



EDUCATOR GUIDE

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DEBORAH HOPKINSON

THE
GREAT
TROUBLE


A MYSTERY OF LONDON,
THE BLUE DEATH,
AND A BOY CALLED EEL



Alfred A. Knopf

RHTeachersLibrarians.com



Grades 5 up 
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ABOUT THE BOOK

Thirteen-year-old Eel is an orphan and makes his living as a “mudlark,” scavenging the Thames river for coal and anything he can sell for a few coins. His great trouble is that Fisheye Bill Tyler is on the hunt for him, and intends to find the secret that Eel is safely guarding. Survival is Eel’s game and he doesn’t plan to give up hope.

Then another great trouble hits when the cholera epidemic of 1854 strikes Eel’s Broad Street London neighborhood. Dr. John Snow, well known by important people like Queen Victoria, believes that cholera is spread through water, and not “poisonous air.” It’s up to Eel and his friend, Florrie, to help Dr. Snow gather the information he needs to prove his theory before the entire neighborhood is wiped out.

PRE-READING ACTIVITY

Ask students to write their definition of *epidemic* and share it with the class. Then lead a discussion about the difference in an epidemic and a pandemic. How can an epidemic turn into a pandemic? Divide the class into small groups and instruct them to study the following websites: the

Correlates to Common Core Standards Language: Vocabulary Acquisition & Use L. 5.4, 6.4; Reading: Informational Text: Key Ideas & Details RI. 6.3; Speaking & Listening: Presentation of Knowledge & Ideas SL. 5.4, 6.4

QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

What is the central conflict of the novel? Ask students to discuss the plot development, including rising action, climax, falling action, and the resolution. How quickly is the conflict resolved after the climax of the novel?

Describe the work of a mudlark. How is their work territorial? Jake says, “We need to play fair and take care of one another.” (p. 4) How might Jake define playing fair? How does he take care of Eel in the end?

Name the bullies in the story. Which one is the greatest threat to Eel and his well-being? Explain how Eel deals with each of them.

Eel’s situation is dismal. How does he maintain hope when things appear to be getting worse?

Eel says, “Trust was as rare on the river as finding a gold ring.” (p. 6) Discuss how a boy like Eel must learn to trust. How does Eel know that Mr. John Huggins doesn’t believe he is innocent of the theft? Explain why

World Health Organization (who.int/en) and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (cdc.gov). What is the role of each organization in managing epidemics and pandemics? What current epidemics is the greatest threat?

Eel is so surprised when Dr. Snow applies the word *trust* to his name. How does Dr. Snow know that he can trust Eel?

Discuss the relationship between responsibility and loyalty. Describe Eel’s sense of responsibility toward his brother. How does he become a responsible and loyal citizen of his Broad Street neighborhood? In what other ways does Eel demonstrate responsibility and loyalty?

Cite passages in the novel that reveal Eel’s pride in his work. How do Dr. Snow and Mr. Edward Huggins recognize Eel’s work ethic? Discuss Eel’s reaction when Dr. Snow tells him that his parents would be proud of him.

Discuss Eel and Florrie’s relationship. Why doesn’t he tell her why he needs money? How does she convince him that he can help the folks on Broad Street?

During the cholera epidemic, Eel

QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION continued

gets a job loading bodies in coffins. Explain what Eel means when he says, “Instead of looking with my eyes, I decided to see with my heart.” (p. 88) How does he see with his eyes and his heart when he helps Dr. Snow uncover the cause of the cholera epidemic?

Describe the fear that overtakes Broad Street. Why are people hesitant to believe Dr. Snow’s theory?

At what point does Eel realize that Dr. Snow is more of a scientist than a physician? What does Dr. Snow mean

when he says that the Broad Street pump is his patient?

Dr. Snow tells Dr. Farr at the General Register Office, “Eel has a well-developed sense of curiosity and is quite tenacious.” (p. 147) How does this qualify him for Dr. Snow’s assignment? Cite evidence that Dr. Snow is accurate in his assessment of Eel’s character.

Trace Eel’s courage throughout the novel. What is his most courageous act?

Correlates to Common Core Standards Reading Literature: Key Ideas & Details RL.5.1, 6.1, 5.2, 6.2, 5.3, 6.3; Craft & Structure RL. 5.4, 6.4, 5.5, 6.5, 5.6, 6.6.; Speaking & Listening SL. 5.1, 6.1. 5.3, 6.3

ACTIVITIES

Ask students to jot down unfamiliar words and try to define them by taking clues from the context. Such words may include: *motley* (p. 44), *forlorn* (p. 61), *pestilence* (p. 84), *pungent* (p. 86), *menagerie* (p. 93), *incubation* (p. 118), *devastate* (p. 112), *contamination* (p. 154), *hansom* (p. 176), *propagated* (p. 205) and *cistern* (p. 207)

Correlates to Common Core Standards Language: Vocabulary Acquisition & Use L. 5.4, 6.4.

Dr. Snow employs Eel to help him uncover the cause of cholera. How does he approach the charge systemically and with common sense? Ask students to become a disease detective by solving the case on the following website: pbs.org/wgbh/

nova/body/disease-detective.html. Then have them write a letter to the park service that discusses their conclusion and the clues they used in solving the case. Have students share their letters in class.

Correlates to Common Core Standards Writing: Text Types & Purposes W. 5.1, 6.1, 5.2, 6.2; Production & Distribution of Writing W. 5.4, 6.4.

The novel is divided into five parts. Divide the class into five groups and assign each group one part of the novel to write as a one-act play. Instruct them to enhance the dialogue to include multiple actors. Allow the groups to perform the play in class.

Correlates to Common Core Standards Writing: Production & Distribution of Writing W. 5.4, 6.4; Speaking & Listening SL. 5.4, 6.4, 5.6, 6.6.

ACTIVITIES *continued*

Ask students to use books in the library or sites on the Internet to find another epidemic that killed large numbers of people. Then have them write a paper to include in a class book called *Epidemics: Then & Now*. Have them include the causes, treatment, and cures of the disease. Who is responsible for the cure? Are there countries where the disease is prevalent today? Such diseases may include typhoid, Typhus, malaria, yellow fever, smallpox, tuberculosis, polio, and avian flu.

- Correlates to Common Core Standards Writing: Text Types & Purposes W. 5.2, 6.2; Research to Build & Present Knowledge W. 5.8, 6.8

Ask students to read a synopsis of *Oliver Twist* by Charles Dickens. Then ask them to write a brief paper that draws a parallel between Oliver and Eel. Encourage peer editing for clarity and grammar.

- Correlates to Common Core Standards Reading: Literature: Integration of Knowledge & Ideas RL. 5.9, 6.9; Writing Text Types & Purposes W. 5.1, 6.1, 5.2, 6.2 5.3, 6.3; Production & Distribution of Writing W. 5.5, 6.5.

A 2003 survey by *Hospital Doctor* magazine revealed that doctors named Dr. John Snow the “greatest doctor” of all time. Ask students to research the life and work of Dr. Snow and write a feature article on Dr. Snow for the magazine. The following website is helpful: ph.ucla.edu/epi/snow.html.

- Correlates to Common Core Standards Reading: Informational Text: Integration of Knowledge & Ideas RI. 6.7, 6.8; Writing: Research to Build & Present Knowledge W. 5.7, 6.7, 5.8, 6.8; Text Types & Purposes W. 5.2, 6.2

The World Health Organization, established in 1948 by the United Nations, has designated April 7 as World Health Day. Ask students to make an annotated bibliography of fiction and nonfiction books that deals with global health topics. Then have them locate and annotate five websites for children that communicate the importance of a healthy lifestyle. Combine the lists and post on the school’s website. Divide the class into small groups and assign them one of the following: a written introduction for the lists, a brief description of the World Health Organization and its mission, and activities for families to use in celebrating World Health Day.

- Correlates to Common Core Standards Reading Literature: Integration of Knowledge & Ideas RL. 5.9, 6.9; Writing: Production & Distribution of Writing W. 5.6, 6.6.

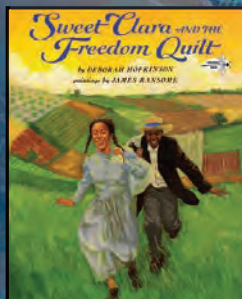
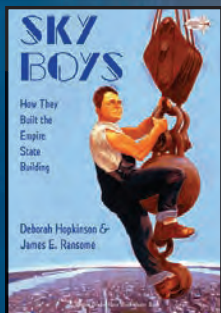
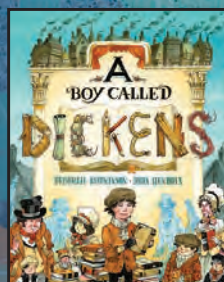
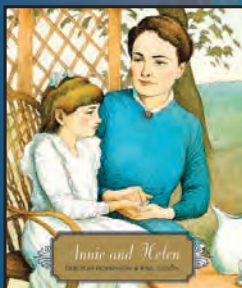
ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Photograph courtesy of the author.

DEBORAH HOPKINSON has written more than 40 books for young readers. Her picture books include *Sky Boys: How They Built the Empire State Building*, an ALA-ALSC Notable Children's Book and a *Boston Globe-Horn Book Honor Book*; *Abe Lincoln Crosses a Creek*, an ALA-ALSC Notable Children's Book and a Junior Library Guild Selection; *A Boy Called Dickens*; and the ALA Notable Book *Apples to Oregon*. She is also the author of the middle-grade novel *Into the Firestorm: A Novel of San Francisco, 1906*.

Informational texts have come to the forefront with the rollout of the Common Core State Standards. Deborah Hopkinson's unique way of framing the past leads young readers to think critically and become engaged with history. Check out these other books by a true master of informational text.



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