

DISCUSSION GUIDE

"AN ENTHRALLING, NARNIA-FLAVOURED NOVEL." - GUARDIAN

"TORCH-UNDER-THE DUVET-CAN'T-STOP-READING MAGIC." PIERS TORDAY



WALKER
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The MIDNIGHT GUARDIANS

ROSS MONTGOMERY

DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR WALKER BOOKS

ABOUT THE BOOK

An instant winter classic, *The Midnight Guardians* is a wonderful adventure full of danger, comic brilliance and, most of all, heart. As World War II rages, the Midwinter King is intent on conquering both the human and the spirit worlds. Col, raw from the death of his father and evacuated to his cold aunt Claire's, just wants a Christmas with his sister, Rose. But when Rose in London for the festive season to help the war effort, Col finds solace in his imaginary childhood friends – until a vision reveals that his sister is in mortal danger. Now, Col and his Guardians must travel across the country through the bitterest winter, with more at stake than he could possibly imagine.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ross Montgomery started writing stories as a teenager, when he should have been doing homework, and continued doing so at university. His debut novel, *Alex, the Dog and the Unopenable Door*, was nominated for the Costa Children's Book of the Year and the Branford Boase Award. It was also selected as one of *The Sunday Times'* "Top 100 Modern Children's Classics". His books have also been nominated for the CILIP Carnegie Award while his picture book *Space Tortoise* was nominated for the Kate Greenaway Medal and included in *The Guardian's* "Best New Children's Books of 2018". He lives in London with his wife and their cat, called Fun Bobby.

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

Brimming with all the elements of great middle grade fiction, *The Midnight Guardians* is an extraordinary source of material for discussion and exploration. From historical insight and relevance to WWII topics, through fantasy and mythology, to the breadth of Col's experience and journey, the book provides countless opportunities for children to interrogate, engage and enjoy. While a historical fantasy, the novel contains elements that might readily be reflected in the lived experience of many children today. NB: Given the various themes of parental loss, abandonment, evacuation, displacement and war, it is worth considering in advance any group members for whom these may be difficult. Ensure that adequate support and, if necessary, signposting is in place before engaging in discussion.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Getting started:

Ask what the group thought of *The Midnight Guardians*. Who would like to share something they liked about it? How did it make students feel? How would members of the group describe the book? What genre is it? (Encourage the group to explore the idea of multiple genres or elements – history, fantasy, comedy, adventure, etc.) Can it be summed up by one genre?

1. Col

“Col was imagining things again.” – p.13

What did members like about Col, as a character? How does the author show the war from Col’s perspective? What effect does this have? Does Col’s perspective change as the novel goes on? How? What causes this? How does this change the reader’s view of Col? Or of the war? How would the novel be different if it were written from, for example, Ruth’s perspective?
EXTENSION: Creative writing: task the group with rewriting the meeting between Col and Ruth, from Ruth’s perspective.

2. Ruth

“She wasn’t one of the Midwinter King’s spies ... but in many respects she was just as bad.” – p.94

How is Ruth introduced to the novel? Whose eyes do we see her through? What does the reader know about her at first? Why does the author introduce her in this way? Why is this significant to the book? Encourage members to think about other people’s perceptions of Ruth in the book, or the wider context of Germans, and Jews, in the UK at this time.

3. The Guardians

“The glow is small but strong – it feels like it could light the whole house, if it tried.

Three figures sit around it. They have been waiting for some time.” – p.10

What did the group think of the idea of imaginary friends existing in the spirit world? Who likes the idea of imaginary friends existing somewhere close but far away? Why? Ask the group to try to remember the inspiration for each of Col’s Guardians. (Mr Noakes was Col’s dad’s stuffed toy, Pendlebury was his mum’s china figurine, the King of Rogues was a painting by his aunt Claire.) Why has the author created them in this way? What do these references mean to Col?

4. The Midwinter King

“It was wrong to call him a man.” – p.64

Read the description of the Midwinter King on p.64 together. What effect does the author create in this passage? How does he achieve this? How does this description make the reader feel? Why is the Midwinter King so powerful in the novel? What does the Midwinter King want? Why? Think about some other villains (depending on the group, introduce the word “antagonist” as appropriate) – how does the Midwinter King differ from these? Are there any comparisons?

5. The Green Man

“He is the lord of life; the bringer of light. The balance is restored: it brings spring into your world.” – p. 48

Remind one another what happens when Col meets the Green Man (from p.298). What does the group think of the Green Man? Why does he do what he does? What changes in this scene? What does the Green Man mean when he says, “*I have felt the change in the world over these last few days*”? What does this suggest about the nature of power in the book?
EXTENSION: task group members with finding out more about the Green Man in myth and folklore. What does the Green Man represent? Are there any celebrations of the Green Man still in existence today?

6. Power, Hope and Despair

“It was true – it was more like a spring morning than a winter’s day. The sense of despair and fear and darkness that had covered the land for weeks had disappeared.” – p.315

Ask the group where power lies within the novel. Who is powerful? Who is powerless? Does anyone wrongly think they have or do not have power? Who, and why? Consider the quotation in this question – what power does the Midwinter King possess? What about the Green Man? Is hope, or despair, a form of power? If so, how? What part do these emotions play in the novel?

7. The Spirit World

“Ruth blinked. ‘Wait – fairies? I was thinking fairies were pretty.’” – p.148

As a group, list all the creatures that Col meets from the spirit world. How many had everyone heard of before? Were they what the readers would have expected? Were they as Col expected? What is the author suggesting by this? Compare some of these creatures to other interpretations group members might have read or seen. What is the same? What is different?

EXTENSION: depending on the group, you could use these as a research task, asking smaller groups to find out all they can about one of the creatures on the book, and presenting back.

8. Trapped in Memories

“To be cut from existence. To be wiped from this world and all others. To be nothing...” – p.131

How important is the idea of memory in the book? Why does the Midwinter King use Col’s memories to trap Col? Why is Col so reluctant to talk about what happened to his dad? What do his memories mean to him? What about Ruth’s memories of her parents? Or Rose’s memories of home? Why is the Midwinter King’s threat, to cut the Guardians out of existence, “worse than death”?

9. The War

“He’d been so lost in his own unhappiness these last few months that he hadn’t thought once about the others who had lost their homes, their loved ones. He’d been one of the lucky ones...” – p.196

Throughout the novel the reader sees glimpses of what life was like in Britain during the war. Which parts of wartime Britain in the book did anyone find most memorable? How does the author build up a sense of war-time Britain across the novel? How are other people in the novel affected by the war? Does anyone think Col is lucky in some ways? Why?

EXTENSION: Find out more about life during the war. Task group members with different areas to research – evacuees, London in the Blitz, field hospitals, etc.

10. A Hair’s Breadth Away

“But none of them were gone, not really. They were all just a hair’s breadth away, in their own worlds, beyond where he could see.” – p.370

Why do Col’s Guardians, and his father, disappear at the end? What does it mean that “none of them were gone, not really”? What has changed for Col that makes the loss of them manageable? In what ways do we keep our past with us?