

# *The Tale of Despereaux*

by Kate DiCamillo

When Despereaux Tilling, a mouse in love with color, music, stories, and a princess named Pea, learns of an evil plot against his princess, he must enter a terrible dungeon filled with rats in order to rescue her.

## **THEMES**

fantasy, animals, love, the arts, evil vs. good, problem-solving, responsibility, courage

Young Listener Unabridged Audio

## **I. PRE-TEACHING**

### **A. Have the class define and discuss these terms:**

indignant, adhere, elemental, captivating, tribunal, indisputable, fervent, perfidy, egregious, ominous, abyss, implications, beleaguered, ironies, treacherous, inexplicably, domain, despicable, astute, solace, ornate, spectacle, palate, capacious, unsavory, dire, dusk, innumerable, dour, permeated, olfactory, stench, discernible, borne, pronouncement, portentous, tortuous, ascertaining, aspirations, covert, comeuppance, dappled, empathetic, cascading, beatific, gusto, gnarled, thwarted, infringe, coda

### **B. Before beginning the story, discuss the following questions with the class:**

1. Do you enjoy fantasy stories featuring animals like mice? What's fun about these stories?
2. Do you like fairy tales? How do fairy tales end? What would happen if a fairy tales didn't end happily?
3. What does it mean to be brave?
4. What do you consider to be beautiful? How would you feel if you could no longer enjoy beautiful things?
5. Why is darkness something to be feared?

## **II. PRESENTATION**

### **A. Understanding the Story:**

1. Begin with Book The First, "A Mouse Is Born": What is strange about Despereaux when he is born? How do his parents and siblings feel about him? What happens when his brother Furlough takes him to the library? What happens to Despereaux when he sees Princess Pea? What mice rules does he break? What do the other mice decide must be done? How does Despereaux respond to the Council's accusations? What do they say will happen to him in the dungeon? What is ironic about Gregory being in the dungeon? Why does Gregory decide to save Despereaux?
2. Advance to Book The Second, "Chiaroscuro" and Book The Third, "Gor! The Tale of Miggery Sow": What does *chiaroscuro* mean? What does Roscuro think is the meaning of life? What does Botticelli say it is? Why has the new prisoner been sent to the dungeon? What real

crime has he committed? Where does Roscuro go? What happens when Pea sees him? What happens to the queen? Why are all the spoons, bowls, and pots taken to the dungeon? Describe Miggery Sow's life. What does she see that changes her life? Why do the soldiers take her to the castle? Why isn't she a good servant? Why isn't she afraid in the dungeon? Why can she hear Roscuro?

3. Complete the story with Book The Fourth, "Recalled to the Light": What happens to Despereaux when he gets to the kitchen? What happens to Gregory? What is Roscuro's plan for Princess Pea? What does Despereaux hear in the kitchen when he wakes up? What must he do? What happens at the Mouse Council meeting? Why does Despereaux forgive his father? How does the king react to Despereaux? What makes Despereaux's task difficult? How does Cook react when she sees him? What happens as Despereaux enters the dungeon? How does Botticelli offer to help? What happens when Roscuro won't give Mig what she wants? How does he react when he smells the soup on Despereaux? How does Princess Pea save Roscuro? What happens to each of the others?

### **B. For Discussion:**

1. How is Despereaux different from other mice? How does this lead him into trouble? How does it make him a hero?
2. In what ways does the story end "happily ever after"? What doesn't end happily? Is there such a thing as "happily every after"?
3. In what ways are Roscuro and Despereaux alike?
4. What does the red thread and red cloth symbolize? What does soup symbolize? Light and darkness? What other symbols can you find?
5. Why do you think the author calls love, hope, and forgiveness "ridiculous"?

## **III. EXTENDING THE LESSON**

Give students the opportunity to work with partners, groups, the whole class, or alone.

## **INTERDISCIPLINARY CONNECTIONS:**

### **A. Language Arts:**

1. Have students read fairy tales about knights in armor and fair maidens, and compare the elements in these stories with *The Tale of Despereaux*.
2. The author takes special care to point out the meaning of certain words, like *farewell*, *perfidy*, and *empathetic*. Have students look up these words and discuss their meanings. Why is *farewell* sadder than *goodbye*? Why is *perfidy* the perfect word for what Furlough does? How is *empathetic* different from *sympathetic*?
3. Have students go somewhere relatively quiet and write down all the sounds they hear. Why do we seldom notice quieter sounds?
4. Have students write a story about one of the adventures Princess Pea and Despereaux have together.

### **B. Art and Music:**

1. Have students select background music that is appropriate to some of the scenes. They could use lute or guitar music for the castle setting, the song "Deep Purple" for the music the king plays, drumming for when Despereaux's father calls the Council together, "The Impossible Dream" from *Man of La Mancha* for when Despereaux heads off to the dungeon to rescue the princess, and "Soup, Beautiful Soup" from *Oliver!* for whenever soup is mentioned.
2. Have students make a bulletin board about the story. They could draw a cross-section of a castle, showing the banquet hall, Princess Pea's room, the stained glass windows, the kitchen, and the dungeon. They could draw tiny mice and larger rats in the halls and between the walls, then add a spool of red thread, spoons and pictures of pots, bowls, and ladles, a needle, and other items mentioned in the story.
3. Have students make or collect sun-catchers that contain stained glass of different colors, hang them in the sun and notice the colors on the walls and floor.

### **C. Social Studies:**

1. Despereaux is condemned by a tribunal. Have students learn about different ways people are brought to justice. In what ways is our own system more fair than others? In what ways might it be improved?

2. Have students learn how drums have been used to communicate in early civilizations, such as in African or Native American tribes.
3. Have students learn about rats in history. What devastating event was caused by rats?
4. Botticelli considers making the prisoners suffer to be his main duty. Have students learn about the torturing of prisoners in history and today. What laws are in place to prevent this? Why does torture still happen?
5. Have students learn about famous tapestries. Why did people make tapestries? What history is told in them?

### **D. Science and Math:**

1. Have students find out why rodents, kittens, and other animals are born with their eyes closed. What animals are born with their eyes open?
2. When they first meet, Despereaux feels Princess Pea's pulse. Have students learn to take their own or a classmate's pulse and find out why doctors take our pulse when we visit them. What does taking the pulse indicate?
3. Have students find out about rodents. How are mice and rats related? What are some other rodents?
4. Mig can't smell the stench of the dungeon because her olfactory senses have been dulled by her beatings. Have students learn what organs we use for smell. How does a stuffy nose affect our sense of smell?

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