

Literature Circle Guide to THE GREAT GOOD THING by Roderick Townley

Book Summary

Sylvie has been a 12-year-old princess for more than 80 years, ever since the book she's a character in was first printed. She's the heroine of the exciting story, but she only gets to play her part when a reader opens the book and starts the action. One day Sylvie makes an exciting, but dangerous discovery: She can travel beyond her own pages and into the dreams of her reader. When a mischievous little boy takes a match to Sylvie's pages, her whole book community must take their chances within the dreams of their reader, Claire. Once the royal family and many of the community members have arrived in the city of Claire's dreams, they must adjust to a new life that includes dangers, betrayal, and life outside the written lines of their old story. Eventually Sylvie is charged with the dangerous task of forging a new path in the memories of Claire's daughter, Lily. It's a risky move, but Sylvie is driven to do a great, good thing.

Author Information

Roderick Townley has written ten books, including *Into the Labyrinth*, a follow-up to *The Great Good Thing*, and *Sky*, a story about a boy who longs to be a jazz musician. He has taught in Chile on a Fulbright fellowship, worked in New York as an editor, and now lives and writes in Kansas. He has two children, Jesse and Grace, and is married to the poet Wyatt Townley.

Suggested Answers to Literature Circle Questions

1. Princess Sylvie gets to know three generations of girls and women. Who are the readers she becomes friends with and how are they related?

The first reader Sylvie interacts with is Claire. Through Claire, she meets the girl with the dark blue eyes, who is Claire's grandmother and the very first reader. With help from Claire's grandmother, Sylvie meets Lily, Claire's daughter.

2. Sylvie and the other characters take many journeys in the story. Why do all the characters leave the storybook in the first place? Where do they go?

Sylvie, her parents the King and Queen, and the rest of the story community are forced to leave their pages when Claire's brother, Ricky, takes a match to the book to try to give it the weathered feel of an old pirate map (p.74). He destroys the book and the characters are forced to flee to the world of Claire's dreams.

3. Sylvie returns to the land of Claire's memories to find out that Pingree has taken over as King. How does she escape from the castle? Who helps her?

Sylvie makes a desperate escape by climbing out onto a balcony ledge and scampering up onto the roof. Unfortunately one of Pingree's guards catches hold of her foot. She begins to fall, but the blind owl that she saves in the pages of her story catches her and brings her safely to her family (pp.153-156).

4. Princess Sylvie says she feels as though she is Claire's older sister. What evidence is there to show that Sylvie takes care of Claire?

When Sylvie first meets her, Claire is scared and doesn't know what to do. Sylvie helps Claire climb a tree to escape those chasing her (p.29). On subsequent visits, Claire is upset about her Grandmother's decline and depends on Sylvie for comfort and help (pp.40 and 61).

5. Sylvie can be bold, brave, and helpful. Yet sometimes she needs help. What evidence is there that Sylvie needs guidance and who does Sylvie grow to depend on to help her?

Sylvie is brave, but she doesn't always know what to do. She learns from the girl with the dark blue eyes, who serves as Sylvie's guide through Claire's dreams and memories and helps Sylvie make the transition into Lily's memories. Sylvie also learns from Claire's geometry teacher, Professor Fangl. His wisdom helps Sylvie figure out what she must do to save the kingdom.

6. When Sylvie is in the storybook, she feels that life isn't interesting. Describe what life is like for Sylvie and the other characters in Claire's *dreams*? How does life change when they become part of Claire's *memories*?

Living in Claire's dreams means constant change for the characters. They never know what their surroundings will be from one moment to the next (p.99). Once they move into Claire's memories, they find a much less crowded terrain that is rugged and sometimes frightening (p.110).

7. Authors sometimes subject their characters to difficult tasks. What are two tasks Sylvie accomplishes?

Sylvie guides the characters to the world of Claire's dreams in order to escape the fire (p.74). Later, she braves the journey to Lily's memories and conceives of a plan for creating a new home for all the characters by having Lily write the story again (pp.70 and 202).

8. Fangl tells Sylvie, "You can't solve a problem from inside it...you've got to get outside." What problem does Sylvie solve and how does she take Fangl's advice?

Sylvie considers Claire's geometry teacher's advice and decides that she must take a chance on Lily's memories, rather than stay and attempt to win back the castle from Pingree in Claire's memories. She must "get outside" the problem (pp.167 and 178).

9. Compare the way King Walther rules to the way King Pingree rules.

King Walther is a gracious but cautious ruler. He chooses to stay inside the confines of the story and would rather not change. Pingree is a power-hungry king. He doesn't want to hold onto the old story because he's scheming to overtake the throne (p.115).

10. What evidence can you find to prove that the girl with the dark blue eyes is the author of *The Great Good Thing*?

Sylvie says of the girl with the dark blue eyes, "Sometimes I thought she knew more about me than I knew about myself" (p.42). The girl herself answers, "I'm sure of it"

when the king asks her if she really was their first reader. She also makes a point to distinguish the author (herself) from the writer (Lily) (pp. 214-215).

11. Sylvie and the storybook characters escape to Claire's dream world. How might the story have been different if they had escaped to Richard's dream world?

Claire's younger brother, Richard – or Ricky – is a destructive and self-involved individual. He gets strawberry jam on the book and later carelessly destroys it. One can surmise that Ricky's dream world would be a more dangerous and chaotic place for the characters to journey.

12. When Sylvie arrives in Lily's dream world, she helps Lily rewrite the storybook *The Great Good Thing*. How might the ending of the novel have been different if Lily rewrote the storybook without the help of Sylvie?

Sylvie's suggestions bring both Professor Fangl and the girl with the dark blue eyes into the new story. Thus she is able to save Fangl from rusting away to nothingness, and she looks forward to the company of the girl with the dark blue eyes.

13. Sylvie is given many choices to make in the story. She chooses to leave her storybook to look for adventure. She chooses not to marry Pingree. She chooses to go by herself to Lily's dream world. Justify Sylvie's decision to leave the storybook in the first place. By making these choices, does Sylvie destroy or save the story?

By following her curiosity, Sylvie is ultimately able to save the story. Although her initial decision to leave the book seems dangerous, it is through the knowledge she gains that Sylvie is able to save the characters when the book burns. By staying true to her heart and not submitting to marry Pingree, she may initially add to the strife, but ultimately she is able to help the characters make their way back to their story. When she goes to Lily's dream world by herself, she has no idea what to expect. By dwelling there though, she is able to help Lily rewrite the story and thus save her world.

14. At the beginning of the story, we find that Sylvie is bored in her storybook life. What motive is there for Sylvie to help Lily rewrite the story?

While keeping true to the spirit of the original story, Sylvie suggests subtle alterations that will change Sylvie's daily life. By bringing the girl with the dark blue eyes into the story, she will now have a friend within her world.

Activities

1. In the story, Sylvie enters the dreams of a number of characters. Think of your own dreams. Make an illustration of a wonderful dream that you would like to be able to enter whenever you want. Be sure to use color and show detail. Write a paragraph describing the dream you created.

Collaborate as a class to make a list on the blackboard of different student's dreams. You may also want to have students keep a dream journal for a period of time where they record their dreams each morning. Use this material as a starting point for the dream illustrations. After completing the illustrations, students may present their work to the class.

2. With a partner, dramatize a scene in which Sylvie confronts Pingree. You could choose a scene from the original storybook or you could choose a scene after Pingree has taken over the throne. Think about how each character feels. Do your best to convey that character's personality.

Encourage students to improvise a scene based on interactions in the book. Sylvie and Pingree exchange words about his following her and telling on her when she escapes to Claire's dreams (p.50). Sylvie explains what she doesn't like about him (pp.70-71). Upon arrival in Claire's memories, Pingree and Sylvie clash over Pingree's tendency to change their story (p.116), and they butt heads when Sylvie is captured and learns Pingree has become king (pp.144-147).