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A Discussion Guide to

The Circle of Magic

Quartet:

Book #1 *Sandry's Book*

Book #2 *Tris's Book*

Book #3 *Daja's Book*

Book #4 *Briar's Book*

By Tamora Pierce

About the Books

In a fantasy set in mythical lands surrounding the Pebbled Sea, four orphaned or unwanted children from various backgrounds are brought to Winding Circle Temple by Niklaren Goldeye, who sees, in each, inborn magic hidden to others. There, under the tutelage and care of mages Lark, Rosethorn, Frostpine and Niko, their special gifts blossom along with their insights into themselves and each other. Called upon to do battle with evils wrought by nature and man, Sandry, a nobly born thread mage, Tris, a merchant weather mage, Daja, a Trader smith mage and Briar, a "street rat" plant mage, spin their magics and themselves together, making them stronger and forever binding them together. Empowered by challenges faced and overcome, they grow in stature and spirit as their magics, initially fed by hate and bitterness, defy all known boundaries when ultimately fired by love and compassion.

Sandry's Book

Forgotten in a dark cellar after her parents fall victim to smallpox, Lady Sandrilene fa Toren struggles for light and for life, willing the last glimmer from her dying oil lamp into silken threads. Rescued by a mysterious mage, she is brought to Winding Circle Temple and installed in a cottage called Discipline with three other young people who, like Sandry, possess unrecognized magical powers. When an earthquake wrought by magic gone awry puts the lives of Tris, Daja and Briar in mortal danger, Sandry overcomes her fear of darkness and spins the fibers of her companion's individual magics into a stronger, combined power that redirects the earth's force and protects their hollow in the ground.

Tris's Book

When Winding Circle Temple is endangered by the betrayal of a visiting member of Tris' family and an attack by marauding pirates led by Queen Pahua and her mage brother Enahar, weather mage Tris must harness both temper and forces of nature to save the only home she and Sandry, Daja and Briar have ever known. Brought to the brink of defeat despite numerous efforts in magical defense, Tris calls upon the combined powers of her companions and their mage teachers. Together, they feed their magic and their very lives into the pattern of a spell, shattering bewitched barriers and vanquishing the pirates' deadly magic.

Daja's Book

Daja Kisubo, an outcast Trader, discovers her talents in metal craft when she is brought to Winding Circle

Temple. Accompanying her fellow mages-in-training and Duke Vedris IV to Gold Ridge Valley in the drought-stricken lands of the north, she stops at a local smithy and fashions a living metal vine coveted by the Traders, the very people who exiled her. Bargaining in Trader style, she is reminded of family and her former life on the seas. When a fire seeks not to embrace but to destroy her, a Trader Caravan and other mountain inhabitants, she melds the magic of Sandry, Tris and Briar with hers to douse the fire, bring water and resources back to the land, and reclaim her identity as Trader.

Briar's Book

Upon his arrival at Discipline Cottage at Winding Circle Temple, Briar, a convicted street thief, meets three young girls and a prickly teacher named Rosethorn from whom he learns to develop his plant magic. When one of his street friends falls sick with a mysterious illness, he seeks his teacher's help, but the disease, impervious to all remedies, claims the life of his friend and develops into a full-blown epidemic. Rosethorn joins hands with Crane, an air mage of great power and difficult personality, to find a cure for the fatal "blue pox". Assisted by Briar and Tris, they determine the disease is magicked, but joy in their discovery is overshadowed when Rosethorn becomes ill. Not about to lose what he loves most, Briar follows Rosethorn into death's realm, anchored by magical and personal ties to Sandy, Tris and Daja.

Pre-Reading

Using the detailed maps provided on the endpapers of each book, discuss the geography of Emelan and its environs. Note, in particular, the homeland of each of the main characters and where each was rescued by Niko. Locate Winding Circle Temple and the locale for each of the adventures in the quartet.

Discuss the ways in which magic permeates the social/cultural boundaries of this world. What are mages? How are they identified/classified? How are their special talents utilized?

Understanding Genre

Each of the four stories in the Circle of Magic is a middle fantasy, a literary form incorporating structural patterns and magical elements rooted in folklore. Discuss ways in which the largely medieval secondary world in this saga is similar to/different from European and Mediterranean/Middle Eastern settings in traditional literature. Compare qualities of character and the nature of the four young protagonists with those of ancient Europeans and Easterners. How are they motivated to confront dangers and rise to impossible challenges? How do they succeed? What archetypal and/or religious themes, typical in these folk literatures, are woven into the fabric of these fantasies? Are they relevant to us in our modern world? How?/Why?

Mythology

Yalina, goddess of water. Koma, Trader god of deals and rewards. Like many ancient and contemporary civilizations, the people of Emelan believe in gods and goddesses that control the universe. List the names of deities called upon throughout the Circle of Magic quartet along with the functions attributed to them. How are they similar to/different from those in ancient Greek, Roman and Norse mythologies? Compare them also to gods and goddesses in African, Native American, Asian and other cultures. How are beliefs in such deities echoed in the language, art and customs of these peoples?

Setting

The fantasy setting of the Circle of Magic quartet sets the stage for the development of character and plot and provides an internal consistency necessary for readers to embrace the created world and suspend their disbelief. What elements of the real world (scientific, ecological, social, medicinal) does the author integrate into this secondary world to make it more believable?

Choose a passage vividly describing an aspect of setting (e.g. the Hub at Winding Circle; Discipline's thatched roof top, Urda's House). Draw/paint your visual interpretation of this locale based on textual description. How does your interpretation compare/contrast with another reader's?

List the different social classes/cultures inhabiting this world: nobles, merchants, Traders, and street thieves. Identify distinguishing characteristics, language, beliefs, traditions and codes of behavior for each. How do they view each other? Do their views reflect any stereotypic or prejudicial perceptions?

Character

A mistrusting weather mage, a noble who fears the darkeach of the four main characters in the Circle of Magic books is distinct in personality; multidimensional and complex in nature. Child and mage, each grows and develops in person as well as in power throughout the stories, transformed by experiences as well as by affections and affinities for each other and their teachers. Search for passages that reveal aspects of character and changes they undergo. Are they made known through physical description, inner thought, perceptions of others, dialog or actions? Do these characters subscribe to or defy notions of gender and other stereotypes? Which of the characters do you feel closest to? Why?

In addition to assisting their young charges to discover and harness their unrecognized powers, the nurturing mentorships of Niklaren Goldeye, Lark, Rosethorn and Frostpine facilitate their coming to know themselves and each other. Discuss the significance of each teacher's name in light of character traits and special abilities. How do the traits/abilities of each meet the personal and magical needs of his/her individual student? How do they serve the collective needs of the group, thereby forging a "family"? Is learning the exclusive domain of the four children, or do their teachers learn from the children as well? Compare these adult/child relationships with those in your own life.

Plot

The well-drawn plots in the Circle of Magic quartet move forward in chronological fashion, weaving a series of events into a logical cause-and-effect sequence. Chart the rising action in plot structure in each of these stories, noting: inciting incidents at story's beginning, action/incidents that build suspense, the story's climax and denouement. How does knowledge of folkloric plot patterns help to anticipate possible outcomes?

While each character's problems to solve and goals to achieve are evident in external battles with earthquakes, pirates, fires and plagues, they are also present in internal struggles that come with growth and change. What are the personal/magical challenges each child must confront as stories unfold? What inner and outer conflicts are associated with these challenges? How would you classify these conflicts: person-against-self; person-against-nature; person-against-society or person-against-person? Do you see any relationship between the challenges and conflicts faced by Sandry, Tris, Daja and Briar and those in your own life?

Themes

While the fantasy of the Circle of Magic quartet is shaped by imagination and fueled by the impossible, its varied themes reflect human concerns universal to all cultures. What do these stories say about good and evil; life and death; the power of love and friendship? How is responsibility to oneself and others depicted? What do they tell us about judging others on the basis of appearance and station in life? How are these, and other important themes revealed in the narratives?

Style

The Circle of Magic tales derive both depth and individual expression through the author's choice of

language and stylistic devices.

Symbols: How are persons, objects or actions (such as Yarrun Firetamer, Briar's shakkan tree, Tris' rescue of a nestling) used as metaphoric symbols to represent different levels of meaning? How is the repetitive motif of "the circle," prominent in the title of the Quartet, used to symbolize aspects of character, setting, plot and theme in all four stories? What is the dual significance of "patterns" in the lives and magics of these four young mages?

Humor: While the ultimate tone and message of her modern fantasy is serious in nature, Tamora Pierce provides a generous sprinkling of humor to lighten mood. Look for dialog delivered in a humorous or sarcastic tone such as Frostpine's assertion, "*I need faults to accent my excellence otherwise I would be too wonderful to live with*" (Tris, p.92) What effects do such comments have on character development and plot action? What effects do they have on you, the reader?

Foreshadowing: When Daja affirms, early on in her story, that she will be *trangshi* for life unless a Trader family is so indebted to her they will pay to have her name written in the Trader logs groundwork is laid for her choice to save a Trader caravan thereby incurring such debt later on. Look for other instances of foreshadowing in which the author provides hints and clues that may be used to anticipate later story events. What effect does this technique have on the story's overall credibility?

Discussion

1. Modern fantasy is often viewed as a "social genre" in that every decision made and action taken by a hero affects another individual and, sometimes, the fate of an entire society. How is this view borne out in the stories of Sandry, Tris, Daja and Briar?
2. How is the magic in the Circle of Magic different from the fakery or trickery Briar initially perceives it to be? What is the relationship between "magic" and "power"? Is it possible to have power without magic? If so, from where does such power stem? How is power worn by different characters such as Niko, Duke Vedris IV, Lady Inoulia, Rosethorn and Lark? Niko says, "*Every creature has magic even if only the magic of life*" (Sandry, p.114). What does he mean? Is there magic in the real world?
3. For Yarrun, a purely "academic" mage, magic is a matter of spellbooks, rituals, artifacts and formulae best taught through linear paradigms set in a university; while Niko, an academically trained mage versed in temple magic taught by application and for use, also sees the merit of circular paradigms and hands-on practices which encourage experimentation. What is the role/place of the learner in these different approaches? How are rules and teacher/student inquiry incorporated in each? How do you view teacher questions/student questions in learning? Do they limit thinking? Guide thinking? Do both? Does the absence of questions and set rules imply chaos?
4. After Daja is cast out by her people as a carrier of bad luck, later experiences and relationships cause her to question the "rightness" of this and other Trader traditions and beliefs. What roles do traditions and beliefs play in individual and group identities? How do Sandry, Tris, Daja and Briar defy restrictions imposed by their cultural/social classes? Have you, or others you know, ever revised thinking about fundamental beliefs once held as true?
5. Trader language, street slang and the educated register of nobles and mages are integral aspects of dialog in the Circle of Magic fantasies. How does the inclusion of these different languages and dialects lend depth to individual characters, and breadth to social contexts? What effect do these language variations have on the quartet as a whole?
6. Unable to remember his real birthdate and prodded by Sandry to pick one, Briar decides against the day he traded his street name of Roach for that of Briar Moss, the day he came to Discipline, and the day Flick died, in favor of the day Rosethorn let him into her world. What leads him to this choice? If you were to pick a birthdate of significance in your own life, what would it be and why?

7. In response to a comment from Tris's ever-sharp tongue, Sandry accuses her of being too hard on people because she pays "*attention to just words, not how they're said*" (Briar, p. 27). What does she mean? How might such an approach cause one to hear and say things not really meant? Can you find passages in the text, and recall instances in your own experiences, where the meaning of words was changed by the manner in which they were spoken?

Other Fantasy Series to Compare and Contrast

A Wizard of Earthsea by Ursula LeGuin

The Dark is Rising by Susan Cooper

Time Quartet by Madeleine L'Engle

Chronicles of Prydain by Lloyd Alexander

The Enchanted Forest Chronicles by Patricia Wrede

The Blue Sword by Robin McKinley

Other Books by Tamora Pierce

The Song of the Lioness Quartet

Alanna: The First Adventure

In the Hand of the Goddess

The Woman Who Rides Like A Man

Lioness Rampant

The Immortals Quartet

Wild Magic

Wolf-Speaker

The Emperor Mage

The Realms of the Gods

The Protector of the Small Quartet

First Test

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The Circle Opens Quartet

Magic Steps

About the Author

Critically acclaimed author of modern fantasy for young readers, Tamora Pierce has written many fantasy quartets popular in the United States and overseas. In addition to the Circle of Magic books, whose honors include ALA "Quick Pick" for Reluctant Young Adult Readers, Booklist Top Ten Fantasy Novel, VOYA Best Science Fiction, Fantasy and Horror (1997), and more, she has also created the richly detailed fantasy worlds and winning protagonists in the highly praised series The Song of the Lioness and The Immortals, and *First Test*, the first book in The Protector of the Small series.

A graduate of the University of Pennsylvania, Ms. Pierce has worked at various jobs, but has always loved to write. In addition to her novels for young people, she has produced magazine articles, short stories and film reviews. She has also composed many radio plays, including episodes for "Little Chills 2" on NPR Playhouse.

Tamora Pierce lives in New York City with her husband, also a writer, and their three cats and two birds.

Discussion Guide written by Dr. Rosemary B. Stimola, who teaches Children's Literature at City University

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- Subjects:

Challenges and Overcoming Obstacles, Confronting and Resolving Fears, Earthquakes, Tsunamis, Volcanoes, Main Idea and Details, Literacy, Literature, Cause and Effect, Compare and Contrast, Literary Devices, Plot, Character, Setting, Literature Appreciation, Culture and Diversity, Ancient Civilizations, Disease and Illness, Natural Resources, Geography and Map Skills, Adoption and Foster Care, Magic and Supernatural, Maps and Globes, Kindness and Compassion, Responsibility, Tolerance and Acceptance, Friends and Friendship, Prejudice and Tolerance Experiences, Survival, Understanding Self and Others

- Skills:

Literary Elements, Cause and Effect, Compare and Contrast, Drawing Conclusions, Main Idea and Details, Plot, Character and Setting, Problem and Solution, Maps, Social Studies, Language Arts