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The Book

A spy, a murderer, a mischievous princess, a loyal servant, a magician who is really a philosopher with a few well-learned tricks up his sleeve, a plotting queen, and a superstitious king all converge in a castle on a dark and stormy night in Italy in 1491 after the princess claims to have seen the ghost of her murdered brother. Conspiracies abound, as Mangus the Magician works to prove ghosts don't exist, while Fabrizio, his servant, works to prove they do, even as Princess Teresina plots in hidden passages with the brother who is supposed to be dead, while the evil Count Scarazoni plans his takeover of the throne. Part mystery, part history, and a big part just plain fun, *Midnight Magic* enchants and entertains.

Understanding genre

Midnight Magic offers the suspenseful elements of a mystery/detective story, in a setting of ghostly haunts at midnight, against the historical backdrop of life in a castle during medieval times. Discuss the elements of each of these aspects of the book by adding to the chart below. Some examples are provided under each heading to get you started (you may want to line up the chart in columns). Once the chart is completed, discuss which aspect — mystery/detective story, ghost story, or historical fiction-made the story most enjoyable to you.

- Elements of mystery/detective story
 - detective and helper
 - multiple conspiracies
 - murder
 - medieval clothing clues for reader
- **Elements of ghost story**
 - events that occur at midnight
 - tolling of bells
 - apparitions
 - magic
 - setting: a dark and stormy night
 - setting: a castle with hidden passageways
- Elements of historical fiction
 - medieval customs and beliefs
 - medieval justice

Avi offers a varied cast of characters — the evil count, the unsuspecting king, the wise philosopher, the loyal and slightly bumbling servant, the mischievous princess, the clever prince. These characters remind us of many stock characters from traditional literature. What other aspects of a traditional tale does Avi bring to *Midnight Magic*? How does this folk tale quality affect the tone of the book?

Theme

Against the backdrop of an adventurous ghost story, Avi leaves readers with themes worth contemplating. Consider Fabrizio's comments on page 203: "Master," Fabrizio pressed, "you said you did not believe in ghosts, only in ghost stories. But can't a story speak the truth?" What are the truths that this story reveals?

Think about Mangus's comments on fear (pages 30 and 41), Fabrizio's commitment to Mangus, or Mangus's search for truth. What truths could be learned from each of these?

Characterization

Fabrizio is a delightful protagonist. Full of sayings, promises, impulsiveness, loyalty, wisdom, foolishness and fears, Fabrizio offers surprise after surprise. He has difficulty keeping his word -for instance, he promises not to perform any tricks but quickly does so; he promises he will be "as ignorant as a worm and obedient as a donkey" (page 14) but soon proves to be neither. Nevertheless, he still emerges as a likable, honest person. His role in *Midnight Magic* is a wonderful blend of the magician's apprentice from traditional literature, and the detective's helper (like Holmes's Watson or even Batman's Robin) from the detective genre. Look back through *Midnight Magic* to find examples of his loyalty, impulsiveness, foolishness and wisdom. Which of those traits is the strongest? Which trait do you enjoy the most in him? What trait would you add to this list? Finally, consider how Fabrizio's adventures affected him. Did he accept his master's views on reason and magic by the end of the book? What does his return to tarot cards at the end reveal about his growth?

Foreshadowing

Suspense in a novel is balanced with subtle clues, called foreshadowing, that help readers predict the outcome. *Midnight Magic* is filled with wonderful foreshadowing that keeps readers enjoying the suspense while gathering in the clues so they too can unravel all the mysteries in the book. Look back through *Midnight Magic* for instances of foreshadowing. For example, look at the description of Rinaldo (pages 62-80) and Rinaldo's explanation of how he received the statue (pages 105-108). How does the foreshadowing on those pages hint that Rinaldo might not be who he claims to be?

Conflict

Conflict is more than a problem that must be solved; it is a struggle a character faces because of his or her actions, thoughts, or beliefs. For instance, Mangus's commitment to reason and truth creates his conflict concerning what to tell the king about the ghost. When thinking about conflict, complete the following statement: This character (insert a character's name), has this trait (insert a trait), which causes this conflict (insert a conflict). Identify the various conflicts in *Midnight Magic* by completing the following conflict chart (you may want to line up the chart in columns). The information for Mangus has been inserted as an example. After completing the chart, discuss which conflict was most interesting to you.

- **Character**
 - Mangus Fabrizio
 - King Claudio
 - Princess Teresina
 - Count Scarazoni

- **Trait**
 - commitment to truth and reason

- **What Conflict**
 - what to tell the king about ghosts

- **Conflict against whom?**
 - conflict against himself

Discuss

1. King Claudio believes in ghosts, is superstitious, and makes decisions by consulting the stars. Mangus does not believe in ghosts, is not superstitious, and makes decisions by reasoning. However, it is Mangus who is tried as a wizard and nearly executed. Why is the believer free while the unbeliever is persecuted?
2. With its medieval setting, *Midnight Magic* shows how through time human nature has basically remained the same. Consider Count Scarazoni's statement, "There are laws against magic. Our people fear it" (page 32). At what other times in our history would this statement be true? What does his comment reveal about human nature? What are other things against which people have made laws mainly because of fear?
3. One of the most entertaining aspects of *Midnight Magic* is Fabrizio's and Mangus's constant use of adages. From the beginning when Fabrizio recalls that "Bad news always hides its face" (page 6), to the end when he reminds Mangus that "being small allows one to have large secrets" (page 246), the book is full of veiled wisdom. Find more of Fabrizio's and Mangus's sayings and then discuss what they mean. In particular, consider the following ones:
 - a. Though the old people of the world have yet to find a way to make a person invisible, one can be young. It often amounts to the same thing. (page 13)
 - b. The only thing more fearful than what we know is that which we do not know. (page 40)
 - c. ...though time is the most valuable thing a man can have, it can buy him no more time. (page 45)
 - d. A hungry chicken should never lay an empty egg. (page 55)
 - e. One often finds life under dead stones. (page 82)
 - f. There are two ways to look through a window. (page 101)
 - g. When a cat speaks, mice will listen. (page 109)
 - h. To open a door, better small coins than a large fist. (page 153)
 - i. You may wrap a monkey in the skin of a lion, but he remains a monkey. (page 169)
 - j. The more there is to see, the less one sees. (page 215)
4. Fabrizio and Mangus play a delightful game of one-upmanship with adages on page 60. Reread this scene and interpret what they were really saying to one another. Then, using some of the statements listed above, or creating your own, write another scene in which the two banter with adages.

About the author

Avi is the author of many fine books for young readers, in a variety of genres ranging from humor to fantasy, from historical fiction to contemporary fiction. He has won Newbery Honors for *The True Confessions of Charlotte Doyle* and *Nothing but the Truth*, and the Scott O'Dell Award for Historical Fiction for *The Fighting Ground*. Whether taking readers back in time, presenting them with issues of truth and deception, or reminding them about the importance of loyalty and honor, Avi creates characters who entertain and inform, enlighten and encourage. To learn more about Avi, visit his web site at www.avi-writer.com.

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