

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

The Battle for the Castle

by

Elizabeth Winthrop

Book Information

Elizabeth Winthrop, The Battle for the Castle
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Twelve-year-old William uses the magic token to return through the toy castle in his attic to the medieval land of Sir Simon, which is now menaced by a skeleton ship bearing a plague of evil.

Topics: Adventure, Travel; Fantasy/Imagination, Misc./Other; Mysteries, Magic; READNOW - Demco Media Turtleback Books, Demco Media - Read Now Grades 6-8; Transportation/Vehicles, Ships/Boats

Main Characters

Deegan Sir Simon's fool, a fine tumbler, occasional magician, and dubious advice giver

Dick a figure of some authority in Sir Simon's castle

Gudrin Dick's young niece, who foresees the danger that is coming to the kingdom, and whom only William seems to trust and value her talents

Jason Stubbs Hardy William's exercise-happy friend, who joins William on his adventures in the castle

Sir Morlan appears briefly in the role of a combative, if not quite "evil," knight

Sir Simon William's little lead knight and the ruler of the kingdom of Hargrave

William Edward Lawrence receives a magic token on his twelfth birthday, which allows him to re-enter the world of a miniature medieval castle

Vocabulary

armory the place in the castle where weapons are kept

Janus the two-faced Roman god used to represent openings and beginnings; the month of January bears his name

offal the remains of dead or butchered animals

pallets wooden platforms used as beds in the castle world

portcullis the iron grating hung over the castle's gateway

squire a young helper for a knight

Synopsis

In this sequel to *The Castle in the Attic*, William receives for his twelfth birthday a magic medallion that allows him to go back to the medieval world of Sir Simon and his subjects. This time he is joined by his friend, Jason, a boy who is obsessed with biking and muscle building. While Jason is too sure of himself, William lacks confidence and direction as their adventures begin.

In Sir Simon's world, William is reunited with his old friends, who greet him warmly. They well remember his defeat of the evil wizard, Alastor, in the previous novel. His most important relationship is with the girl, Gudrin, whose powers of prophecy Sir Simon and the other castle menfolk ignore. Gudrin has seen a ship full of skeletons, a death ship, which Sir Simon believes is gone for good. Gudrin feels sure it will return.

It does, after Sir Simon and many of his knights leave for a jousting tournament. Gudrin, William, and Jason set fire to the ship, hoping to destroy its evil omen. They discover the ship is full of rats, all of which are controlled by a strange-eyed monster rat as big as a man. The fire sends them swimming to shore.

Soon, the plague of rats, marching on their hind legs, is headed for the castle, devouring any creatures they find. When the horde comes upon the castle, Gudrin's uncle (left in charge by Sir Simon) loses control of his senses. William takes command. He sets a trap and discovers a secret that allows him to defeat the monster rat, and thereby its army. Both Jason and William eagerly return to their own world after the rats are gone and Sir Simon returns. In this fantasy tale, the underlying theme of their friendship is resolved as both boys

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learn there are many ways of "growing up."

Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

Initial Understanding

William seems to think his father can't "argue right" with him. He thinks their conversations are often "weird" and "sideways." Why might Mr. Lawrence have chosen to talk to his son in that way?

William's dad seems to want his son to make up his own mind about things. When the boys take their bicycles to the attic, he does not forbid it or even question them too closely. ("My mother would have killed me," William says at the time.) Mr. Lawrence listens to William's reasons for quitting gymnastics, but he leaves the decision up to William. He corrects William's facts, but not his choices. Jason's dad is just the opposite; he usually tells his son what to think.

Literary Analysis

Which of the people Jason and William meet at the castle seem the most modern? Why?

Gudrin is the one character who seems most at odds with her own day and age. Like modern girls, she has learned to read and write. She is also very independent in her thinking and her actions. In his dealing with her, William treats her as an equal, and she acts like one, even though the males from her own time tend to overlook her abilities.

Inferential Comprehension

Why is William such a hero in Hargrave? What makes him a good leader?

Unlike Jason, who puts all his energy into his physical talents, William uses his head to defend himself. His courage has less to do with meeting physical challenges (like jumping the trains) than with staying calm when danger comes. Even when Dick, the "man in charge," becomes useless during the rats' attack, William keeps his cool and tries to plan the best next move.

Constructing Meaning

How does William's friendship with Jason change after their adventures?

Before they shrink each other, William feels uncomfortable with Jason. His friend seems very sure of himself and his physical skills. These are new feelings for Jason, and William isn't sure he wants to share them. His one proven talent (at gymnastics) seems unimportant and "wimpy" to William. In defeating the rats, William sees that he can act bravely when it really matters. And Jason sees that muscles aren't everything. Their friendship seems stronger in the end. William is able to tell Jason he won't jump the trains, and Jason agrees that William has gone through a different kind of "rite of passage."

Teachable Skills

Understanding Literary Features In libraries and bookstores, fantasies and science fiction based on time travel abound. Ask students who enjoy the genre to compare *The Battle for the Castle* with other time-travel books. You could begin with a general focus on favorites and the reasons behind the student's preferences. Such discussions could be expanded into a more structured account of the characteristics books in the genre share and vary. An example of a classic contrast in effects would be the whimsy of Twain's *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* with the negative utopia of Wells's *The Time Machine*.

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Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors As

William leaves the castle world, young Tolliver has been chosen by Sir Simon to undergo a proper training in knighthood and leadership. Students may find it interesting to hear or read about the actual life and education of squires in the Middle Ages. How were they chosen to be squires? What were their duties? When did they graduate to knighthood? And what privileges and duties did both squiring and knighthood entail?

Extending Meaning As an exercise, ask students to imagine that William's father accidentally used the token and wandered alone into the world of the castle. Based on the book's brief scene with him, how might Mr. Lawrence have reacted to Sir Simon's world? Would he relate differently to the characters than did William? How might Gudrin and the others have received him? We know that William learned to take command of people and dangerous situations while he was there. What might Mr. Lawrence have learned? Explicitly or implicitly, students would be evaluating their notions of adulthood.

Making Predictions Gudrin clearly was more modern in learning and attitude than girls commonly were in her times. Ask students to consider how she might react to William's world. Assume William brought her out of the castle world with him. Identify the conveniences, inventions, or social customs that Gudrin would admire, dislike, or misunderstand. Have students draw some conclusion about which era Gudrin would have ultimately preferred.