



TEACHER NOTES

Teacher Notes by Kellee Moye

WALKER BOOKS

Ferris

KATE DiCAMILLO

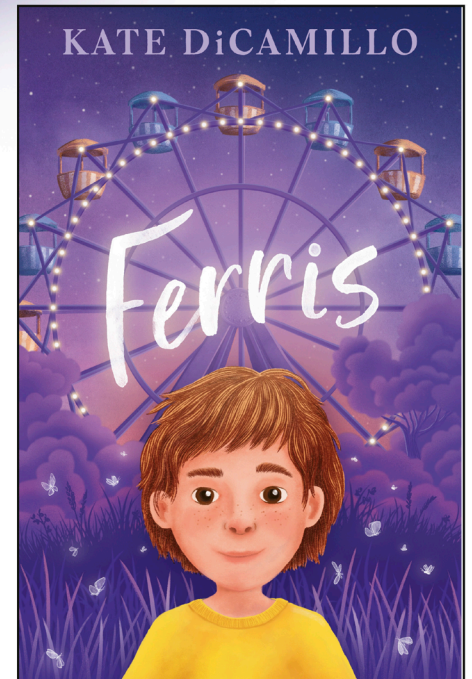
About the Book

It's the summer before fifth grade, and for Ferris Wilkey, it is a summer of sheer pandemonium: Her little sister, Pinky, has vowed to become an outlaw. Uncle Ted has left Aunt Shirley and, to Ferris's mother's chagrin, is holed up in the Wilkey basement to paint a history of the world. And Charisse, Ferris's grandmother, has started seeing a ghost at the threshold of her room, which seems like an alarming omen given that she is also feeling unwell. But the ghost is not there to usher Charisse to the Great Beyond. Rather, she has other plans—wild, impractical, illuminating plans. How can Ferris satisfy a specter with Pinky terrorizing the town, Uncle Ted sending Ferris to spy on her aunt, and her father battling an invasion of raccoons?

As Charisse likes to say, "Every good story is a love story," and Kate DiCamillo has written one for the ages: emotionally resonant and healing, showing the two-time Newbery Medalist at her most playful, universal, and profound.

Common Core Connections

This discussion guide, which can be used with large or small groups, will help students meet several of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) for English Language Arts. These include the reading literature standards for key ideas and details, craft and structure, and range of reading and level of text complexity (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL), as well as the speaking and listening standards for comprehension and collaboration and for presentation of knowledge and ideas (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL). Questions can also be used in writing prompts for independent work.



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Anchor Standards Addressed in This Guide

READING

Key Ideas and Details

1. Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.
2. Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas.
3. Analyze how and why individuals, events, and ideas develop and interact over the course of a text.

Craft and Structure

4. Interpret words and phrases as they are used in a text, including determining technical, connotative, and figurative meanings, and analyze how specific word choices shape meaning or tone.

Range of Reading and Level of Text Complexity

10. Read and comprehend complex literary and informational texts independently and proficiently.

SPEAKING AND LISTENING

Comprehension and Collaboration

1. Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

Presentation of Knowledge and Ideas

4. Present information, findings, and supporting evidence such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning and the organization, development, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.

Discussion Questions

1. Kate DiCamillo uses personification and simile throughout the book (find examples on pages 11 and 18). How do personification and simile add to the imagery of the story?

EXTENSION ACTIVITY: Have students choose a passage where Kate DiCamillo uses figurative language and create two drawings: one showing what the author literally says and one showing what the author figuratively says.

2. Ferris reads the Bible and Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* to Charisse. Ferris's father likes to read the encyclopedia, and he even read it to Ferris when she was a baby. What is your favorite book to have read to you? Why?
3. Kate DiCamillo writes, "Ten seemed like the age when Ferris might start to understand some things" (page 8). Why do you think Ferris believes ten is a turning point in understanding the world? At what age do you think one starts to understand the world better? Why?
4. One of Ferris's criticisms of her mother is that she is not great at reassurance (page 13); however, her mother often is just telling the truth of the situation. Would you prefer an adult to share the truth bluntly or to offer reassurance even if it means leaving out some of the truth? Why?
5. Shirley and Twilla want Ferris to have her hair cut "like a proper young lady" (page 22). Who defines what is proper and right? Is there any one way that a person should look or be?
6. Billy Jackson is pursuing his passion for music. What is your current passion? What do you hope to do with it in the future?
7. Ferris's father's saying "the dogs bark but the caravan passes by" (page 42) doesn't have a clear meaning, but he loves to say it. What do you think it means? Do any adults in your life have a saying that they use all the time? What is it and what does it mean?
8. On page 65, Ferris's mother wonders, "Why do I have the feeling that this is the calm before the storm?" What does this idiom mean? Do you think she was correct? What ended up being "the storm"?
9. In addition to loving vocabulary, Mrs. Mielk "insisted that being a good speller was the way to let people know your writing was trustworthy, that *you* were trustworthy" (pages 73–74). Do you think that spelling reflects trustworthiness? Do you think spelling is just as important as vocabulary? Why or why not?
10. Pinky and Ferris are very different. Charisse points this out when she calls Ferris a rule follower and advises her to tell the world who she is, noting, "Pinky understands this. She takes it to an extreme, of course." We can see the problems with Pinky's choices throughout the book, but Ferris's mom says that "being a rule follower carries its own set of problems" (page 77). What do you think that means?

FOLLOW-UP: On page 78, Ferris's mother starts a sentence but doesn't finish it. What do you think she was going to say?

11. Mr. Munson says that "the world knocks the stuffing out of piano players" (page 81). What do you think he means by this? What other careers may also have it tough in this world? Why do you think that is?

12. The smell of Florida water automatically makes Ferris think of Charisse. Is there a smell in your life that makes you think of a person, place, time, or thing?
13. Ferris listens to the sounds around her at nighttime (page 8), and Billy Jackson once told her that “everything in the whole world” makes music (page 122). What music do you hear in the world? Use figurative language, such as similes and metaphors, to describe the sounds, just like Kate DiCamillo would.
14. Mrs. Mielk is very fond of collective nouns (page 142), so Ferris learned quite a few of them. Look up some collective nouns, specifically those for animals. Which one is your favorite? Why?
15. What do Ferris’s interactions with the bees and the raccoon show you about facing adversity in the world?
16. On page 166, the author writes that Ferris felt “homesick even though she was already home.” What does that mean? How can that be?
17. Mrs. Mielk has obviously changed Ferris’s and Billy’s lives; she is even described as remarkable (page 172). Who is someone remarkable in your life who has changed you?
18. How did the mood in the dining room change (in chapters 27–29) once the chandelier was lit? How would you describe the mood before? After?
19. How do you think Ferris knew where to find Pinky?
20. What does Ferris’s mom mean, metaphorically and literally, when she says that the Wilkeys would “never pass up a ride of any sort” (page 213)?
21. Using all the clues from within the book, what time period do you believe the story takes place in?
22. Each of the main characters is described succinctly by the author.
 - Boomer is described as having “a gentle soul” (page 4). What characteristics does Boomer have that fit this description? How else would you describe him?
 - Charisse is described as a romantic (page 6). What characteristics does Charisse have that fit this description? How else would you describe her?
 - Ferris’s mom is described as practical and pragmatic (page 7). What characteristics does she have that fit this description? How else would you describe her?
 - Pinky is described as monomaniacal (page 28). What characteristics does she have that fit this description? How else would you describe her?
 - Ferris’s dad is described as mild-mannered (page 29). What characteristics does he have that fit this description? How else would you describe him?
 - Shirley is described as formidable (page 63). What characteristics does she have that fit this description? How else would you describe her?
 - What words would you use to describe Billy Jackson? Big Billy? Mrs. Mielk? Mr. Buoy? Ted? Twilla?

23. Charisse says that “every *good* story is a love story” (page 6). Do you agree or disagree?

FOLLOW-UP: Do you think she means romantic love only, or is her meaning of love broader? Do you think *Ferris* is a love story?

24. Mrs. Mielk believes that “vocabulary is the key to the kingdom” (page 20), and many different vocabulary words and definitions appear in the book. Which words were your favorite? Why?

EXTENSION ACTIVITY: Have students complete a Frayer Model graphic organizer for their favorite words from *Ferris*.

25. There are six characters on the front cover. Who do you think they are? Which characters were left off? Do you agree with the illustrator’s choice of who to represent on the cover?

26. Words are very important to Ferris, and she always tries to find the best one. What word would you use to describe a story like *Ferris*? Why did you choose that word?

About Kate DiCamillo

Kate DiCamillo is one of America’s most beloved storytellers. She is a former National Ambassador for Young People’s Literature and a two-time Newbery Medalist. Born in Philadelphia, she grew up in Florida and now lives in Minneapolis.



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These questions were prepared by Kellee Moye, a middle school librarian in Orlando, Florida. She is the author of various teaching guides for all levels, the coauthor of the blog *Unleashing Readers*, the 2024 president of the Assembly on Literature for Adolescents of NCTE (ALAN), and a member of ALAN, AASL, and ALA. She served as a 2016–2018 member of the ALAN Board of Directors, a member and then cochair of the 2020–2021 Schneider Family Award Jury, and a member and then chair of the 2012–2014 Amelia Elizabeth Walden Book Award committee.