

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for The Phantom Tollbooth by Norton Juster

Book Information

Norton Juster, The Phantom Tollbooth
Quiz Number: 130
Random House, 1964
ISBN 0-394-82199-8; LCCN
256 Pages
Book Level: 6.7
Interest Level: MG

In this wise and witty fantasy, a boy travels through time and space to the Lands Beyond.

Topics: Adventure, Travel; Fantasy/Imagination, Misc./Other; Humor/Funny, Funny; Power Lessons AR, Grade 5; Power Lessons AR, Grade 6; Power Lessons Vocabulary, Grades 4-6; Power Lessons Vocabulary, Grades 7 & Up; Recommended Reading, California Recommended Lit., English, 3-5

Main Characters

Alec Bings a boy who can see through things
Azaz the King of Dictionopolis, who believes words are the most important things in the world
Chroma the Great the conductor of color
Milo a young boy who is bored with everything until he takes a trip through a magic tollbooth
Official Which the king's great aunt, who shows Milo the way out of the dungeon
Rhyme and Reason princesses who were banished from wisdom when they would not take sides
the Humbug a disagreeable insect who reluctantly accompanies Milo on his journey
the Mathemagician the King of Digitopolis, who believes numbers are the most important things in the world
Tock a watchdog who becomes Milo's companion when he enters Expectations

Vocabulary

animosity long-standing or deep-seated hostility
apothecary one who prepares and sells drugs and medicines; pharmacist

disconsolate utterly dejected; cheerless or gloomy
effusive excessive and unrestrained in emotional expression
misapprehension failure to interpret correctly; misunderstanding
villainous viciously wicked or criminal

Synopsis

A young boy named Milo, who normally finds little interest in his life, finds himself transported into the Lands Beyond, a strange land where things are not what they seem. On his trip, Milo meets a watchdog named Tock who joins him as he tries to get out of the Doldrums. Eventually the two land in the Dictionopolis Word Market. After meeting some people, including the Humbug, and coming to enjoy the letters and words he sees and hears, Milo winds up in prison wrongly accused of causing a ruckus at the market.

While in prison, Milo and Tock meet the Which, or Aunt Faintly, who explains the trouble between Azaz and the Mathemagician and the need for the return of Rhyme and Reason. Upon leaving prison, Milo and his friends meet Azaz, the king of Dictionopolis. Milo manages to persuade King Azaz to allow him to rescue Rhyme and Reason with the condition that his brother must also agree.

Milo, Tock, and the Humbug set out for Digitopolis to request the Mathemagician's permission to rescue Rhyme and Reason. Along the way, they pass through Point of View, Illusions and Reality, and the Valley of Sound. In these places they meet such characters as Alec, the boy who grows down, Chroma the Great, the conductor of color, Dr. Dischord, who creates loud sounds, and the Soundkeeper, who has kept all the sounds stored away in the Valley of Sound.

Arriving in Digitopolis, the three travelers learn that numbers come from underground mines. They also meet with the Mathemagician, Azaz's brother. Milo tricks him into letting him rescue Rhyme and Reason by showing him that he actually agrees to

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for The Phantom Tollbooth by Norton Juster

disagree with Azaz.

On the trip to the Castle in the Air, where Rhyme and Reason are being held, they pass through the dangerous Mountains of Ignorance. After battles with various demons, they reach the castle and rescue the sisters. Narrowly escaping the demons, the group arrives back in Digitopolis where they rejoin all the people Milo has met on his trip. A royal holiday is declared in honor of Milo, Tock, and the Humbug. Three days of carnivals follow, and Milo returns home. The following day, Milo discovers the tollbooth is gone, so he decides to explore his own world instead.

Open-Ended Questions

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

Initial Understanding

Why was Milo given the opportunity to go through the tollbooth?

He was wasting his life, seemingly bored with everything and had no desire to learn. After seeing the Land Beyond, he realized how interesting learning could be, and he opened his eyes to things around him.

Literary Analysis

At the royal banquet, Milo is served some half-baked ideas such as "it never rains but it pours." Have the students discuss why the ideas are half-baked, and think of other ideas that fit the category.

The discussion could be started with these ideas: "television is a fad that won't last," "step on a crack, you'll break your mother's back," or "man will never fly in outer space."

Inferential Comprehension

Why were some of the characters and places given the names they were?

Officer Shrift gave Milo the "short shrift," or an unfair punishment. Chroma the Great gave color to the world; "chromatic" means relating to color and proceeding by half steps through the musical scale. A castle in the air is something lofty or unattainable.

Constructing Meaning

How did the author show both the importance and ludicrousness of the English language?

Milo discovered that many words meant different things, and different words meant the same thing. At the "giant's" house, he discovered that being ordinary is relative. He found out that sometimes people speak figuratively, and sometimes literally.

Teachable Skills

Understanding the Author's Craft

The characters in the Land Beyond seemed normal to each other. Have students choose a character and write a description of Milo from that character's point of view. Include personal impressions as well as a vivid physical description.

Comparing and Contrasting

The character of Alec showed Milo how people see things from different perspectives. His explanations generally involved how a person's size or physical position can change the visual perspective of an item. Have the students choose four items to look at and give them time to look at each from three different perspectives or positions. Ask them to share how their perspectives changed in the different positions.

Recognizing Details

When Milo met Chroma the Great, he learned how the different instruments could make different visual images, such as the violin making a spring green and the trumpets blaring out the blue sea. Ask the art and music teacher to do an activity in which the students listen to music and try to illustrate what the

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for The Phantom Tollbooth by Norton Juster

sounds feel or look like in art. Maybe the other teachers could lead the activity or at least suggest music or art forms (sculpture, painting, etc.) that would lend themselves to this activity.

Deriving Word or Phrase Meaning The author put a twist on how the senses experience letters, words, phrases, and numbers. At one point, he talks about how letters tasted (C's were crispy and crunchy) and what sounds looked like (a clap looked like a sheet of paper). Have the class split into groups with a list of letters and sounds. Allow them time to freely brainstorm how letters would taste and what sounds would look like. Ask the class to share their findings in the form of poems or visual presentations.