

# Karen Cushman's Novels:

## A Discussion Guide



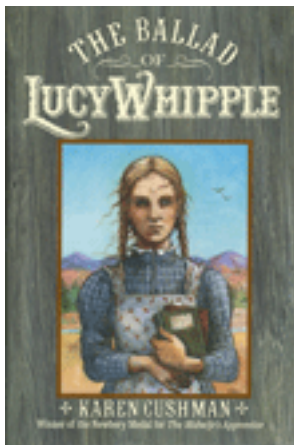
[The Loud Silence of Francine Green](#)



[Catherine, Called Birdy](#)



[The Midwife's Apprentice](#)



[The Ballad of Lucy Whipple](#)



[Matilda Bone](#)



[Rodzina](#)

*"I am honored that my books are being used in mother-daughter book groups. One mother told me her daughters like that Birdy and Alyce, Lucy and Matilda, are real girls like them, not princesses, and by talking about the characters' problems, they are talking about their own. There, I think, is the benefit of mother-daughter book clubs: talking together." —[Karen Cushman](#)*

The young women of Newbery Medalist Karen Cushman's novels are from diverse places and times. They are strong and they are determined. They make mistakes and they make strides. These heroines embark on engaging adventures and journeys of self-discovery that are not so different from those undertaken by today's young readers.

### ***The Loud Silence of Francine Green***

Quiet, obedient, unassuming — that's Francine Green. An eighth-grader in 1949 Los Angeles, Francine is disregarded by her parents, intimidated by the nuns at All Saints School for Girls, and frightened by the government's pursuit of the H-bomb and its campaign against communism. A growing friendship with opinionated, outspoken Sophie Bowman opens Francine to confusing new thoughts. Is it unfair of Sister Basil to punish Sophie for asking questions? How do you stand up for a friend? Is the government always right? Francine begins to find out what she herself is willing to speak up for in the world around her — a challenging journey for all teens, whatever their moment in history.

### ***Catherine, Called Birdy***

Catherine has trouble accepting her role as a young noblewoman. She tells her humorous story of rebellion in a journal given to her by her brother Edward, who hopes that the practice of writing will help make her "more observant, thoughtful, and learned."

### ***The Midwife's Apprentice***

Brat is the name given to the homeless waif who is taken in by the sharp-tempered midwife of a fourteenth-century English village. Alyce is the name she gives herself as she begins to find her place in the world.

### ***The Ballad of Lucy Whipple***

Lucy does not want to be in California, even though her mother insists that there is a fortune to be made in the gold rush town of Lucky Diggins. Lucy begins a campaign to make her way back home, but in doing so she finds home where she least expects it.

### ***Matilda Bone***

In medieval England, Matilda has known nothing but religious study and piety under the tutelage of Father Leufredus. A change of circumstance forces her to live with Red Peg, the Bonesetter of Blood and Bone Alley, where she must learn that goodness and human compassion come in many forms.

### ***Rodzina***

Rodzina is orphaned after her family emigrates from Poland to Chicago. In 1881, she is loaded onto an orphan train bound for California. At each stop she wonders if a new family and a new life await her.

### **For Further Discussion**

Groups may also wish to discuss the books more generally or in relation to one another. This section comprises the categories "Discussion Across the Texts," "Questions for Adults and Young People to Share," and "Author's Craft."

## A Discussion Guide



# The Loud Silence of Francine Green

by Karen Cushman

- [About the Book](#)
- [About the Author](#)
- [Questions for Group Discussion](#)
- [Classroom Projects](#)

**General themes:** *Growing Up, Freedom of Speech, Friendship, Fear, Family*

### About the Book

---

Quiet, obedient, unassuming — that's Francine Green. An eighth-grader in 1949 Los Angeles, Francine is disregarded by her parents, intimidated by the nuns at All Saints School for Girls, and frightened by the government's pursuit of the H-bomb and its campaign against communism. A growing friendship with opinionated, outspoken Sophie Bowman opens Francine to confusing new thoughts. Is it unfair of Sister Basil to punish Sophie for asking questions? How do you stand up for a friend? Is the government always right? Francine begins to find out what she herself is willing to speak up for in the world around her — a challenging journey for all teens, whatever their moment in history.

### About the Author

---

Award-winning author **Karen Cushman** presents a powerful story full of questions about how you grow up, learn to speak out, and become yourself.

Ms. Cushman is the author of six books for young people. She won a Newbery Honor for *Catherine, Called Birdy* and the Newbery Medal for *The Midwife's Apprentice*. *The Loud Silence of Francine Green* is her sixth book. The author lives with her family in Washington State.

# Questions for Group Discussion

---

## Growing Up

1. What do you learn about Francine Green and Sophie Bowman in the first chapter? What does the title of the book mean? Find some evidence in the book that shows what Francine thinks of herself. On page 58, Mr. Bowman says that Francine "has unplumbed depths." Does she?
2. Francine's sister, Dolores, tells Francine how to become popular and attract boys. What do you think about Dolores's guidance? Francine says that Sophie tells her to just be herself. What does "being yourself" mean? What do you think about the two different kinds of advice given to Francine?
3. Do you think Francine grows up during this story? Explain. Do "growing up" and "getting older" mean the same thing? Francine lives in another time. How is growing up in her world similar to — and different from — growing up in your world?

## Freedom of Speech

1. What is freedom of speech? What does Francine think about how Sophie supports freedom of speech? Does Sophie truly stand for freedom of speech or is she just being rebellious?
2. What does this story say about free speech? Think about Sophie at school, Francine at home, Jacob Mandelbaum, and Mr. Bowman. Is freedom of speech important? Why or why not?
3. What causes Francine to finally speak up? Why does it take her so long to find her own voice?

## Friendship

1. At the end of Chapter One, Francine says that she and Sophie are "on the way to being best friends." Brainstorm the qualities of a true friend. In what ways are Francine and Sophie friends? Is Francine as good a friend to Sophie as Sophie is to Francine? What happens to their friendship? Why? What does Francine learn about friendship from other characters in the book?
2. Which do you think is more important: being approved of or being original? (page 115) Why?
3. What choices does Francine make when other girls tease and exclude Sophie at recess? Why? How did she feel about what was happening? What other choices could Francine have made? Think about a time when you weren't as loyal a friend as you wished you had been. What could you have done differently?

## Fear

1. There are many types of fear in this novel. Who is afraid, and what are they afraid of? What scares you about your world? What makes you feel hopeful about the world you live in?
2. Francine says she is "trouble-phobic." What does she mean by that? In what ways does her fear of trouble affect her choices?
3. How does Francine think about Sister Basil at the beginning of the book? At the end? What do you think of Sister Basil? Why? Explain why Sophie tells Francine to stop comparing Sister Basil to Hitler.
4. Discuss the ways prejudice appears in this book. Consider Francine's thoughts about nuns, the experiences of the Petrovs, the girls in Francine's class, and Jacob Mandelbaum. In what ways do Francine and Sophie deal with prejudice?

## Family

1. Describe the relationships that Sophie and Francine have with their own and each other's parents. Does freedom of speech exist in their families? Does free speech have a place in parent-child relationships?
2. Sophie and Francine's families are very different. Compare the personalities of the two families and what affect it has, if any, on their lives.

## Classroom Projects

---

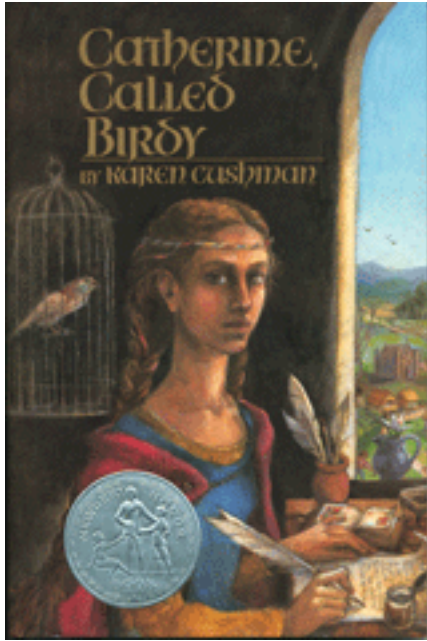
1. This novel takes place between August 1949 and June 1950. Have students research United States and international history during this period to make a timeline of important events.
2. Assign small groups of students a political topic to study: the House Un-American Activities Committee, the Hollywood Ten, Mao Zedong, communism, the atomic bomb, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, Harry Truman. Ask each group to create a presentation to teach the rest of the class about the topic as it is related to the time of the novel.
3. Research freedom of speech in the United States. What does it mean? In what ways is it a part of our country and history? Does everyone have freedom of speech, and has everyone always had it? Write a letter to someone who lives in another country explaining what freedom of speech means in the United States.
4. On page 173 Sister Pete says, "Much of Sophie's treatment is the result of her own behavior." Engage students in a discussion about this statement. Charge each with writing a persuasive essay supporting or opposing Sister Pete's view. The essays should include examples from the book.

5. On the dedication page, Karen Cushman includes a quotation from Graham Greene's *The Quiet American*: "Sooner or later one has to take sides if one is to remain human." In the novel, Mr. Bowman asks Francine what she thinks about "the bomb issue" (page 97). He says, "It's important to know what you think . . . or else you will be so hemmed in by other people's ideas and opinions, you won't have room for your own." Brainstorm a list of national or local current events with students (nuclear weapons can be included). Invite each student to choose one issue, find out more about it, and write a speech explaining his or her opinion, citing evidence from their research.

6. Assign pairs or small groups of students to find out more about the cultural life of Francine's teenage years. Make each responsible for creating a display to present one of the period's celebrities or aspects of entertainment noted in the book: Montgomery Clift, Jerry Lewis and Dean Martin, Frank Sinatra, Vic Damone, Betty Grable, *Look* magazine, radio shows (including *Dragnet*), Doris Day, Mona Freeman, the Sears catalog, television in 1949–50, soda fountains, Nat King Cole, the Mills Brothers, baseball in 1949–50, Abbott and Costello.

7. Francine journeys from silence to questions to speaking up for what she thinks and values. Ask students to list their own questions and their own values. What do they think they would speak up for? What do they question? Is there anything worth getting in trouble for? After students have had multiple writing sessions, charge them with writing a personal credo — a statement of their values and opinions. Encourage students to use this opportunity to get to know themselves better, just as Francine gets to find her true self.

## A Discussion Guide



# Catherine, Called Birdy

by Karen Cushman

- Questions for Discussion

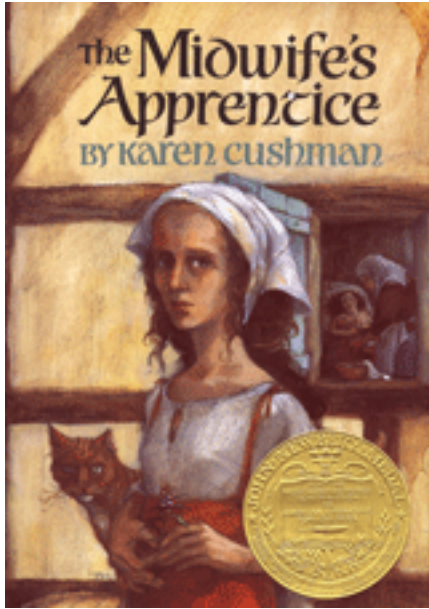
**General themes:** *Rebellion, Acceptance*

### Questions for Discussion

---

- Are there parts of Catherine's medieval world that you find shocking or surprising? Why do you think the author chose to include this information?
- Does Catherine always tell the truth in her journal? How can you tell?
- What kinds of assumptions does Catherine make about people? Her suitors? Her family? The Jews? Perkin? Aelis and George? Does she ever discover that her early assumptions about people were wrong?
- How does Catherine feel about her father? Why? In what ways is she similar to him?
- Why does Catherine finally decide that it is useless to run away? Whose advice helps her to realize this?
- Why, at the end of the story, is Catherine satisfied with her arranged marriage? Is this a realistic conclusion for a story about a young woman of the Middle Ages?
- Compare Catherine's early diary entries with her later ones. How does she change?

## A Discussion Guide



# The Midwife's Apprentice

by Karen Cushman

- Questions for Discussion

**General themes:** *Overcoming adversity, Finding identity*

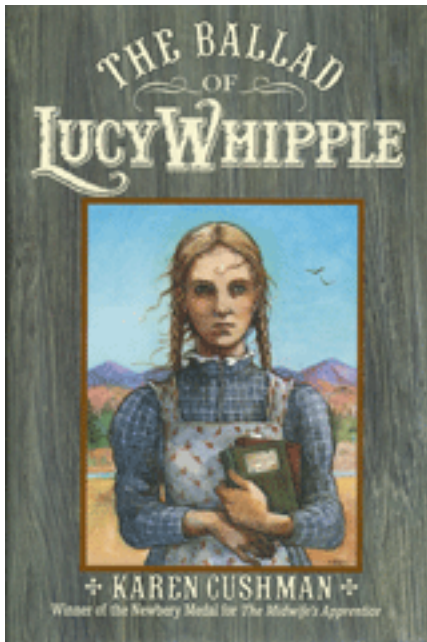
## Questions for Discussion

---

- In what ways does Alyce demonstrate intelligence? Why do you think some people call her a "lackwit fool"?
- What are some of the villagers' beliefs and superstitions? Why is it important for the author to include those beliefs in the story?
- Who or what is "the devil"? What do the devil's visits reveal about the villagers?
- What events and beliefs about herself cause Alyce to leave the midwife? What makes her decide to return?
- In what ways do Jane Sharp, Will, the cat, Edward, Jennet, and Magister Reese all help Alyce to find her place in the world?
- How is life different for children of Alyce's time than it is for children now? How is it similar?
- Do you think Alyce will succeed in making a life for herself? Why?



## A Discussion Guide



# The Ballad of Lucy Whipple

by Karen Cushman

- Questions for Discussion

**General themes:** *Adapting, Self-discovery*

### Questions for Discussion

---

- What do you think of Lucy's mother's decision to move the family to California? Do you agree or disagree with Lucy's reaction? Why?
- How does the author portray the rough-and-tumble atmosphere of 1880s California? Why do you think she included Butte's death?
- What do Lucy's letters tell you about her? Why do you think she sometimes expresses different feelings in her letters from those in her narrative?
- How does Lucy react to instances of prejudice and injustice?
- How do the adults in the story sometimes act like children? How do the children in the story sometimes take on adult roles?
- Compare and contrast Lucy's feelings about California at the beginning of the story and at the end. Why do her feelings change?

## A Discussion Guide



# Matilda Bone

by Karen Cushman

- Questions for Discussion

**General themes:** *Assumptions, Belonging*

### Questions for Discussion

---

- Why do you think the author made Matilda's religious beliefs an important part of her character? Are you familiar with Matilda's religion? How does this affect the way you understand the story and relate to Matilda?
- What assumptions does Matilda make about Red Peg and the people of Blood and Bone Alley? Why do you think she trusts Master Theobald more than Doctor Margery at first? What causes her to rethink her assumptions?
- How does each of the following people help Matilda to discover that Blood and Bone Alley is a place where she belongs: Red Peg, Doctor Margery, Tom, Walter, Nathaniel, Effie, Tildy?
- How do Red Peg and Father Leufredus express their care and concern for Matilda differently? Who do you think cares more for Matilda? Who is the better role model?
- How does Matilda eventually combine what she learned from Father Leufredus and Red Peg to help people?

## A Discussion Guide



### Rodzina

by Karen Cushman

- Questions for Discussion

**General themes:** *Prejudice, Family*

### Questions for Discussion

---

- What are some examples of prejudice in the story? Why do you think the author chooses to include them?
- The adults in the story claim that they have the orphans' best interests in mind. When is this true? When is it not true?
- How is Rodzina's ethnicity important to her? How does she let other people know this?
- What emotions does Rodzina keep to herself? Why?
- Rodzina doesn't always follow the rules. Do you think she is justified in doing this? In what instances does this behavior help her to survive?
- Why do you think people say Lacey is "slow"? Do you agree? What examples support your opinion?
- Despite their differences, how are Rodzina and Miss Doctor alike? Do you think they will be able to get along in the future?

## For Further Discussion



### Karen Cushman

- [Discussion Across the Texts](#)
- [Questions for Adults and Young People to Share](#)
- [Author's Craft](#)

### Discussion Across the Texts

---

- Catherine, Alyce, and Matilda all come from medieval England, but their social circumstances are vastly different. What parts of their experiences are the same? How do they differ? What might they think of one another? What could they learn from one another?
- Lucy and Rodzina both journey across the United States. Are there places where Rodzina follows in Lucy's footsteps? How do the girls feel about their journeys? What do they learn about others? About themselves?
- How is each girl's name important to her sense of self? In what ways is "Birdy" an appropriate nickname for Catherine? Why is it important to Rodzina that people pronounce her Polish name correctly? Why do Lucy and Alyce rename themselves? What must Matilda discover before she can accept the name Matilda Bone?
- What are society's expectations for each young woman? What challenges does she face? What character traits help her to face these challenges?

### Questions for Adults and Young People to Share

---

- How do adults and young people in the books learn to appreciate and accept one another's strengths and weaknesses?
- What kinds of mothers and mother figures appear in the books? How do they help to shape the young characters' experiences? What can modern readers learn from the mother-daughter relationships in the books?

- In what ways might adult readers and young readers react differently to the characters and themes in the books? What are the reasons for this?

## Author's Craft

---

- Why do you think the author chooses to tell each story from the perspective of only one character? How does she let her readers know what the other characters in the story are thinking and feeling?
- Do you think the author always agrees with her characters' opinions and actions? How do you know?
- How does the author's inclusion of journals and letters in her books help you to understand the characters?
- What role does the author's use of humor play in her books? How does she use characters' misunderstandings to create humorous situations? How would her books be different without humor?