

A Curriculum Guide to

The Lord of Opium

By Nancy Farmer

About the Book

Matt, the clone of the evil and powerful drug lord El Patrón, was harvested to provide spare parts for the old man. When El Patrón is assassinated, Matt is reclassified as a human and named Lord of Opium, ruler of the largest and most powerful territory in the Dope Confederacy. The problem is that Matt is only fourteen years old, and his life as a clone gave him no experience for leading an empire. To make matters worse, there are forces inside and outside his land that are attempting to dethrone him. Matt wants to rid the empire of the evil ways of El Patrón, but he must first learn to recognize his friends and his enemies. As Matt sets out on his journey for truth, he learns that a ruler and a dictator require different skills, and that he must earn the trust of his people to accomplish his mission.

Prereading Activity

The following activities contained in this section particularly address the Common Core State Standards: (RL.7.1, 2, 3) (SL.7.4) (L.7.1)

Ask students who have read *The House of the Scorpion* to summarize the book for the class. What is Matt’s life like in El Patrón’s Opium Empire? The title of this sequel implies that Matt is about to begin a journey as Lord of Opium. Have students discuss the challenges that Matt is likely to face.

Discussion Questions

The following questions contained in this section particularly address the Common Core State Standards: (RL.7.1, 2, 3) (SL.7.1a, 1c, 3, 4) (L.7.1)

1. At the beginning of the novel Matt is at the Oasis and is dealing with grief and nervousness. What is the reason for his grief? Name at least five things that contribute to his anxiety.
2. Ask students to explain the following quote: “The air changed from the fresh breeze of the mountains to something slightly sweet with a hint of corruption.” To what is the quote referring? Document hints of corruption throughout the novel. Who are the central characters responsible for the corruption?
3. Discuss how Matt makes the sudden transition from “filthy clone” to human and to the new Lord of Opium. What are his greatest challenges? How does exposure to “real humans” change Matt’s view of eejits? What does he mean when he says, “Talking to an

eejit was almost like talking to himself?” Explain how this shapes his dream of changing life in Opium.

4. Celia tells Matt, “You’re a Drug Lord now and must learn to behave like one.” Make a list of behaviors that Celia might think a Drug Lord should possess. Explain why Cienfuegos thinks that Matt needs a name that instills fear. Discuss Matt’s greatest fears. At what point does he gain the courage to face his fears?

Debate whether Matt fears power. How does fear give him the wisdom he needs to carry on his attempt to change life in Opium?

5. The quest to belong is one of the themes of the novel. Trace Matt’s struggle to belong from the beginning of the novel to the end. Why is he uncomfortable in the apartments of the Alacrán family? What is the pivotal point when Matt finally gains a sense of belonging? Which characters help him the most with his struggling identity?

6. Good vs. evil is the central theme of the novel. Matt understands that the land of Opium is evil, but it takes him a while to distinguish the good and evil characters. What must Matt learn about trust before he recognizes the good and evil players? Which character disappoints him the most? Discuss what Cienfuegos means when he tells Matt that it isn’t always easy to be good.

7. How does being Lord of Opium change the way people view Matt? Debate whether it changes the way he views himself. How is he overwhelmed by his duties? What compromises must Matt make as he rules the empire? What is significant about Matt’s desire to be called Dom Sombra, Lord Shadow?

8. Symbolism in literature conveys a “deeper meaning” that a writer is trying to convey. What is symbolic about Matt giving Waitress the name Mirasol? Explain the symbolism of El Patrón’s touring car.

9. Discuss the view of women in the Land of Opium. How might Matt’s relationship with Maria change that view?

10. Matt hears El Patrón’s voice in his head. Explain what the voice means when it says, “Just because they took your weapons doesn’t mean you aren’t armed.” What weapons did the evil forces take? How is Matt “armed” to defeat them?

11. Explain Matt’s reaction when he learns the purpose of the Scorpion Star.

12. One of the main themes of the book is family. Matt believes that there is an instinct for family members whether you are born with them or not. You search until you find a parent or sibling. What is the relationship he has with Celia, Maria, Listen, the Bug, Cienfuegos and El Patron?

13. Listen is the only character Matt allows to visit the Oasis. Discuss why she, and not Maria, is taken there.

14. Listen influences major events in the book, although she is very young. Discuss why she has this effect, when others do not.

15. Matt strives for Cienfuegos's approval, but he never trusts him. Is this because he is growing up and trying to reject parental authority, or because of serious flaws in Cienfuegos's character? What are those flaws?

Activities

The following activities contained in this section particularly address the Common Core State Standards: (RL.7.1, 2, 4) (W.7.1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 7, 8, 9) (L.7.1, 3, 4d) (SL.7.1a, 1b, 1c, 1d, 4, 5, 6)

1. Ask students to explain the following simile: “It’s like owning a cage full of pit bulls.” Who are the pit bulls in the novel? What is the cage? Identify other similes in the novel. Then, write a simile that Matt might use to describe one of the following characters: Maria, Esperanza, Cienfuegos, Celia, Dr. Rivas, Listen, or Glass Eye.

2. El Patrón bought paintings and tapestries from Museo Nacional Del Prado, the National Museum of Spain, for his home. Have students research the most famous painters and paintings that hang in El Prado. (<http://www.museodelprado.es/en/the-collection/online-gallery/>). Ask them to use books in the library or sites on the Internet to research the technique and style of one of the artists.

3. Read about the global drug trafficking industry and how it affects crime and health issues in the United States. The following website is helpful: http://www.policymalmanac.org/crime/archive/drug_trafficking.shtml. Which government agency handles this issue? Write a letter to the agency and make one suggestion for a solution for solving the drug trade in our society.

4. In class, discuss the meaning of the word *humanitarian*. What are Matt’s most humanitarian efforts? In small groups, write a Declaration that the United Nations might present to Matt at the end of the novel for his humanitarian deeds. Cite at least ten points in the Declaration. Deliver the Declaration in class.

5. Ask students to write a brief opinion essay that addresses the following question: Is it easier to be “good” or “evil” in the Land of Opium? Use specific scenes from the novel to support ideas. Encourage peer editing for grammar and clarity of thought. Ask students to share their papers in class.

6. Antique books often have decorations at the beginning of each chapter. Ask students to make a decoration for each chapter of the book that is symbolic of the chapter content. Include a one-sentence annotation that summarizes the chapter.

7. In class, discuss the ecological message of the novel. Then divide students into small groups and instruct them to use books in the library or sites on the Internet to identify the greatest ecological issues facing our nation today. Have them stage a news talk show, including visuals, that presents the issues and possible solutions.

8. At the end of the novel the idea is expressed that some people don't know what to do with freedom, and therefore they abuse it. Divide the class into two opposing sides and ask them to debate "Should freedom be denied all because some abuse it?" Cite specific ways characters in the novel may abuse freedom. Are there correlations to our current society?

Guide written in 2013 by Pat Scales, a retired middle and high school librarian who is currently a children's and young adult literature consultant and specializes in curriculum and free speech issues.

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