



Discussion Guide

The Floating Circus by Tracie Vaughn Zimmer

Pre-reading:

As a class, brainstorm a list of words associated with a circus. Then, see if you can classify these words in a few different ways (for example: nouns, verbs, people, etc.)

Discussion Guide:

1. Describe Owen Burke. Is he a person you'd like to make friends with? How does he change while on the boat? What is the most important thing he learns about himself and the world?
2. Why does Owen decide to leave his brother on the orphan train? Would you be willing to make such a sacrifice? Do you think he's making the right choice?
3. Explain how Owen ends up on the River Palace. Do you consider this a lucky or unlucky turn of events? Would you want to work on the River Palace? Why or why not?
4. Compare life on the River Palace with Owen's life in the orphanage. How are they different? How are they similar? If you had to choose between them which would you pick? Why?
5. Solomon says about orphans, "Even a slave is worth more." What does he mean by this? Do you agree? How does Solomon help Owen to see things differently? Are there still groups of people today (like orphans and slaves in Owen's time) who are treated as less important? Why or why not?
6. Owen says, "Slavery just was. I hadn't questioned it any more than I'd questioned why leather was brown." Why hadn't Owen ever questioned the institution of slavery before meeting Solomon? How do his views on it change over the course of the novel? Is it possible that we accept things in our own world now that should be questioned? What kind of things?
7. What would you most like to see on the River Palace? Which job would you most like to have? Least like to have? Do you think a River Palace would be popular today? How was it special for that

time?

8. Explain how Owen comes to know and care for the elephant, Little Bet. Would you want the responsibility of caring for such an enormous animal? What would be the most interesting aspect of it? What would be the most difficult?
9. Discuss which of the literary elements you find most interesting in the novel—the unique setting, Owen’s character or conflicts, or maybe the events themselves? Which of the five elements (character, plot, setting, conflict, theme) is most important for you as a reader? Do you think this relates directly to the kinds of books you most like to read? Why?
10. Owen makes a difficult decision at the end of the novel. Would you have made the same choice? Is sacrifice a natural consequence of growing up?

Projects:

Language Arts—

Write letters from Owen to Zachary as you read the novel, summarizing what Owen is experiencing and feeling as he goes on his adventure.

Reading—

Solomon desperately wants to learn how to read. Unfortunately, many adults today are illiterate like Solomon. Research the programs available in your area for literacy, and then hold a fundraiser to support this important cause.

History—

Create a timeline of the five years before the novel and five years after, and list ten major events in the decade. Find at least two facts about each event, and include that information on the timeline. In a short essay, explain why this period is such a pivotal moment in American history.

In small groups, research one of the following topics from the novel and present the information to the entire class. Use at least three different resources for your information, only one of which can be from the Internet.

The Fugitive Slave Act

The Mason-Dixon Line

Yellow fever

Orphan trains

History of the circus

Historical treatment of people with disabilities or differences

Mississippi River

Slavery

Underground Railroad

Art—

Design one of the sets for the movie adaptation of the novel. Use photography, computer design programs, or any media that helps you best depict your vision of the scene. In a brief paragraph, explain why you made the choices you did concerning color, lighting, and architectural elements.