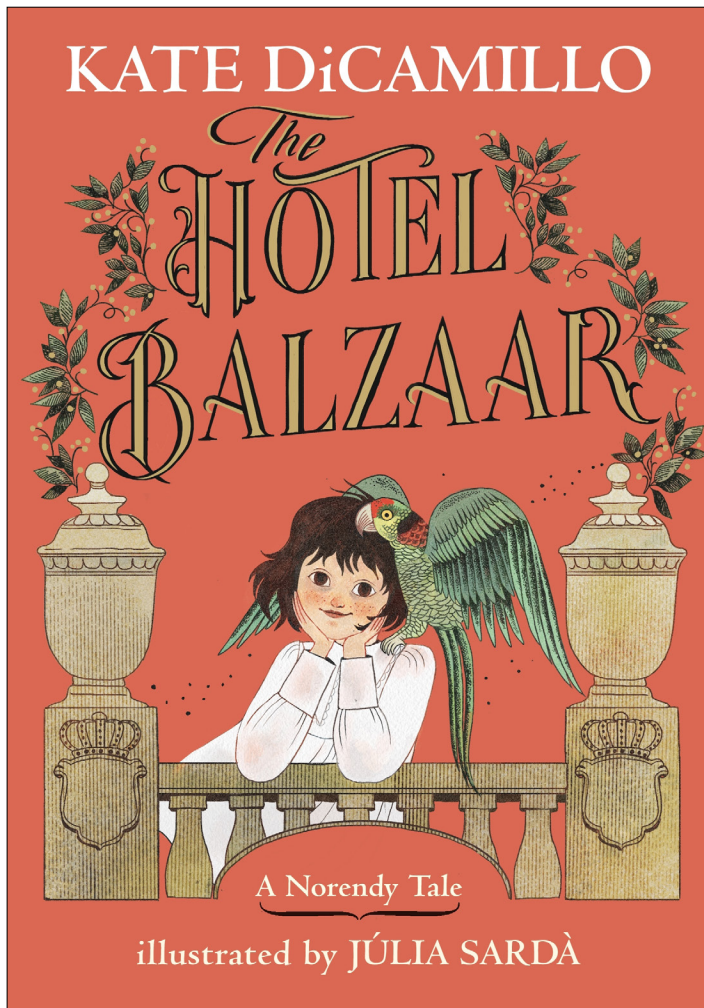


THE HOTEL BALZAAR

KATE DiCAMILLO

illustrated by
JÚLIA SARDÀ



ABOUT THE BOOK

At the Hotel Balzaar, Marta's mother rises before the sun, puts on her uniform, and instructs Marta to roam as she will but *quietly*, invisibly—like a little mouse. While her mother cleans rooms, Marta slips down the back staircase to the grand lobby to chat with the bellman, study the painting of an angel's wing over the fireplace, and watch a cat chase a mouse around the face of the grandfather clock, all the while dreaming of the return of her soldier father, who has gone missing. One day, a mysterious countess with a parrot checks in, promising a story—in fact, seven stories in all, each to be told in its proper order. As the stories unfold, Marta begins to wonder: could the secret to her father's disappearance lie in the countess's tales? With magical storytelling by Kate DiCamillo and elegant line art by Júlia Sardà, *The Hotel Balzaar* masterfully juggles yearning and belief, despair and hope.

Common Core Connections

This discussion guide, which can be used with large or small groups, will help students meet several of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) for English Language Arts. These include the reading literature standards for key ideas and details, craft and structure, and integration of knowledge and ideas (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL), as well as the speaking and listening standards for comprehension and collaboration and for presentation of knowledge and ideas (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL). Questions can also be used as writing prompts for independent work.

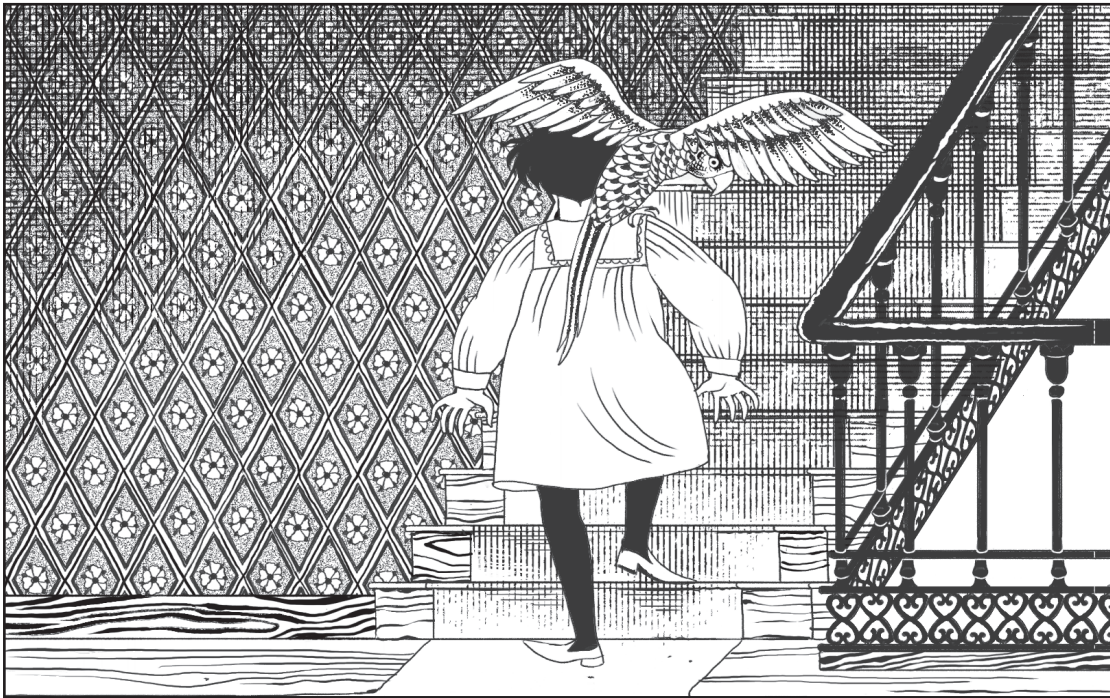
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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. On page 2, it is noted that Marta's mother had told her "The elevator is not for us." Why are there different rules for different people at the Hotel Balzaar?
2. Norman shares his dreams with Marta, and we know what Marta's dream is (pages 8–9), but she doesn't share it. Why do you think she doesn't? Would you like to share your dreams?
3. How is Marta like the mouse on the grandfather clock?
4. How do Alfonse and Norman differ? Why do you think the author chose to have the other workers at the Hotel Balzaar be two very different characters?
5. Do you think that Marta going to room 314 (page 23) was breaking the rules?
6. What do you learn about Marta's father from his letter on pages 28–29? What insight does this give you into Marta? Why is part of the letter blacked out?
7. Why do you think the author shared that Marta's mom kept her hair up during the day and only let it down and brushed it at night? What does that symbolize? What does that tell you about Marta's mother?
8. Blitzkoff doesn't speak in the book; however, he still finds ways to communicate with Marta and the countess. What are some ways he communicates (for example, on page 56)? What are ways that other animals communicate with humans?
9. From the roof, why did Marta see her family on the street (page 56)?
10. After her time on the roof, Marta realizes something important is happening, but she knows she must figure it out alone. Why doesn't she go to her mother? What does she have that her mother doesn't?
11. On page 69, the countess says that "nothing ever truly ends." Do you agree with that sentiment?





12. What does the story about the fox and young girl (pages 107–112) teach about stereotypes and judging others?
13. Why is being able to “see a dazzling light behind every common thing” a gift (page 112)?
14. Marta asks the countess if she is the Annabelle in the story, but the countess will not confirm that she is or is not. What do you think? What are some ways you see the fox’s gift in the countess?
15. In Marta’s father’s letter, he said that “the stars above him only arranged themselves into constellations” when he thought of Marta and her mother (page 122). Although he is talking literally about stars, he also means it figuratively. What do you think he means?
16. Marta’s mother gave Marta gifts guests had left behind. In the end, who were the gifts for?
17. How do the illustrations add to the book’s experience?
18. Why do you think the countess broke up the story into seven parts?
19. War is an important topic throughout the book, specifically in Marta’s father’s letter (page 29), the general’s story (page 40), and the nun’s story (page 68). What do you think the author is trying to convey about war?

CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

Imagery and Art

Kate DiCamillo uses imagery throughout *The Hotel Balzaar* to add to the reading experience. She does this by using both descriptive language and figurative language.

Introduce different types of figurative language and what makes something descriptive. Then send students on an imagery scavenger hunt through *The Hotel Balzaar*. As students read through the book, they should each make a list of instances of imagery, noting if they are descriptive language or figurative language (and if figurative, what type).

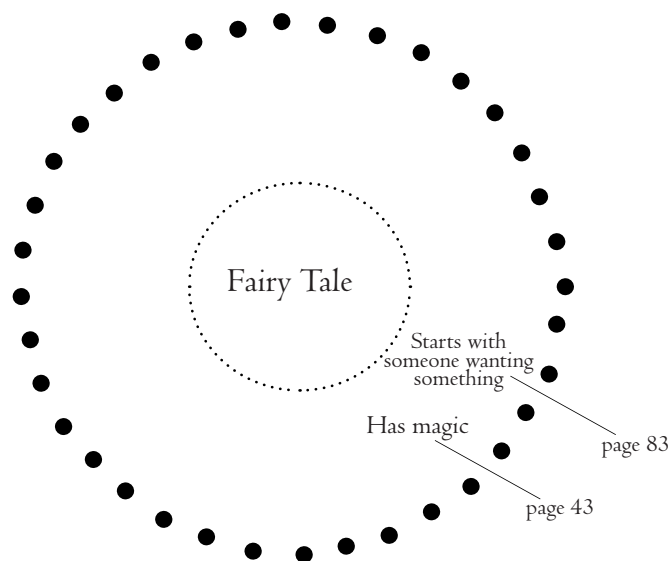
Once students finish, compile their examples into two class-created lists, one of descriptive language and a second of figurative language. Then have students choose one instance of imagery to be their “muse” and have them create a piece of art inspired by *The Hotel Balzaar* and the specific phrase they chose.

A Look at Fairy Tales

The Hotel Balzaar is described as “an original fairy tale.” As a class, use a graphic organizer like a circle map to brainstorm what a fairy tale is.

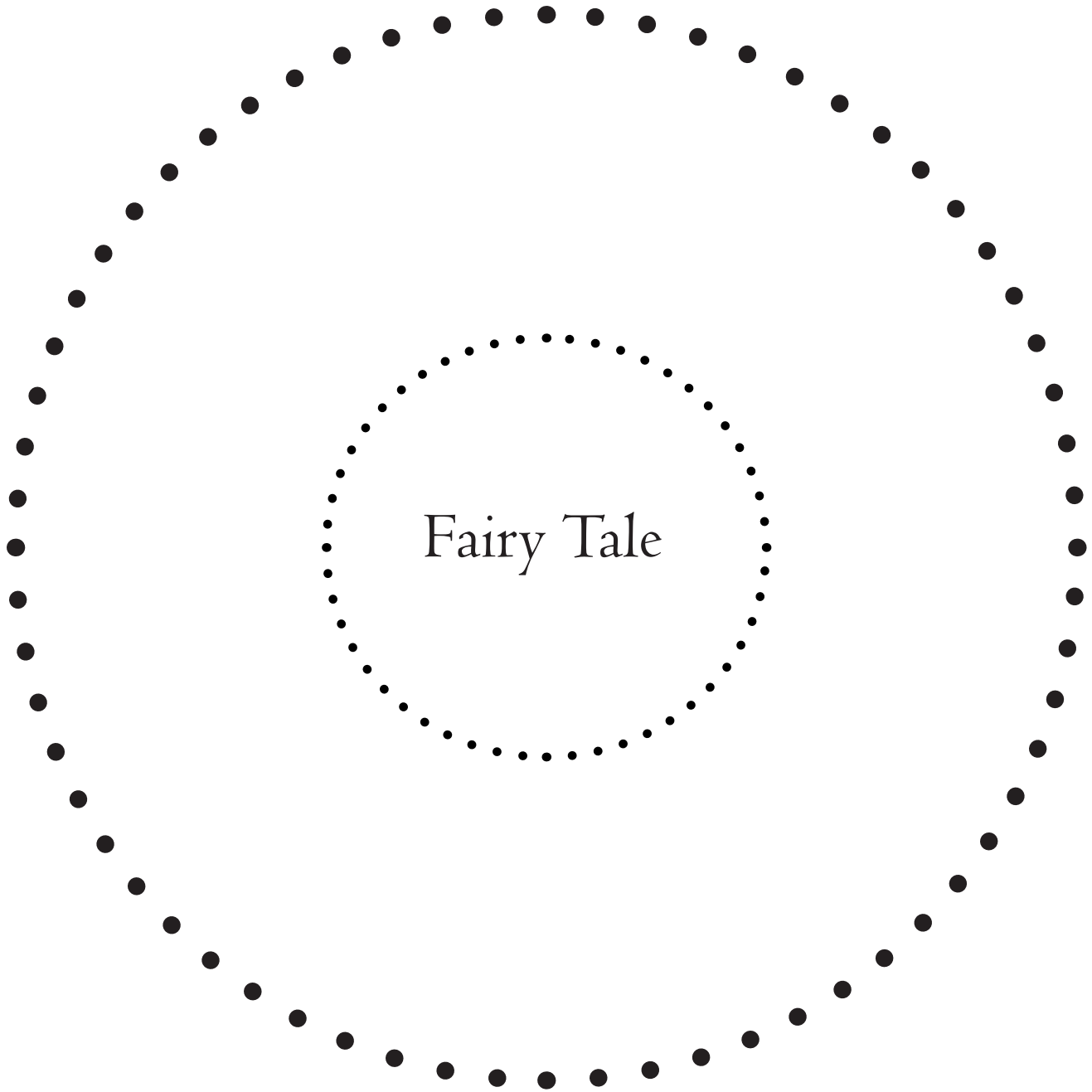
Have students label aspects of the graphic organizer with examples from the story. For example:

- Students may say that a fairy tale has magic in it, so “Has magic” could go in the circle map. Then, to prove that *The Hotel Balzaar* fits the definition of a fairy tale, students can pull out examples of magic from the story (such as the general turning into a parrot, page 43).
- Students may include what Marta said about fairy tales: “All fairy tales start that way . . . with someone wanting something they can’t have” (page 83). Then, to prove that *The Hotel Balzaar* fits the definition of a fairy tale, students can pull examples of people wanting something they don’t have from the story (such as the couple wanting a child, page 83).



Then have students answer the question “What makes *The Hotel Balzaar* a fairy tale?”

Name _____



What makes *The Hotel Balzaar* a fairy tale?



Examine the Stories the Countess Told

Work as a class to connect the stories that the countess told with the rest of *The Hotel Balzaar* using a T-chart. For example, when the man is lost in a “dark wood” (page 101) it represents her father losing his memories, and the reader knows the tightrope walker is Marta’s father because of the lullaby. What other connections can be made?

<u>In the Countess’s Stories</u>	<u>Connections to the rest of <i>The Hotel Balzaar</i></u>
The tightrope walker knows Marta’s lullaby.	The tightrope walker is Marta’s father.
The man is lost in a “dark wood” and cannot find his way.	Her father has lost his memories; the wood is figurative.

Vocabulary

Research shows that discussing vocabulary within the context of reading is one of the most effective ways to learn vocabulary, and Kate DiCamillo is a master at specific word choice, providing many opportunities to discuss vocabulary.

After reading *The Hotel Balzaar*, have your students look back at the vocabulary used and choose five words they do not know. Students should then create a word map for each unknown word. The map could include:

- The dictionary definition in the student’s own words
- The part of speech
- 1–2 synonyms
- 1–2 antonyms
- The sentence from the book
- A sentence using the word created by the student
- An illustration of the word
- Word parts (prefixes, suffixes, roots)
- Associations with the word



Here are some examples of words from the first chapter that students may choose:

battered (page 1)
 beguiling (page 1)
 ceasing (page 5)
 consider (page 4)
 discretion (page 7)

emerging (page 3)
 incalculable (page 6)
 jaunty (page 6)
 mechanical (page 5)
 nuisance (page 2)

perpetually (page 5)
 solemn (page 8)
 strewn (page 2)
 threadbare (page 2)
 tufts (page 6)

Exploring Emotions

In the general's story (pages 39–46), his sadness over the atrocities of war ends up coming out as meanness and anger. Use this moment as an opportunity to discuss other emotions that may be exhibited in different and unexpected ways as well as strategies for working through challenging emotions.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kate DiCamillo is one of America's most beloved storytellers. She is a former National Ambassador for Young People's Literature and a two-time Newbery Medalist. Born in Philadelphia, she grew up in Florida and now lives in Minneapolis.

ABOUT THE ILLUSTRATOR

Júlia Sardà is the illustrator of many books for young readers, including *The Queen in the Cave*, which she also wrote, and *Moving the Millers' Minnie Moore Mine Mansion: A True Story* by Dave Eggers. She lives in Barcelona.

These questions and activities were prepared by Kellee Moye, a middle school librarian in Orlando, Florida. She is the author of various teaching guides for all levels, the coauthor of the blog *Unleashing Readers*, the 2024 president of the Assembly on Literature for Adolescents of NCTE (ALAN), and a member of NCTE, ALAN, FAME, AASL, and ALA. She served as a 2016–2018 member of the ALAN Board of Directors, a member and then cochair of the 2020–2021 Schneider Family Award Jury, and a member and then chair of the Amelia Elizabeth Walden Book Award committee from 2012 to 2014.

