

Cabin Fever Kids



Fun and fascinating questions based on children's books.

Perfect for parents and teachers looking to get kids thinking more deeply and thoughtfully about life's big questions. Links to readings of the stories included.

Ages 4+

It begins as a typical library storytime, and for some children, their first trip to the library. Families are seated in a big circle, some talking, laughing, and jostling for the best view, some quiet and introspective. The storyteller opens the book and reads to the crowd. But after the story ends, that's when things get interesting.

"Who gets to decide what a person can and cannot do?," asks an adult, called the "scholar," seated next to the storyteller. "Is that fair? Why or why not? How do you know?" The kids begin responding to the scholar's questions. Children *and* adults reference choices made by the characters in the book and compare them with the choices they've made themselves. The whole group starts to explore how they might apply those choices and ideas to their own lives, their families' lives, and even society itself. Families, often for the first time, experience reading together and discussing big ideas, sharing their experiences and personal wisdom with others. Stories leap from pages of books and become conversations—conversations that are alive and evolving.

To watch a session of Prime Time Family Reading is to realize not only that we are all philosophers, sages, and intellectuals, but that we have been so from early in our lives. The Humanities Washington program, which takes place at dozens of libraries around the state each year and serves hundreds of families, takes a deeper look at the humanities content in children's literature, encouraging stronger engagement with ideas in books and igniting a lifelong interest in reading and learning.

When COVID-19 struck, closing schools and workplaces and keeping so many of us at home, Humanities Washington created Cabin Fever Kids, a digital project inspired by Prime Time Family Reading. One to two times per week, people across the state would receive a reading of a beloved children's book in their inbox, along with open-ended questions about the story rooted in philosophy, critical thinking, sociology, psychology, and other disciplines.

With schools across the state still closed, and a future that remains uncertain, we decided to compile our Cabin Fever Kids project into a single digital book. We hope that parents, teachers, and families can make use of it as part of remote learning, home learning, or even bedtime reading. Even adults without children might be inspired—after all, diving beneath the surface of a book's ideas is something we can all do to enrich our experience of reading.

*Learn more about Prime Time Family Reading
and join our mailing list at humanities.org*

Tips for Reading Together

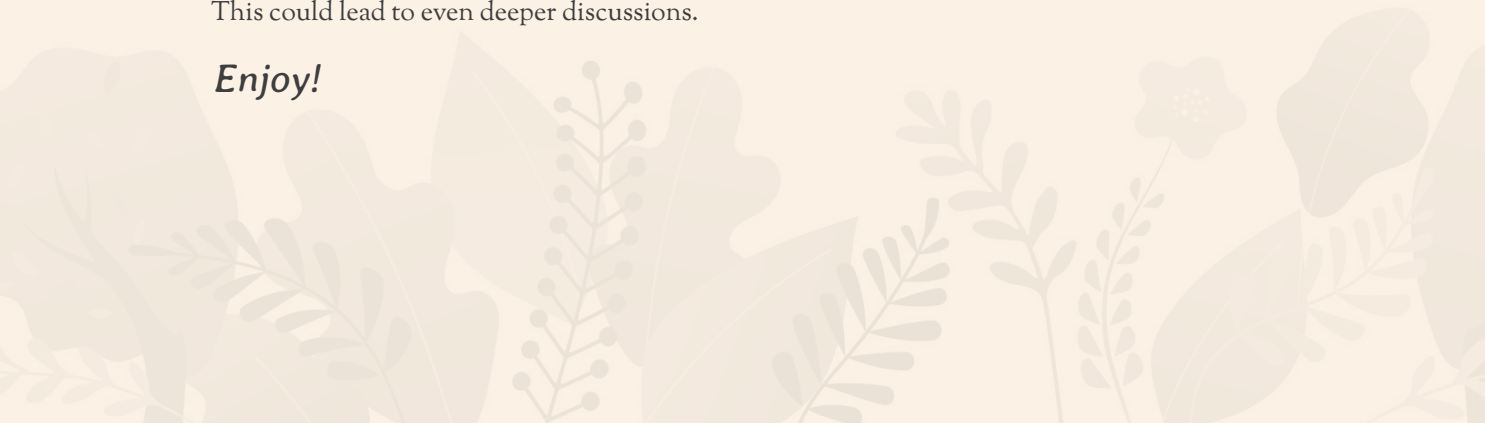
Discussing stories out loud helps us better understand our beliefs and question the world around us. Talking about books doesn't mean the family has a strenuous philosophical debate. Rather, it encourages a deeper level of engagement that connects with the mind long after we close the book. Given how reading together can help connect adults and children alike, we hope you'll make reading and discussing stories part of your everyday family activities. Doing so can transform home into a place of exploration and learning.

The books we have highlighted here prompt deep discussion without being overly didactic. The questions have no right or wrong answers; they are intended to prompt thought and reflection of big ideas. Plus, these stories aren't just for kids—adults can have rich conversations based on these books as well.

Some suggestions for engaging with these stories:

- **Make it routine.** You might try listening to a story and its set of questions on the same night each week. Read before dinner, or during dinner, or before bed. This structure allows for discussion throughout the week and could guide you toward deeper discussion of the next story you select. They're arranged in no particular order. Engage with them in any way you like.
- **Allow for quiet reflection.** Remember, the questions have no right or wrong answers. Everyone has something to say; it might just take some time to form thoughts, particularly when they're about big ideas.
- **Listen.** Allow everyone a chance to discuss the stories, not just kids. Everyone experiences life differently and it's through reading and discussing stories that we learn about and from each other.
- **Remember questions and ideas for the next time** your family reads and discusses books together. This could lead to even deeper discussions.

Enjoy!



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Sylvester and the Magic Pebble

by William Steig

A donkey collects interesting rocks. One day he finds a magic pebble and makes a wish that comes true instantly. Will all of his wishes be good?



[Listen to the book here \(https://bit.ly/3otcLDR\)](https://bit.ly/3otcLDR)



Or you can support your library system by downloading the e-book or audio version

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Questions:

Usually when we hear stories about finding something magical, we imagine that the best things will happen for the characters in the story.

- Was what happened to Sylvester for the best? How or how not?
- Was the magical pebble useful to him? Why or why not?

Sylvester's wish gets him in trouble.

- If you had been in the same situation, what would you have wished for? Why?
- What would be the best kind of wish? The worst? Why?

Sometimes characters in books learn lessons.

- What lessons did Sylvester and his family learn?
- What do you think happened the next day or week?



How I Learned Geography

by Uri Schulevitz

A young boy tells the story of escaping conflict in his home country to subsequently live in a refugee camp, where he and his family share a small hut with another family. The situation is difficult, and food is scarce. The boy copes by studying a large map of the world. How does he do this? Is geography really all he discovers?



[Listen to the book here \(https://bit.ly/2TE32w1\)](https://bit.ly/2TE32w1)



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Questions:

The family in this story flees their home country in search of peace. They must leave behind not only their belongings, but also the security of how they lived.

- Imagine you had to flee like the family did and leave behind everything except what you could carry. What would you take? Why that?

Think about the dad's actions. If you were hungry and your parent came home and said "I didn't bring home any food. Instead, I brought you a map! [or a book]"

- Would you be happy about that? Disappointed? Angry?

Imagine yourself as the dad in this story. You could only buy a tiny amount of food or you could buy a map.

- Which would you choose? Why?

The boy sees "wondrous temples where stone carvings danced on the walls, and birds of all colors sang on the rooftop."

- What place would you like to visit? Why?



Julius, the Baby of the World

by Kevin Henkes

Lilly thinks her new baby brother, Julius, is disgusting. She says, “if he was a number, he would be zero.” But when someone else criticizes Julius, things change for Lilly.



[Listen to the book here \(http://bit.ly/2GbUKIT\)](http://bit.ly/2GbUKIT)



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Questions:

Sometimes what makes a book interesting is that we can see ourselves in one of the characters. Or we see people we know in one of the characters:

- Does anyone in Julius, the Baby of the World remind you of yourself or of someone you know? Who and why? A brother or sister maybe? Or one of your children?

Before Julius is born, Lilly thinks he is “one of us” and treats him well. Then she decides he is not “one of us” (see picture Lilly paints of “My Entire Complete Family” for example) and she treats him badly. Then suddenly, Lilly thinks Julius is “one of us” again (that is, part of the family) and the way she treats him changes:

- Before Julius is born, Lilly loves him. What changed?
- What do you think “one of us” means?
- Do you treat people differently whether they are “one of us” or not?
- Do other people do that? Is it a good thing or a bad thing? Why?
- Is it always a good thing or a bad thing? Sometimes? Why?

After Lilly heard Cousin Garland say the same terrible things she said about Julius, Lilly changed her opinion of her little brother:

- Can opinions change? Why?
- Did baby Julius change, or did Lilly change? How can you tell?



Chato's Kitchen

by Gary Soto and Susan Guevara

A family of mice move into a neighborhood and are greeted by Chato, a cat who can't wait to *have* them for dinner. Chato quickly invites the mice over to his house for dinner. He also invites his friend, Novio Boy, another cat who helps him make rice and beans, salsa, carne asada, chile rellenos, tortillas, and flan. Novio Boy also helps Chato make other plans . . . but will those plans change?



[Listen to the book here \(https://bit.ly/3jDgY41\)](https://bit.ly/3jDgY41)



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Questions:

The mice risked their safety going to Chato the cat's house for dinner, but they also said that they thought Chato seemed muy simpatico (very nice):

- Would you have gone over to Chato's for dinner? Why or why not?

Chato and Novio Boy had plans to eat the mice. But because Chorizo the dog joined them for dinner, the cats changed their minds. Try to imagine the next day.

- What do you think happened after dinner?

If a dog can be friends with a family of mice, can two cats be friends with a dog? How do you decide who to be friends with? Would it be better to have friends who are different from each other or all the same? Why?

- Who is clever, and why?
- Do you have to use your imagination to be clever? Why?
- Are cleverness and smarts the same thing?

Pretend you could choose to be one of the characters in this story.

- Which character would you choose to be? Why?
- Is one character better than the others? How so?



Catching the Moon

by Crystal Hubbard

Marcenia Lyle thought there was nothing better than playing baseball. As a young girl in the 1930s, she caught fly balls and stole bases, and dreamed of playing professional baseball. Marcenia overcame objections from her family and coaches who thought girls shouldn't be on the baseball field. She eventually earned a position in a baseball summer camp sponsored by the St. Louis Cardinals, and she was on her way. How did she achieve her dream?



[Listen to the book here \(https://bit.ly/3jKso5Y\)](https://bit.ly/3jKso5Y)



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Questions:

Marcenia Lyle overcame objections from her family and from coaches to eventually become the first woman to play with a (formerly) all-male professional baseball team.

- Is there anything you feel so strongly about that you would do anything to do?
- Who gets to decide what a person can and cannot do? Is that fair? Why or why not?
- People sometimes describe things as for “girls only” or “boys only.” Do you think this is fair? Why or why not?

Many of the stories we read are about heroes overcoming obstacles.

- What makes Marcenia Lyle a hero in this story? How would you describe Marcenia?
- Do people have chances to be heroes today? Can you think of any?

We all need help to achieve our goals.

- How did her friends help Marcenia achieve her dream?
- Has anyone ever helped you accomplish something?
- How would you help someone else achieve a dream?



Chester's Way

by Kevin Henkes

Chester and Wilson do everything together. They have their own way of doing things – everything! They both cut their sandwiches diagonally. They always keep pocket emergency first-aid kits handy. They plan together and cooperate together. But what happens when Lilly – who has her own way of doing things – moves into the neighborhood? Will Chester and Wilson continue to cut their sandwiches diagonally? What will happen?



[Listen to the book here \(https://bit.ly/3mwjURQ\)](https://bit.ly/3mwjURQ)



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Questions:

Chester and Wilson do everything together. They cooperate and coordinate with each other. But when Lilly moves into the neighborhood, things change.

- Do you like to do things in the same way every day? Or do you like to try different ways of doing things? Why?
- Why do you think Chester and Wilson were not accepting of Lilly at first?
- What made Chester and Wilson change their minds about Lilly? Have you ever changed your mind about someone?
- Have you ever met someone who did things differently than you do? What happened?
- What do you think will happen now that the three mice have met Victor?



Harry the Dirty Dog

by Gene Zion

Harry is a white dog with black spots. He loves playing and getting dirty. What Harry does not like at all are bath days! It's on one of those days that he decides to run away from home and get as dirty as possible. Soon Harry no longer looks like a white dog with black spots; instead, he looks like a black dog with white spots. Will his family recognize him when he gets home? Will he ever have another bath?



[Listen to the book here \(https://bit.ly/2JnC5en\)](https://bit.ly/2JnC5en)



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Questions:

When Harry gets so dirty that he looks like a black dog with white spots his family no longer recognizes him.

- Why do you think his family didn't believe it was Harry, even when he did all of his usual tricks?
- What is it about how Harry looks that changes how his family responds?
- Do you look different after a haircut? What are some other ways people change their appearance?
- How would you recognize someone who suddenly looked very different?
- What do you think would happen if you decided to wear all your clothes inside out? Would your family recognize you?

Harry loved being away from home playing and getting dirty, but he still wanted to return home.

- Why didn't Harry continue to stay out and play some more? Why did he want to return to his home?
- Home is where we eat and sleep, but is it more? How so?
- What is important to you about home?



Rainbow Fish

by Marcus Pfister

The most beautiful fish in the sea, Rainbow Fish has glittery scales, and swims happily while he is admired by other fish. A little blue fish asks Rainbow fish to share his beautiful scales. But what happens when Rainbow fish refuses to share?



[Listen to the book here \(https://bit.ly/3kJZaWf\)](https://bit.ly/3kJZaWf)



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Questions:

After Rainbow Fish refuses to give the little blue fish a glittery scale the other fish turn away from Rainbow Fish whenever he swims near. Rainbow Fish says to the starfish: “I really am beautiful. Why doesn’t anybody like me?”

- Is having beauty or beautiful things more important than being liked? Why or why not?
- Have you ever had something you didn’t want to share with anyone?
- If you were made to share, how would that make you feel?

The octopus tells Rainbow Fish to give away his scales so he can “discover how to be happy.” But wasn’t Rainbow Fish happy before, when he was being admired for his beautiful scales.

- What changed? Are there different kinds of happiness?
- Are there different ways to be happy?

“The more he gave away, the more delighted he became. When the water around him filled with glittering scales, he at last felt at home among the other fish.”

- Is that always the case? Is it always true that if you share, you’ll be happier? What are some examples?
- Why do you think Rainbow Fish finally felt at home among the other fish? Did he change or did the fish around him change? Or both?



Arnie the Donut

by Laurie Keller

Arnie the doughnut is not a typical doughnut. He doesn't agree that doughnuts are only delicious. From the time he's selected at the bakery, placed in a bag, driven home, and placed on a plate, all seems like a typical day; that is, for a doughnut, but maybe it won't be a typical day for Arnie. Will he be eaten? Will Arnie save other doughnuts from the same fate?



[Listen to the book here \(https://bit.ly/37UbC23\)](https://bit.ly/37UbC23)



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Questions:

At the bakery, Arnie looks around and sees all sorts of doughnuts sitting nearby. All the other doughnuts are ready to be placed in bags or boxes, and eventually to be eaten. When Mr. Bing selects Arnie, he is happy to go. But later, when Arnie is lifted toward Mr. Bing's mouth to be eaten, Arnie protests – loudly! Mr. Bing explains that that's what doughnuts are for, to be eaten. Arnie calls the baker to warn other doughnuts. But when the baker asks all the other doughnuts if they know that they will eventually be eaten, they say, “yes, we know! We're delicious!”

- Why do you think Arnie didn't want to be eaten like the other doughnuts?
- How can the doughnuts be so similar and yet, be so different?
- Is it okay to be different than others? Why or why not?
- What makes you you?

After deciding not to eat Arnie, Mr. Bing feels like he must find some way to keep Arnie around. They both make lists. Arnie says he's “good at lots of stuff” and suggests personal trainer, while Mr. Bing thinks Arnie could be a good paperweight. But when they cannot agree Arnie has to leave.

- Arnie says, “I guess doughnuts really are only good for eating.” What else was Arnie good at?
- How are you different than how others see you? How can you know?
- How can we tell what we're good at?
- Can you be good or bad at being yourself?



My Very Own Room

by Amada Irma Perez

The young girl in this story loves her family very much—five younger brothers, her two parents, and lots of visiting relatives—but in such a crowded house, how can she find a place of her own, much less, a place to read!



[Listen to the book here \(https://bit.ly/3mJ68eZ\)](https://bit.ly/3mJ68eZ)



Or you can support your library system by downloading the e-book or audio version

Watch the author discuss her life and work and hear her read excerpts from two more of her books [here](#). Learn more about the author [here](#).

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Questions:

The family in this book is very large and their home is crowded. They live in a very small house, but happily take in relatives coming to the US, making things even more crowded.

- Why do you think the family takes in relatives?
- Would you double or triple the number of people staying in your room for months to help them out?
- How are some ways families help other families?

The little girl in this story says her room would not be complete without books.

- What one thing – one favorite thing – would your room or your home be incomplete without?
- If you were to be able to keep only two books, what two books would they be? Why?
- How do you make a special place of your own in your home? Do other family members have their own special places in your home? Why or why not?



A Different Pond

by Bao Phi

A memorable story of a typical morning for a father and son, who rise early to go fishing. But poet Bao Phi tells us about so much more: triumphs and challenges of ancestors, and one family's connections to the past and how those connections shape their lives. What happens when the father and boy go fishing? Are they only trying to catch fish, or are they also fishing for memories?



[Listen to the book here \(https://bit.ly/31VwbHy\)](https://bit.ly/31VwbHy)



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Questions:

Families often have histories of difficult times. For this family, it is the experience of war in Vietnam.

- What kind of difficulties has your family experienced and how did your ancestors overcome those problems?
- Are the boy and his father “at home” in the United States? How can you tell?
- How many places have you lived in your life? Of those places, which were most like a place you would truly call “home” to you?

The boy tells us that his father’s spoken English is compared to a “slow dirty river.”

- Why would someone say that?
- Why do you think the boy describes his father’s spoken English like “gentle rain?”

The book contains many similes (sim’-uh-leees), which are comparisons that use linking words (like, as, such as, how) to make the likeness clear.

- What do you think the author is saying when the boy describes the sky with “stars like freckles” or when he describes the minnows as feeling like “silver arrows?”
- Can you use some similes to describe your home or what you see outside the window?
- If you and your family take turns sharing stories, what stories would you tell. What stories would you like to hear?



Zombies Don't Eat Veggies

by Megan and Jorge Lacera

Mo Romero is a zombie who secretly loves veggies – growing, cooking, eating, and especially sharing vegetables. But when Mo's parents insist that he eat only zombie cuisine, like fingers, brain cake, and brain stew, Mo must either continue to keep his love of vegetables a secret or come clean and confess to his parents. What choices can Mo make? How will his family react to his not-so-zombie like ways?



Listen to the book here ([In English](#) | [In Spanish](#))



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Questions:

Mo secretly loves vegetables, which is not at all like a typical zombie. Soon he begins to question if he is a zombie at all.

- Name one way you're the same as Mo and one way you're different from Mo.
- How are you different from or the same as your family? Why do you think that is?
- What does Mo need to do in order to reveal his secret? Why?
- What do you think would happen if Mo never reveals his secret love of vegetables?

Mo makes gazpacho for his family hoping they love it. But when they don't like it one bit, Mo says, "maybe other zombies don't eat vegetables, but I do."

- What do you think is the toughest obstacle Mo faces in telling this to his parents? Why is it the toughest?
- What do you think it means to be brave?
- Is it important for Mo to be able to tell his family the truth? Why?



Enemy Pie

by Derek Munson

The book starts with: “It should have been the perfect summer.” That is, until Jeremy Ross moves into the neighborhood and becomes “enemy number one!” For the main character, this is supremely bad news. It’s a good thing dad has a plan – enemy pie. But will dad’s plan work? Aren’t enemies forever?



[Listen to the book here \(https://bit.ly/3kLZWID\)](https://bit.ly/3kLZWID)



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Questions:

The author tells us that the protagonist (the main character) feels that Jeremy is his enemy.

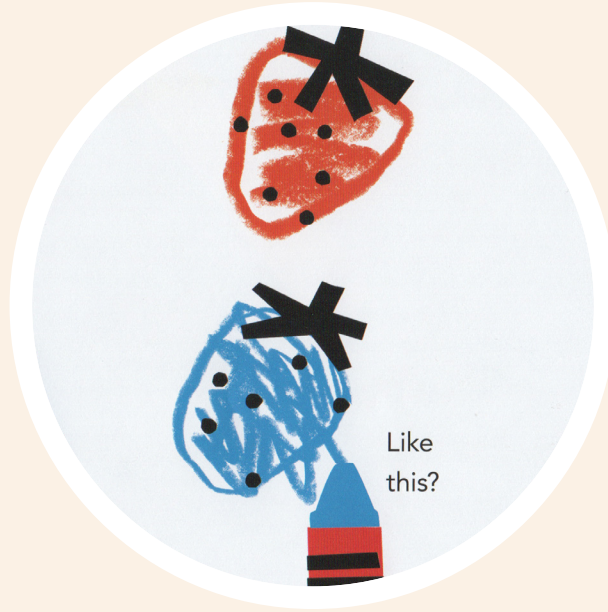
- Do you think his reasons are good enough for the boy to count Jeremy as his enemy? Why or why not?
- Have you ever had an enemy? If so, what made that person your enemy? Do you think you could spend a day with your enemy and have fun? Why or why not?

Jeremy was surprised when the boy asked him to play.

- Do you think Jeremy knew he was thought of as an enemy? Why or why not?
- Does it take two people to agree to be enemies or can one person decide alone?

The two boys spend a day together and learn that they like to do the same things. They even teach each other how to do different things. The boy thought Jeremy “wasn’t being a very good enemy.”

- What do you think the boy meant when he thought Jeremy wasn’t being a very good enemy?
- How do enemies act?
- Do enemies have to be enemies forever or can an enemy become friends?



Red: A Crayon's Story

by Michael Hall

Red is miserable: "He was red. But he wasn't very good at it." Other crayons try to help him be better at being red, but he just can't be red! That is what's making Red miserable. That is until Berry asks Red to make an ocean; Red says it was easy! Red then makes blue jeans, a blue whale, and blue skies. How will the other crayons react when Red says, "I'm blue!"?



[Listen to the book here \(https://bit.ly/3otcLDR\)](https://bit.ly/3otcLDR)



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Questions:

Red is good at some things but not others.

- How can we tell if he is good at being red or blue?
- Can you be good or bad at being yourself?

Others have lots to say about how Red might be better at being red, but what does this mean?

- Have you ever been given a label that didn't feel right? How did you deal with that?
- Have you ever tried to do something or be something you just couldn't do or be? Why?
- Do you think labels can be harmful or helpful? How so?
- Who decides what labels you? Do we have control of what others see?

Red says "I'm Blue!"

- How are you different than how others see you? How can you know?
- How are you different than others? What makes you you?
- Is it okay to be different? Why?

Red isn't like the other crayons.

- How is Red similar to or different from other crayons?
- How is Red the same and different at the same time? How can that be?
- Do you think there might be other mislabeled crayons? Why?



Last Stop on Market Street

by Matt de la Peña

Every Sunday after church, CJ and his Nana ride the bus along Market Street. But CJ thinks they should have a car like his friend Colby. But when CJ asks Nana questions about why they don't have what other people have, she responds with completely different ideas. Will Nana show CJ how to see things differently? Will CJ ever see the beauty and fun in their weekly routine?



[Listen to the book here \(https://bit.ly/383VvyW\)](https://bit.ly/383VvyW)



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? Questions:

Everyone looks at the world differently. Nana says that “some people watch the world with their ears.” The blind man responds “That’s a fact. Their noses too.”

- What are some other ways you could “watch” the world? What might you notice that you didn’t earlier?
- What is your favorite way to “watch” the world?
- When CJ’s Nana tells him that the big tree is drinking rainwater through a straw, is she lying to him? What do you think she means? Why do you think Nana looks at the situation in this way?

CJ wonders why he and his Nana don’t have a car, but Nana points out that they have a bus that breathes fire – with a driver, Mr. Dennis, who always has a trick for CJ. When CJ wishes for an iPod, his Nana points out that he has the real thing right in front of him, a man playing guitar.

- Can you look at what you have – or don’t have – in different ways? What are some examples?
- How would you help someone else see things differently? How would you change someone else’s mind?
- Is it okay to change your mind? Why or why not?

At the end of the story CJ tells his Nana that he’s glad they came – even though earlier he was upset that he couldn’t play like the other kids.

- CJ and Nana take the bus so they can serve meals to others. Why do they do that? Is helping others something that all of us should do? Why or why not?
- What are some ways you could help someone else that don’t cost any money?
- Is it more important to help yourself, help your family, help your society, or help the world? Why?



The Big Orange Splot

by Daniel Manus Pinkwater

Mr. Plumbean lives on a “neat street” where all the houses look the same. For some unknown reason a seagull flies over and drops a can of orange paint on Mr. Plumbean’s roof, leaving a big orange splot! What does this mean for Mr. Plumbean and his neighbors? Do they still live on a “neat street?”



[Listen to the book here \(https://bit.ly/35KCBKS\)](https://bit.ly/35KCBKS)



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Questions:

The seagull drops a can of paint on Mr. Plumbean's roof, but wait, why does the seagull have a can of orange paint in the first place?

- The author writes that no one knows, but can anything ever happen by chance?
- Where do you think this situation began: When Mr. Plumbean got his house? When paint was invented? When birds began to fly? What do you think? Why?

At the beginning of the story all the houses look the same. But at the end of the story, someone might say that all the houses still look the same, only different.

- Why would someone say that the houses looked the same at the end of the story?
- How would you compare the street at the end of the story with the street at the beginning of the story?
- What do you think?

Mr. Plumbean says that he has the right to paint his house as he pleases, regardless of what his neighbors think.

- What do you think? Should we all be able to decorate our homes as we want, or should others have a say? Why?
- What if someone decides to decorate with broken washing machines and old tires? Is that different than colorful strips and orange splots? How so?
- Who decides how things should look? Why?



The Empty Pot

by Demi

Ping is exceptionally good at growing flowers. In this Chinese folktale, when the aging Emperor decides to find his successor (his replacement), he holds a contest. The Emperor gives every child a seed, and says that “Whoever can show me their best in a year’s time will succeed me to the throne.” After a whole year, the other children have flowers they’ve grown to show to the Emperor, but Ping has no flower to show. He cannot get his seed to sprout. What will happen when he presents his empty pot to the Emperor?



[Listen to the book here \(https://bit.ly/3eamObW\)](https://bit.ly/3eamObW)



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Questions:

It seems like all the children lied to the Emperor, except Ping of course.

- Do you think the Emperor has also lied? Are there times when dishonesty is okay? How do you decide?
- Why do you think all the other children present flowers to the Emperor?

All the children are determined to show the Emperor their best.

- Do the other children show determination? How so?
- Does Ping show determination? How so?

The Emperor is looking his successor, but not just anyone. He wants someone with particular qualities.

- What sort of qualities is the Emperor looking for in his successor? Why are these qualities important?
- If you were Emperor, what qualities would you look for in a successor? Why?