



On the Blue Comet

Rosemary Wells

illustrated by
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Times are tough all over in 1931, especially at Oscar's house. But maybe time doesn't move in just one direction. Maybe you can travel back and forth in time, like on a train.

ISBN: 978-0-7636-3722-4

DISCUSSION POINTS

1. Oscar and his dad live by themselves. What happened to Oscar's mother? What do you think "walking lightning" is? Why does Oscar's dad not want to move out of their house? Why does Oscar put his head down on the train layout and open only one eye?
2. What was the Crash of 1929? How do people in the story say it happened? What is Wall Street? Why did rich men throw themselves out of high windows after the crash? Can you talk about events that have happened today that are similar to those that occurred in years after the crash?
3. The unemployment rate was 25 percent or more during the Depression. What is meant by that number? What is unemployment in the United States today? Do you know anyone who has lost his or her job and can't find another? Oscar says kids are never told what and why anything happens. Do you think that is still true?
4. What is a mortgage? Why does Oscar's dad have to leave home? The Midwest turned into a dust bowl during the 1930s. What does that mean? What effect did this have on farming families? Where did they go? What brought Mr. Applegate to Cairo, Illinois? Where did he come from, and what work did he do before? According to Mr. Applegate, what is the personal value achieved by reading poetry? Mr. Applegate tries to help Oscar. Does it work? Does Oscar help Mr. Applegate in return?
5. What does the poem "If" mean to you? Why do you think Mr. Applegate likes this poem so much? Why does Oscar memorize "If"? Do you ever memorize poems?
6. What does Aunt Carmen teach? What is the meaning of the word *declamation*? What is the root word in it?



CANDLEWICK PRESS DISCUSSION GUIDE

7. How does Mr. Applegate explain traveling through time? Who was Albert Einstein? How did he explain the concept of time travel? What does Mr. Applegate mean when he speaks of traveling back to Lincoln's time and telling Lincoln to stay away from theaters? How old is Oscar in Los Angeles? How many miles is that from Cairo, Illinois? How old is Oscar in New York? How many miles is New York from Cairo?
8. When Dutch and Oscar are on the train, something makes Dutch sit up and really take notice of Oscar. What is it? Who is Dutch in real-life history? There are newspaper stories throughout the book. Do they change in a significant way at the end of the story? If so, how?
9. Why are so many young men in uniform in December 1941? Which war was happening at this time, and what countries were involved in it? Who fought on the same side as the United States, and who were we fighting against? What is the draft? How would you feel about being drafted?
10. Who was the president of the United States in 1941? What disease did this president overcome? Who was president in 1931, during the early years of the Depression?
11. Oscar feels guilty about Mr. Applegate's death. Should he? What do his father and Dutch say to him? Why does Oscar's father finally decide that Oscar is not truly twenty-one years old?
12. Who is Mr. H.? Have you ever seen one of his movies or TV shows? Miss Chow came to America after China, her homeland, was attacked. What country attacked China, and when? What do you think a star stone might be?
13. Oscar notices women walking on the street wearing shorts in Los Angeles. He says that never would happen in Cairo, Illinois. What does the difference between the two places mean?
14. What kind of life do Claire's parents want her to have? What does Claire want? What Christmas present do they give her, and what does she think of it? Why do some girls dislike dolls? What is longing?
15. Claire's father has many powerful friends. They all gather in the living room because Oscar has produced a miraculous coin that is dated three years ahead of its time. Where did the coin come from? Would anyone go to the trouble to produce phony coins? Why or why not? Could anyone easily forge a dime? What is a dime made of?
16. Oscar begins to forget things when he is at Claire's house. What is the most awful thing for him to forget? What does he forget that loses him the respect of Claire's father and his friends?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rosemary Wells is a writer and an illustrator who is renowned for her board books, picture books, nonfiction, and novels for middle-grade readers and young adults. She is the co-author (with Secundino Fernandez) of *My Havana: Memories of a Cuban Boyhood*, illustrated by Peter Ferguson; the author of *Lincoln and His Boys*, illustrated by P.J. Lynch; and the illustrator of *My Very First Mother Goose*, edited by Iona Opie. She is also the creator of the unforgettable Max and Ruby. Rosemary Wells lives in Connecticut.



ABOUT THE ARTIST

Bagram Ibatoulline has illustrated such favorite books as *The Miraculous Journey of Edward Tulane* and *Great Joy*, both by Kate DiCamillo; *Thumbelina*, retold by Brian Alderson; *Hana in the Time of the Tulips* by Deborah Noyes; *The Animal Hedge* by Paul Fleischman; *The Serpent Came to Gloucester* by M. T. Anderson; and two Hans Christian Andersen stories retold by Stephen Mitchell, *The Tinderbox* and *The Nightingale*. Bagram Ibatoulline lives in Pennsylvania.

