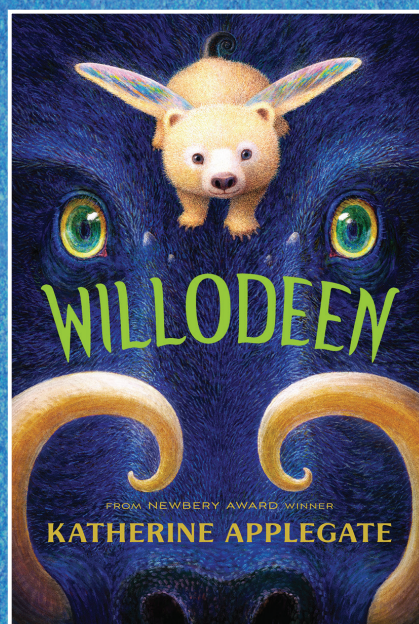


A Teacher's Guide to the Middle-Grade Novels of Katherine Applegate

Explore themes of community, empathy, resilience, and the environment through the powerful, accessible stories of an award-winning author.



ABOUT THIS GUIDE

Katherine Applegate is the author of more than 150 books for children and young adults, including *The One and Only Ivan*, winner of the Newbery Medal. She has received praise from reviewers and critics for writing in various genres—realism, fantasy, and science fiction. Applegate is widely known for her popular series Animorphs, Remnants, Everword, and Endling, and the chapter book series Roscoe Riley Rules and Doggo & Pupper. Noted for her exquisite use of language, she calls upon readers to connect to her stories through imagery, strong characterization, and intriguing plots. She is a #1 *New York Times* bestselling author, and many of her works have been named an American Library Association’s Notable Book for Children. In addition to these accolades, many of her novels have won state children’s book awards.

This guide focuses on four of her middle-grade novels: *Crenshaw*, *Willodeen*, *Odder*, and *Wishtree*. There are discussion questions and activities that ask readers to think about community, communication, teamwork, the meaning of family and home, friendship, survival, and the relationship between humans and nature. Readers are also asked to explore themes of responsibility and respect for the natural world, and find empathy for those who are different or struggling to survive in their communities. Applegate encourages students to use their voices when they witness hunting and environmental laws being broken, or others being treated unkindly. At the end of this guide, there are additional discussion questions and activities that draw a connection between the four novels.

Classroom reading and language-arts teachers, school and library book-club leaders, literacy circles, and parents may find this guide especially helpful as they call upon readers to think critically about big topics and relevant themes.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Katherine Applegate was born in Ann Arbor, Michigan, studied at the University of Texas in Austin, and now lives in Nevada with her husband, a writer. She is the mother of two children and provides a home for a number of pets. Applegate wrote her first story in fourth grade and has been writing ever since. As a child, she didn’t like to read until she discovered E. B. White’s *Charlotte’s Web* and everything changed. That book sent her searching for similar titles, and she became a reader. She advises young readers, “Finding the right book is like searching for a good friend.” To many young readers, her books are like good friends.

Applegate is inspired by young readers that she meets. She says, “They are idealistic, and hopeful. They care about fairness and justice. They’re not afraid to be honest.”

For more information about Applegate visit her website at KatherineApplegate.com.

See pages 11-13
for Author Study
Activities and an
Interview with Katherine
Applegate!

Crenshaw

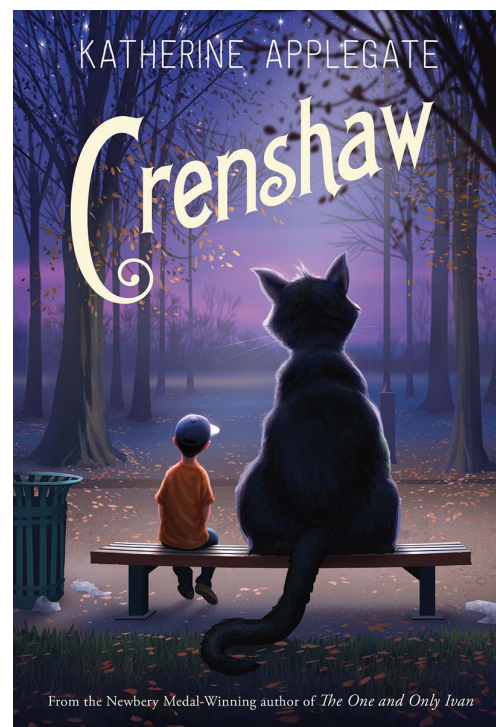
Jackson is in the fifth grade when he spots Crenshaw, a very large cat surfing at the beach. When he takes a closer look, he realizes that this is the same imaginary cat he saw when he was in first grade. A lot has happened between first and fifth grade. Jackson's family has gotten deeper into financial trouble, and they must sell most of their possessions in a yard sale to pay back rent and buy a few groceries. It's not that his parents aren't trying. His mother lost her job as a music teacher and now works three part-time jobs. His dad, who suffers from multiple sclerosis, had to leave his construction job. They are about to move into their minivan when Crenshaw reappears, this time somewhat larger. Is the cat magical enough to bring good luck to Jackson and his family?

PRE-READING ACTIVITY

Write a definition of "unhoused." Share the definitions in class. Discuss how being unhoused has negative impacts on families. Read pages 14 and 15. Explain the game "cerealball" that Jackson and his sister, Robin, play. How is this a sign that their family is struggling financially?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Discuss Jackson's statement: "Stories are lies, when you get right down to it. And I don't like being lied to." (p. 9). Explain why he doesn't like made-up stories. Why is it important for him to have a logical explanation for everything that happens?
2. Define "family" from Jackson's point of view. Explain why he "feels like a relative from out of town" (p. 35) in his own family. Cite evidence that family is important to Jackson. His parents aren't always honest with him about their situation. At what point does Jackson demand the truth?
3. Jackson's dad is ill, and his mother works three part-time jobs. How does this put them in financial difficulty? Contrast Jackson's parents' view of asking for assistance. Why does his dad think that asking for help means you have failed? Debate why his dad is willing to jeopardize the family's well-being.
4. Describe Crenshaw. Discuss the weird things Jackson notices about the big cat. Discuss why Crenshaw changes in size as Jackson gets older. Why doesn't Jackson tell anyone about Crenshaw?
5. What is significant about the first time Crenshaw appears to Jackson? Compare the first time Jackson sees the cat to the second sighting. Why does Jackson keep telling Crenshaw to leave? What is he afraid of when Crenshaw is there? Explain what Crenshaw means when he says, "Imaginary friends don't come of their own volition. We are invited." (p. 76). Why does Crenshaw think that he was invited?
6. Compare the behavior of Crenshaw and Aretha. Discuss whether Aretha can sense when Crenshaw is present. Debate whether Aretha can actually see the cat.
7. Marisol is Jackson's best friend from Swanlake Village, the apartment complex where they lived. Why has Jackson never told Marisol about Crenshaw or his family's financial problems? At what point does he tell her? Explain her reaction.
8. What are the qualities of a true friend? Describe the friendship between Jackson and Marisol. What are the experiences and beliefs that they have in common? What are their differences? How does their friendship help both of them?
9. Why does Jackson steal the dog cookie? Describe his guilt about the few times he has stolen from a store. Why does he feel worse about lying than about stealing? What makes him ask Crenshaw, "Are you my conscience?" (p. 196)



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EL: 9781250080226

10. Discuss the theme of magic in the story. What is the meaning of “magic” in the context of Jackson’s life? Why did he insist on revealing how the magician’s tricks worked at school? Explain Marisol’s comment, “Just enjoy the magic while you can, okay.” (p. 160)

VOCABULARY

The vocabulary isn’t difficult, but readers should be encouraged to jot down unfamiliar words and try to define them by taking clues from context. Such words may include paleontologist (p. 8), delirious (p. 19), curmudgeon (p. 26), keepsake, (p. 39) optimists (p. 40), pessimists (p. 40), volition (p. 76), conscience (196), eviction (p. 203), and altruists (p. 224).

ACTIVITIES

POWER OF MUSIC

Jackson’s parents are musicians. They love music so much that they named their children for guitars, and their pets for R and B artists. Blues music is often sad, reflecting the emotions and struggles of the artists with themes about social and economic challenges. Write the lyrics of a blues song from the point of view of one of the following characters: Mom, Dad, Jackson, or Robin.

IMPORTANCE OF STORY

Jackson’s favorite book is *A Hole Is to Dig: A First Book of First Definitions* by Ruth Krauss and illustrated by Maurice Sendak. Read the first quote from the book at the beginning of part 1: “A door is to open.” Write a brief essay that Jackson might write at the end of the book about the door that has opened for his family.

NEED FOR COMMUNICATION

Jackson’s family doesn’t communicate well about their financial difficulties. Sponsor a class debate about the need for communication within a family, especially when the children are struggling to understand what is happening. Cite specific scenes and use direct quotes from the book to support your thoughts.

ROLE OF IMAGINATION

Crenshaw, Jackson’s imaginary friend, has a knack for appearing when Jackson needs him the most. As a fifth grader, Jackson seems to be too old for an imaginary friend. Yet Crenshaw reappears. Consider his family’s troubles when he is in fifth grade, and write an acrostic poem about Jackson’s need for Crenshaw, using “Crenshaw” as the spine word.

EXTENSION ACTIVITY

FOOD AND HOME INSECURITY

Jackson’s mom wants to ask for assistance, but his dad is adamant about not accepting help. Identify agencies and food pantries in your town or city that might offer help to families like Jackson’s. Make a brochure about these agencies. Include the name of the agency, their overall mission, the address and telephone number, and how to apply for aid.

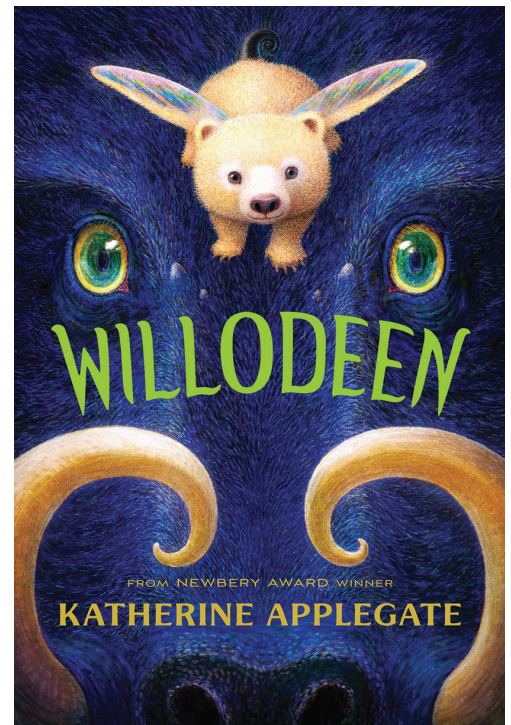
★ “A compelling and unflinchingly honest treatment of a difficult topic.”

—*School Library Journal*, starred review



Willodeen

Willodeen is the only survivor of the Great September Fire that destroyed her home and family. Now orphaned, she lives in the small village of Perchance with Bertie and Mae, two eccentric women known as witches to some of the locals. Willodeen is happiest roaming the nearby hills and searching for screechers, odd-looking and stinky creatures that are considered pests by the locals. The village is under the looming risk of fires, mudslides, droughts, and fevers, but the greatest threat to their economy is the dwindling migration of the hummingbears. Willodeen has never had a friend until Connor Burke comes along. Noted for his prized puzzlers, he gifts Willodeen a puzzler of a screecher for her birthday. Together, Connor and Willodeen set out to make a difference and save their beloved screechers and hummingbears. In the process, they revel in their new friendship and learn what it means to speak up.



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PRE-READING ACTIVITY

Define “citizen science” as explained on the [Get Kids Outside website](#). How are citizen scientists different from professional scientists? Brainstorm ways each type of scientist contributes to the preservation of nature. Write an editorial for the school newspaper that explains how students can become citizen scientists.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Explain the structure of the novel. How does the author use part 1 to introduce the setting and characters?
2. How does Willodeen come to live with Birdie and Mae? Why do the villagers call the two women witches? How do they provide a good place for Willodeen? At what point does Willodeen finally use the word “home”?
3. Describe Willodeen. How did she develop such a love of creatures and nature? When Willodeen wonders why screechers howl at night, Pa responds, “Nature, Willodeen, knows more than we do, and she probably always will.” (p. 11). What does Pa mean?
4. In chapter 5, Willodeen brings up how she is missing a clock in her head. What does she mean by this, and how has this influenced her relationship with people and nature?
5. Willodeen is happiest when roaming the hills. How do the hills make her feel safe? Explain how Bertie and Mae know when to give Willodeen space. At what point does she meet Connor Burke? How does she resist his friendship at first? What is the turning point in their friendship?
6. Willodeen tries her best not to think of her old home and her family, saying that “pain was best packed away” or “covered up.” How do you think this affects her relationship with Birdie and Mae?
7. The residents of Perchance are worried that there are fewer hummingbears each fall but hardly notice when the screechers disappear. Why do you think they care more about the hummingbears?
8. Birdie and Mae say that being different is a useful thing, but Connor’s father says that being different makes life more difficult. Debate who is right. Discuss whether both can be true.
9. At the village council meeting, Willodeen compares the relationship between people and nature to knitting a sweater, and that if you pull one string too hard, the whole thing starts unraveling. What does she mean by this metaphor? Discuss how the actions of humans have impacted the environment throughout history.
10. How does Willodeen change from the beginning of the story to the end? Explain how her perspective on friendship and family changes. Debate whether the fire acts as a catalyst for her character development.

VOCABULARY

The vocabulary isn't difficult, but readers should be encouraged to jot down unfamiliar word and try to define them by taking clues from context. Such words may include demented (p. 6), caterwaul (p. 11), confounded (p. 12), infuriated (p. 30), fledging (p. 37), cowered (p. 49), fickle, beholden (p. 66), cynical (p. 82), jaded (p. 82), logic (p. 114), porous (p. 198), and invincible (p. 236).

ACTIVITIES

CREATE ART WITH NATURAL OBJECTS

Sketch a picture of a hummingbird and a screecher. Bring to class at least five items collected from nature—twigs, bark, blades of grass, stones, etc. Use your sketch as a reference and create a puzzler like Connor makes and sells to tourists.

BEAUTY OF LANGUAGE

The author is noted for using figurative language to create certain images in the minds of readers. Review the definition of simile, personification, and metaphor. Identify personification and simile in following sentence: "The moon, after all, still smiles from time to time, and the world still spins like a dancer through the skies." Explain the imagery. Then find other examples of figurative language in the novel.

CONNECT WITH NATURE

Willodeen records what she sees in nature in a notebook. How does keeping a record of observations create a connection between the observer and what they see? Select one of the virtual nature walks on the following website: <https://northbranchnaturecenter.org/online/naturewalks/>. Write a paragraph about what you see along the walk, and include a sketch.

PROTECTION OF ENDANGERED SPECIES

Visit the following website: <https://www.fws.gov/program/endangered-species>. Study the list of endangered species and select one to study. How are endangered animals tracked? What is the greatest threat to the species? Identify ways the government is trying to protect them. Share your findings in class.

IMPORTANCE OF LAWS

Sir Zurt, an old screecher, is killed by men with bows and arrows. Explore hunting laws in your state. Why are the laws important? Write an editorial for a local newspaper about the hunting laws and the consequences if the laws aren't followed.

EXTENSION ACTIVITY

ENVIRONMENTALISM

Discuss the following quote: "The earth is old and we are not, and that is all you must remember." How does the quote speak to responsibility and respect for the environment? Consider environmental conditions in your town or city. Write a one-page paper that discusses what you can do to protect the environment in your area.

★ **"Applegate's gentle yet honest take mixes magic with very real environmental messaging."** —*Booklist*, starred review

"Applegate's latest fantasy is a simple but beautiful story about humans' relationship with the natural world." —*School Library Journal*

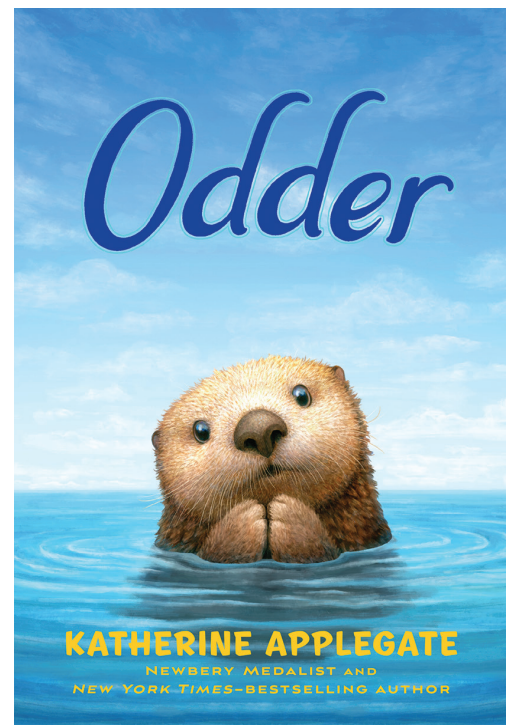


Odder

Odder is very young when she is separated from her mother, Ondine, during a storm and left to fend for herself in the deep dark waters off the coast of central California. She spends her days practicing underwater acrobatics and spinning the quirky stories for which she's known. She's a fearless daredevil, curious to a fault. But when Odder comes face-to-face with a hungry great white shark, her life takes a dramatic turn, one that challenges everything she believes about herself—and about the humans who hope to save her. These humans are at the Monterey Bay Aquarium, where sea creatures are healed and slowly rehabilitated before they are released to their natural habitat. Written in free verse, the story reveals Odder's charm, bravery, and resilience.

PRE-READING ACTIVITY

Instruct readers to visit the Monterey Bay Aquarium website (montereybayaquarium.org) and watch the sea otter cam for three days. Observe the sea otters as a scientist would, by taking notes and later comparing their observations with those of other students. As a class, make a list of the various observations.



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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Explain the structure of the book. What is the importance of each part? Discuss the title of each part, and its significance to the story. Why is part 1 titled “The Queen of Play”?
2. Odder is “otter #156.” Discuss why scientists label the sea creatures with numbers rather than names. How did Odder get her name? Why is it important to the story that she have a name? Explain how her name fits her personality.
3. Describe the nurturing nature of a sea otter mother. Explain the following simile: “clutching her newborn, like a pillow with a heartbeat.” (p. 86) What is the role of otter fathers? Discuss the meaning of the following: “otter fathers aren’t exactly Parent of the Year material.”
4. How do otter mothers teach their young what to fear? Explain why Ondine wonders if Odder is listening. How does “not listening” get Odder in trouble?
5. Define “free spirit.” What is the difference between a free spirit and a troublemaker? In what way is Odder a free spirit? Debate whether she is also a troublemaker. How does this make her an interesting character? Explain how her free spirit nature gets her in trouble.
6. Trace Odder’s development. Reread “Milestone.” (p.142) What are the “driving lessons”? Discuss Odder’s first attempt at “driving.” Where does it take place? What is the outcome?
7. Why do the otters call the aquarium Highwater? Discuss why the aquarium is described as “almost ocean, almost real.” (p. 73) Discuss the mission of the aquarium.
8. Who is Kairi? Why would Odder’s mother have liked Kairi? What advice did both Kairi and Ondine give Odder? Discuss why Odder ignores their advice. Discuss the time Odder is reunited with Kairi at Highwater. What do she and “the little pup” add to the story?
9. Contrast the two times that Odder is a resident of the aquarium. How does the staff rescue Odder and rehabilitate her? Describe the process of getting Odder ready to return to the sea. Describe Odder’s panic about being sent back to the ocean. What do the humans do to calm her?
10. Discuss Odder’s transformation to Jazz. Explain how her personality changes when her name changes. Debate whether the name change is about Odder’s rehabilitation.

VOCABULARY

The vocabulary isn't difficult, but readers should be encouraged to jot down unfamiliar words and attempt to define them taking clues from context. Such words may include retreats (p. 5), dorsal (p. 6), succulent (p. 21), photogenic (p. 27), submerges (p. 32), sinuous (p. 48), salvation (p. 62), inquisitive (p. 66), prognosis (p. 75), buoyant (p. 85), vanity (p. 91), decipher (p. 125), and prodigy (p. 178).

ACTIVITIES

ROLE OF ILLUSTRATION

What do the illustrations add to the overall novel in terms of information and emotion? Select one illustration and write a one-page paper that explains how it helps shape your understanding of the text.

CONNECTION WITH CHARACTER

Readers should think about Odder, her character, and her adventures. Address questions like: What emotions did her story bring up? What are the strongest images? Then write a short poem about Odder, similar in style to the author's free verse. Include figurative language such as similes, metaphors, and personification. Read your poem aloud in class.

EXPLORATION OF SEA LIFE

Make a list of facts learned about otters and other sea creatures from the novel. Use resources in the library or sites on the Internet to verify the facts. Make five trading cards, one of the otter and four of other sea creatures. Include an illustration on the front of the card and a paragraph on the back about one important fact.

EXAMINATION OF A SPECIES

Reread the poem "keystones." Read about keystone species on the [National Geographic](#) website. Then, working in pairs, choose a keystone species to learn more about. Present your findings to your classmates, describing the species and what makes it important.

CRIME IN THE SEA

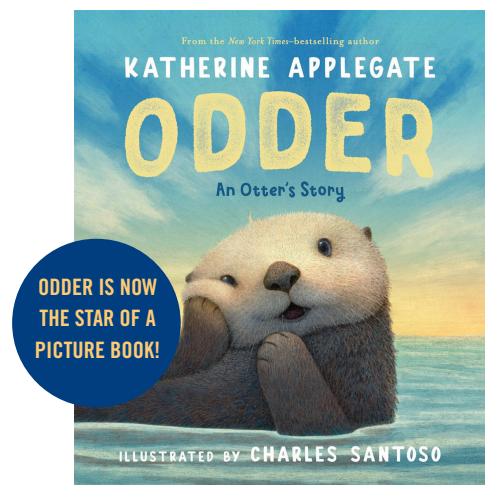
Define "poaching." Take information about the poaching of sea otters from the novel and the [Poaching Facts](#) website. Then locate laws in the United States that protect sea otters. Make a "Wanted Poachers" sign. Include the punishment for poachers.

EXTENSION ACTIVITY: RESILIENCE

Define resilience. Imagine you could speak to Odder, and ask her how she learned to thrive during adversity. Write a paragraph about her answer.

★ "A stunning study of a remarkable and resilient sea creature." —*Booklist*, starred review

★ "Written in exquisitely descriptive free verse, Applegate delivers an uplifting tale."
—*Publishers Weekly*, starred review



Wishtree

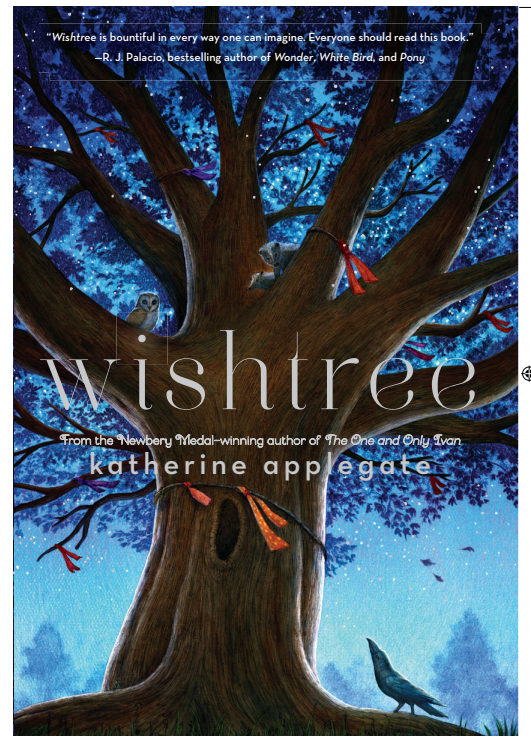
Set in an unnamed American town, the story is narrated by a 216-year-old dioecious oak tree called Red, known by locals as the “wishtree.” The tradition of writing a wish on a piece of cloth and tying it to the branches of a tree was first brought to the town in 1848 by Maeve, a young Irish girl. Now, every year on May 1, the town celebrates Wishing Day when people parade to Red and carefully tie their wishes on branches. But darkness casts shadows on the town when someone targets a Muslim family by carving “LEAVE” into the bark of Red. In addition to the prejudice and bigotry that engulfs the town, there is a local effort to cut down Red. Samar, Stephen, a crow named Bongo, and other animals who seek refuge in Red’s hollows set out to heal the wounds caused by such hatred, and to save the tree that has been home to so many creatures and wishes.

PRE-READING ACTIVITY

Read the poem “Be Different to Trees” that is printed at the beginning of the book. Discuss the meaning of the poem. Who is the speaker? Write a paragraph that explains why you think the author includes the poem at the beginning of the book.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Discuss Red’s comment: “Making others feel safe is a fine way to spend your days.” How does Red make others feel safe? Name those whom Red protects.
2. Describe Samar. Explain her relationship with the animals that make their home in and around Red. What makes them trust her? Why is it difficult for Samar to make friends with other children at school and in the neighborhood?
3. Red compares the neighborhood to a garden, “wild and tangled and colorful.” (p. 54). In what ways are the people in the neighborhood “wild”? How are they “tangled”? Explain how some folks in the neighborhood want everyone to be alike. How do these people see “colorful” as a blight on the town?
4. Describe the boy who carves “LEAVE” into the bark of Red. What does the author tell you about him and what assumptions can you make about him? Why do you think he would carve that word? How does this act affect Red, Bongo, and Samar and her family? What effect does it have on Francesca? Explain the reaction of the police when they come to investigate.
5. Why does Francesca want to cut the tree down? What do the police officers, Max and Sandy, think about her reasons? Discuss Max’s wish and what it means.
6. What personality traits do the tree and Samar have in common? How do these traits help them both cope with the changes in their lives?
7. Explain what Red means, “I wanted to tell them that friendship doesn’t have to be hard. Sometimes we let the world make it hard.” (p. 126). Describe the friendship between Red and Bongo. How are their differences their strengths?
8. Why does Red decide to speak to the children? How does this act change their relationship to the tree and to each other? Discuss why Red doesn’t speak to Francesca.
9. What motivates Stephen to make a difference in the neighborhood on Wishing Day? Discuss the message the children in the school deliver with their wishes. What makes Francesca change her mind about coming down from the tree?
10. Discuss Red’s statement, “I wanted to make a difference, just a little difference, before I left this lovely world.” (p. 126) What difference does Red make by talking to Stephen and Samar? Explain Stephen’s comment, “My parents aren’t bad people. They’re just . . . afraid of things.” (p. 125). Analyze Samar’s response. What might both sets of parents learn from their children?



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VOCABULARY

The vocabulary isn't difficult, but readers should be encouraged to jot down unfamiliar words and try to define them taking clues from context. Such words may include introverts (p. 3), discreet (p. 13), dioecious (p. 17), monoecious (p. 18), motivated (p. 110), anchored (p. 129), righteous (p. 144), indignation (p. 144), and laden (p. 188).

ACTIVITIES

WISHES THROUGH ART

Readers should collect natural materials—branches, twigs, vines, etc.—from around the neighborhood and create a class wishtree. Talk about the many ways in which wishes can come true and the ways in which wishes can be “grand and goofy, selfish and sweet.” (p. 12) Then each person should attach an unsigned wish to the tree and write a paragraph about that wish and why it is important to them. Read aloud the wishes and classify them by topic. How many different categories are there?

WISHING TREES IN OTHER CULTURES

Research cultures widely known for the practice of “wishing trees.” How do wishing trees vary by culture? For example: How are wishing trees in Japan different from those in Ireland? How are wishing trees in China similar to those of Native cultures in the United States? Select two cultures and write a paper that reveals similarities and differences in their wishing trees. Include a paragraph that discusses whether the cultures celebrate a Wishing Day.

IMMIGRATION THROUGH TIME

Red has witnessed many changes in their 216-year history in the neighborhood. Use clues like foods and customs that Red notes and make a list of the different nationalities that have lived there. How has the neighborhood changed throughout time? Write a short story titled “What Maeve Brought” or “What Samar Brought.”

STRENGTH OF COMMUNITY

Brainstorm characteristics of a community or a neighborhood. What is the major difference? Write a short paper titled “When Samar’s Neighborhood Becomes a Community.” Use direct quotes or cite specific scenes from the book to support your thoughts.

POWER OF NAMES

Discuss the reasons that Red gives for each of the animals choosing their individual names—raccoons, opossums, owls, squirrels, skunks, and crows. How does the choice of name reflect the characteristics of each animal as Red describes them? Look up the collective nouns that are used for each animal group and make a chart of the animals, their habitats and habits, and the names they are called as a group.

EXTENSION ACTIVITY: EMPATHY

Empathy is the ability to understand and share another person’s feelings. How does a person develop empathy? Define “prejudice” and “bigotry.” What is the relationship between the two? In what ways might prejudices and bigotry be destroyed through empathy? As a group, make an annotated list of fiction that deals with empathy. This should include books about other cultures, races, religions, and those with different life experiences. Post the list on the school’s website.

★ **“Timely, necessary, and brimming with heart.”** —*Booklist*, starred review

★ **“A beautifully written, morally bracing story that will leave its imprint on a reader of any age.”** —*The New York Times Book Review*



KATHERINE APPLIGATE AUTHOR STUDY

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS AND ACTIVITIES THAT LOOK AT THE COMMON THEMES ACROSS THE FOUR NOVELS

1. Home is a theme in all four books: Jackson in *Crenshaw* struggles with his family being unhoused; Willodeen has trouble calling Bertie and Mae's cottage home; Odder is forced to leave her home in the sea after a shark attack; and Samar in *Wishtree* is threatened when local bullies tell her Muslim family to leave their home. Write a poem, in any style, titled "Home" from the point of view of each of these characters.
2. Teamwork is another common theme in Applegate's work. Discuss what teamwork means to Jackson, Willodeen, Odder, and Samar in reaching a resolution to their problem. Identify the team members in each book.
3. Jackson has a friend, but struggles to tell her about his family problems. Willodeen and Samar don't really have a friend at the beginning of their stories. Identify Odder's friend. How might each of these characters describe their new friend. Select one character and write a short essay titled "My Friend" from that character's point of view.
4. Community is another underlying theme in the books. Discuss whether Jackson feels a sense of community in *Crenshaw*. How might his feelings regarding community change by the end of the book? What does Willodeen learn about community from Connor Burke? Talk about Odder's community in the sea and then in the aquarium. Describe the community that surrounds Red in *Wishtree*. Who is the community that saves Red? Divide students into groups and ask them to have a conversation between each of the main characters about the meaning of community to them.
5. There are environmental issues in each of Applegate's novels. Ask students to discuss what is learned about the environment and nature from each of the novels. What does it mean to be an activist? How might every citizen learn to be an activist to help people like Jackson's family. Explain how Willodeen learns to be an activist. How does activism save both Odder and Red? Select two main characters and exchange letters that explains what activism means to them.

A LETTER TO THE AUTHOR

Readers like to write letters to authors, and some may even have the opportunity to meet them. The best way to tell a writer that you like their work is to ask thoughtful questions that let her know you have read her books. Write a question about one of Applegate's novels that demonstrates that you have really connected with the book. Maybe it's a question about the plot, or one that shows your interest in one of the characters. Then write two sentences to explain why this question sparks your curiosity.

A CONVERSATION WITH THE AUTHOR

Tell us about your childhood and what you were like growing up.

I was born in Michigan, which means I know how to make a truly impressive snowperson. I'm the oldest of four siblings; I have a brother and two sisters. For as long as I can remember, I've loved animals. We had lots of dogs and cats over the years. and for a while I was the go-to purveyor of gerbils in East Grand Rapids, Michigan.

We moved around a bit, and I graduated from a high school near Houston, Texas. I think those moves gave me an appreciation for what it feels like to be the new kid, a theme that I've touched on in books like *Home of the Brave*, *Wishtree*, and *Pocket Bear*.

I always tell readers that it took me a while to fall in love with books. I have a daughter with dyslexia, which can make reading a challenge until you find teachers who can help you. But my problem was simpler: I just didn't see the point in reading.

Then my third-grade teacher, Mrs. Gray, read *Charlotte's Web* to my class, and everything changed. Here was a book that explored the hearts of animals! I was hooked. So hooked that even after so much time, I reread *Charlotte's Web* almost every year.

I like to remind kids, especially kids like me, that a “best friend” book is out there waiting for them. Sometimes it takes work to find it, but that’s why we have teachers and media specialists and librarians and parents and booksellers. Hang in there. Once you find that book, your world will be forever changed.

You have said that Charlotte’s Web turned you into a reader. What were some of the books that followed, especially those that also became beloved by you?

My favorite picture book, one that predated my *Charlotte’s Web* love, was *The House on East 88th Street*, by Bernard Waber. It was about a crocodile named Lyle who lives with the lovely, if eccentric, Primm family. I’m sure I made my mother read that particular book to me about 100,000 times. (Maybe I longed for a pet crocodile?)

That’s the way it is with books. Sometimes they just hook you and never let go.

Later, I fell in love with *The Hobbit*, *Stuart Little*, *The Borrowers*, *The Cricket in Times Square*, *From the Mixed-up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler*, *Harriet the Spy*, and many, many others.

Your novels have recurring themes of community, empathy, resilience, and the environment. Are you conscious of these themes as you come up with story ideas and develop them? Are you drawn to other books with these themes?

Always, when you’re writing, you start with the story, with characters you want to root for and plots that grab you. But as a story reveals itself to a writer (that’s how it often feels, anyway), an author’s heart reveals itself in the storytelling.

I come back again and again to the same themes because those are the things that most matter to me. What is our responsibility to our community? To our precious planet? How do we find hope on dark days?

I write to help myself understand this big, messy world of ours. And my characters walk me through the possibilities.

What is the most memorable response you’ve received for one of your books from a young reader?

I was on a book tour for *Odder* not long ago, and during a talk to a group of student writers, I told them how our “inner editor” never really leaves: You just have to put her in time-out when you’re writing your first drafts.

A young boy came up to me afterward with a Post-it note he wanted me to keep for those days when I was having a tough time with work. On it he’d written: “to kathrine applegate for writeing the best autur. And if your having truble, read this.”

Moments like that are simply the best part of writing.

What is something unique about your writing process?

Well, of course, writers can discuss for days which paper and writing implements are the best (in case you’re wondering: college-ruled hardback pads and SharpWriter mechanical pencils). But most of the time, I’m working on a laptop (Mac) at a desk.

My family laughs at me because each time I finish a book, I move my “office” to a new location. In our current place, that just might mean relocating from one corner of the living room to a spot in the kitchen. But somehow, the change signals to my brain that it’s time to start anew.

What is your top piece of advice for aspiring young writers?

Embrace your “weird”! Cherish the part of yourself that’s unique. The part that sees the world differently. The part that knows what’s wrong with the world and longs for change.

We creators are all a bit weird—and I say that in the most affectionate way possible. That’s the reason we create.

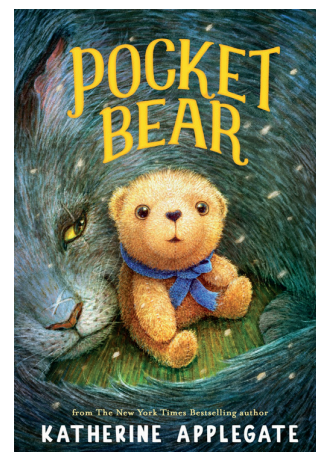


Give us a teaser of your new middle-grade novel, Pocket Bear.

Pocket Bear is the story of an unlikely friendship between a streetwise cat named Zephyrina and her dearest friend, a tiny stuffed bear. Pocket was a World War I-era “mascot bear” designed to fit into the pocket of a soldier’s jacket. His eyes were sewn a bit higher than normal so that he would always gaze upward. That way, glancing at his pocket, a soldier would see an endearing token of love from someone back home and, hopefully, a good luck charm.

Now, more than a century later, Pocket is serving as unofficial mayor of Second Chances Home for the Tossed and Treasured, where stuffed toy animals are refurbished and given a fresh opportunity to be loved. When an old bear—perhaps so rare that he’s worth a fortune—is discovered by Zephyrina, she and Pocket must help decide what happens next, both to Second Chances and to the humans they love.

Writing from the point of view of a cat, especially one as sassy as Zephyrina, was great fun. And so was the research into the history of stuffed toy bears. But most of all, I loved creating a cozy world of unlikely friendships. It was hard indeed to say goodbye to Zeph and Pocket and all their pals!



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