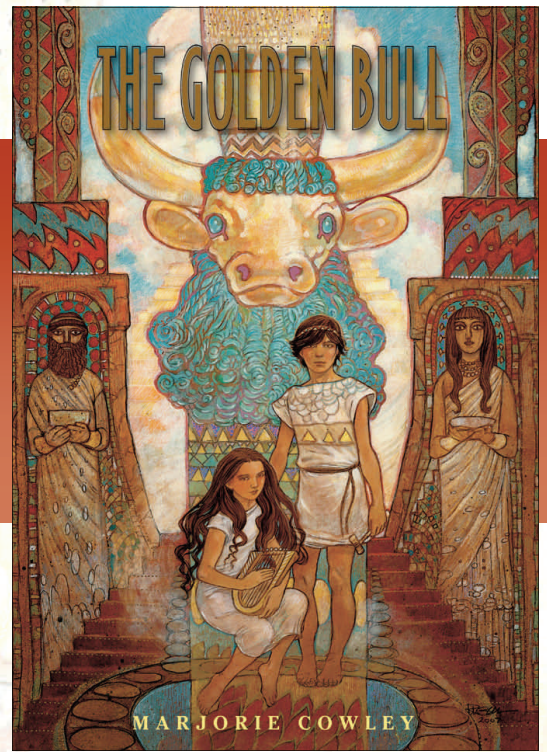


The Golden Bull

Discussion Guide



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Ages 11–14

Introduction

In ancient Mesopotamia the drought has lasted for months, and the farmlands on the outskirts of the city of Ur have been devastated. The parents of Jomar and his younger sister Zefa have no choice but to send their children away from their failing farm to seek employment in Ur. At fourteen Jomar is old enough to apprentice with Sidah, a master goldsmith who works for the temple of the moon god. Sidah, with Jomar's help, will embellish a magnificent lyre that will be the centerpiece in the coming new year celebration. But Zefa finds no welcome in Sidah's house. Tensions grow as Jomar slowly learns his craft while Zefa faces a troubled and insecure future. In order to survive in a city whose vibrant life and customs are new to them, the siblings must put aside old resentments to overcome the obstacles they face.

Themes:

- Determination
- Friendship
- Loyalty
- Honesty
- Generosity

Grade Levels:

5th–8th

Subjects:

Mesopotamia
Geography
Ancient Cultures
Music

Comprehension

1. *What are some of the important features of life in Mesopotamia five thousand years ago?* (For example, the power of the temple and the gods was paramount; most children were expected to work.) *What are some of the similarities between life in Mesopotamia and our own way of life?* (For example, throughout history all children everywhere need the protection and love of adults to grow and thrive; all humans share the same basic emotions of joy, sadness, anger, and fear.)
2. From the beginning, Sidah is troubled by Zefa's presence in his house. *Why?* (She comes to his home without invitation or prior agreement, and shortly after her arrival is suspected of theft.) *What is the bargain that Sidah and his wife agree upon regarding Zefa?* (Zefa will stay so that Sidah can listen to her play on the temple lyre, but she must work for Nari and leave when the lyre is completed.)
3. Jomar's insight into situations or characters often changes. *When does Jomar begin to understand his failure to appreciate Zefa's musical gifts?* (When the high priestess Bittatti, proud and powerful, tells Jomar about a brother who did not acknowledge her worth.) *When does Jomar realize there is a reason behind Nari's stern behavior toward them?* (When Zefa tells him she understands Nari's grief over her dead son.) *What is Jomar's reaction when he discovers why Gamil has behaved so strangely toward him?* (He feels guilty because he has never tried to discover the reasons behind this behavior.)
4. When Jomar finally finds Zefa in the bazaar, he is amazed and moved by her maturity, strength, and compassion, but he also feels guilty for refusing to believe her denial of the theft. *What does he do to demonstrate his new feelings for her?* (In spite of Sidah's opposition, he insists on putting himself at risk by taking the river test in her place.)

Discussion



1. Jomar and Zefa have grown up in a secure home with loving parents and are unprepared for life in a city that demands new ways of behavior. *Have you ever been insecure when starting a new activity or going to a new city or school? How did you deal with your insecurities?*
2. Leaving the family farm is difficult for Jomar and Zefa. Their father has told Jomar that his sister will be his responsibility, a burden he does not want. Jomar finds Zefa difficult to deal with and unwilling to accept his authority. *Are you sympathetic to his problems or irritated by his impatience? Are you sympathetic to Zefa when she finds her brother ignoring her and making decisions without first discussing them with her?*
3. Although Jomar is not a naturally talented goldsmith and has doubts about his abilities, he is an attentive pupil and determined to learn the new skills required of him. *What trait do you think is more important in acquiring new skills, natural talent or persistence?*

4. Jomar immediately believes that Zefa has stolen the lapis bead from the workshop. Sidah and Nari, his wife, come to the same conclusion. *Do you think Jomar was justified in thinking Zefa a thief? How does Zefa react to everyone believing she stole the bead? Have you ever been accused of something you did not do? Or have you ever suspected someone of theft, cheating, or something equally serious? If so, how did you deal with these incidents?*
5. Sidah still grieves for his dead son and would not have accepted Jomar as his apprentice had he known he must complete the lyre on a deadline. *Do you think this makes his relationship with Jomar an uneasy one?*
6. Jomar's assessment of those around him changes throughout the novel. For instance, he realizes Zefa's strength when he finds her surviving on her own in the bazaar, and he understands Gamil's courage when the boy comes forward with the stolen lapis bead. *Have you ever looked at someone with new eyes and reevaluated your opinion or behavior when you have more understanding or information about them?*
7. Jomar steps forward to take the river test in Zefa's place because he wants to protect his younger sister. *Have you ever felt obligated to protect and comfort the members of your family and your friends?*
8. Think about some of the differences between ancient Mesopotamia and the way we live in this culture today. *Do you think it would be a difficult adjustment for Jomar and Zefa if they were transplanted from their time and place to the way we live now?*

About the Author

Marjorie Cowley is the acclaimed author of children's books on ancient history. Her first book, *Dar and the Spear-Thrower*, was published by Clarion, in 2001 and was hailed as "a fast-paced, truly interesting coming-of-age novel for young readers" by *Booklist*. Her next book, *Annoka's Answer* (Clarion) was a Junior Library Guild Selection.

In addition Marjorie was named a Professional Expert by the Los Angeles Unified School District, has been a guest lecturer in prehistory at Santa Monica College, has designed teaching charts for the Prehistoric Museum Project, and has been an instructor at the Los Angeles Children's Museum. She lives in Santa Monica, California.

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