

Secrets of the Cirque Medrano

Discussion and Activity Guide

Paris was not home, but it was new—and new things were always exciting, even if they were also frightening . . .

When her mother dies, Brigitte is sent to live in Paris where she helps her aunt and uncle in their café. Her new life seems strange and interesting. When Brigitte befriends Paco, the young circus performer from the Cirque Medrano who poses for the temperamental Spanish artist Pablo Picasso, she is drawn into a web of international intrigue.

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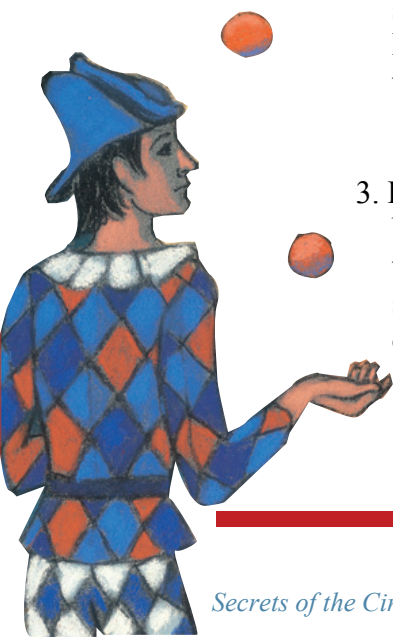
Discussion Questions

1. Brigitte is hesitant to move to Paris, and clings to the letter Aunt Dominique wrote to her mother giving instructions for Brigitte's arrival. What might she have been feeling as the train approached her new home? Ask students if they've ever had to move or spend time away from home. How did they feel?
2. Discuss students' first impressions of Aunt Dominique, Uncle Georges, and Henri. How did they change as the book progressed? Were there any clues that suggested people may not be as they first seem?
3. In the story Picasso is only famous among his friends and those in Montmartre, yet today he is known as one of the best painters of the twentieth century. Besides *Family of Saltimbanques*, do students know of any other paintings by Picasso? Why would such a famous painter have been so poor during his lifetime? Open this into a lesson on the life of Picasso, his art, and his legacy. Use the following links as resources:
<http://www.artchive.com/artchive/P/picasso.html>
<http://www.bartleby.com/65/pi/Picasso.html>
<http://www.picasso.fr/anglais/>
4. On page 38 Brigitte and Henri discuss ways to achieve goals. Have two students read this passage aloud. How do Brigitte and Henri differ in their beliefs about achieving goals? Why does Henri call Brigitte "naïve"?
5. Have a student read the following quote aloud. "From each according to his ability, to each according to his need" (page 38). What do students think this means? Brigitte responds, "How does that happen? Everyone doesn't have equal abilities—or equal needs." How would they respond to Brigitte's question? This could also be an essay or journal assignment.
6. Brigitte resents being called a member of the bourgeoisie, or middle class. Why does she see being part of this class negatively? What is the difference between the bohemians and the bourgeoisie? Ask students which group they would prefer to be a part of.

7. Ask students if they know what the word “anarchism” means. George believes that anarchism could never work, because freedom must have limits. Do students agree? Ask students to think of everyday examples to support their opinion?
8. Discuss why Brigitte is so captivated by the Cirque Medrano. Ask students what transports them away from their everyday life.
9. When does Brigitte begin to feel at home in Paris? What or who causes her feelings about the café and Aunt Dominique to change?
10. Picasso is strongly drawn to the circus performers, visiting the circus often and spending extensive time painting the family of saltimbanques. What attracts him to these people? Ask students what attracts them to people and friends. This could be a journal or essay topic.
11. Brigitte is angered and embarrassed when Paco calls her a child (page 129). She longs to show him that she lives on her own terms. Ask students what they think she means by “living on her own terms.” What are students’ expectations about getting older and living on their own?
12. Briefly introduce and explain the French Revolution to students, giving the dates and why it occurred. (Use the following resource: http://encarta.msn.com/encyclopedia_761557826/French_Revolution.html) At the beginning of the novel, Henri discusses the motto used during the French Revolution: “Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité,” or “liberty, equality, brotherhood.” Ask students why they think this was the motto for the French revolutionaries. Do Americans value these things as well?

Language Arts

1. The setting of Montmartre is essential to the story. Why is setting important? How can it help to set a tone or feeling within a story? How does the setting of Montmartre contribute to the tone of *The Secrets of the Cirque Medrano*? Have students write a paragraph describing the setting of a story. Students may read their paragraphs aloud to the class. Afterward, classmates can share what they think the tone of the story is, based on the setting.
 2. Point of view is also very important in this story. What is the difference between first and third person? What are the limitations of hearing a story from only one person’s point of view? Is Brigitte a reliable narrator? Assign students different characters from the novel, such as Henri, Aunt Dominique, Uncle Georges, Picasso, Fernande, or Monsieur Pavlov. Have students write an essay in which they describe seeing the Cirque Medrano show from that character’s point of view.
 3. Dialogue is central to *The Secrets of the Cirque Madrano*, from the discussion of the bohemians in the café, to the arguments between Henri and Brigitte, to the tension-filled conversations between Brigitte and Paco. Why is dialogue important to a story? How can it move the plot forward? Challenge students to write a short story of their own using only dialogue.



Social Studies

1. Divide students into groups. Assign each group a time period in Picasso’s life, as listed below. Have the groups do research on their time period in the school library or on the internet. Then have the groups map out their period on a piece of poster board, including dates and significant events. They can even print out samples of Picasso’s art from that period. When each group is finished, hang the poster boards on the wall in chronological order to make a timeline of Picasso’s life.

Before 1901
Blue Period
Rose Period
African-Influenced Period
Cubist Period
Surrealist and Classic Period

2. Discuss with the class the differences between reformation and revolution, giving definitions of each. Write both words on the board and under each have students name things that are done in each circumstance. For example, “protest” can be written under reformation, and “riot” can be written under revolution. Once the class is clear about the differences and definitions of these words, divide them into groups. Give each group the following situations and ask them to discuss the best method of change for each one. Afterwards, discuss the groups’ opinions as a class.

Situation 1: The school’s administration has decided that it no longer wants to waste time and money by providing students with lunch. They believe that if students eat a large breakfast, they should be full until dinner. As a replacement, the school has installed a snack machine that serves only milk and crackers, which students can purchase during a ten-minute break in the afternoon. What is the best way to change the administration’s new rule?

Situation 2: Imagine that you are all on the same soccer team. The coach of the soccer team allows only students with brown eyes to play during games; the rest must sit on the sidelines or provide water for the brown-eyed players. How can the whole team change this rule so that all members can play?

Situation 3: The President of the United States and Congress have ordered that no one is allowed to enter or leave the country. Everyone must stay in the U.S. and if they try to leave they will be imprisoned. Businesses start to fail, foreign visitors cannot go home, and no one can go on a vacation over seas. How can the people of the United States change this law?

3. Remind students of the scene when Anna Marie steals an apple from a street vendor. If necessary, have two students read this passage aloud (pages 113–114). Present the issue to the students. Is it morally wrong for people to steal if their survival depends on it? Divide the class in half. One half will debate that stealing is morally wrong no matter what the circumstance, and the other will debate that there are exceptions to every rule. Give the students time to compile their arguments and then stage the debate, allowing one side to speak at a time.

Art

1. Picasso's early art is very traditional. He painted his subjects in a realistic manner, using colors that were true to life and giving his subjects natural proportions and an accurate sense of depth. His later art became more experimental. He painted using shades of only one color and developed a style of painting called cubism, in which subjects are painted in geometric shapes that are disproportionate. Show your students examples of each style and ask them to point out the differences. Using watercolor or acrylic paint, have students create two self-portraits, one in the traditional style and one in the cubist style.

Use these resources for this activity:

<http://www.artchive.com/artchive/P/picasso.html>

www.moma.org/exhibitions

2. Without showing your students Picasso's painting *Family of Saltimbanques*, discuss what they think it looks like based on Brigitte's reaction on pages 205 and 206. How can a painting evoke emotions? In what ways can a painter suggest sadness? Have the students paint what they think *Family of Saltimbanques* looks like. Once the class is finished, show your students the actual painting and discuss what does and doesn't surprise them about it. Use the following resources: <http://www.nga.gov/collection/gallery/20centpa/20centpa-46382.0.html>

3. Pablo Picasso tried to paint subjects that he thought portrayed real, everyday people. Picasso wanted to represent the struggles of modern life in his paintings. Have students choose a subject that they think represents everyday life now. Encourage them to use color and shape to express the feelings of modern life in their paintings.





Elaine Scott

“My earliest memories are caught up with sitting on my mother’s lap and listening to her read . . . I am constantly grateful that there were people in my life who taught me the joy of reading [and] writing . . .

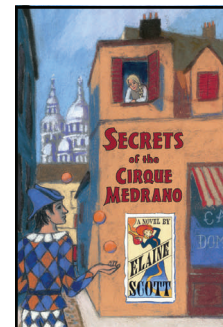
Elaine Scott was born into a family that loved to read and write. When they adopted a stray dog, arguments abounded over the proper name for the new family pet. Elaine’s mother came up with a solution—a writing contest. All members of the family were to write a poem about dogs, and whoever wrote the best poem could name the new pet. The name Topper was decided by Elaine’s brother, the winner of the contest. Though Elaine did not prevail in this challenge, later she did win a prize for her sixth grade poem, “A Tale of Woe,” about three snowmen who knew they would melt when spring arrived. Her poem was published in the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, and for the first time she wondered about becoming a writer when she grew up.

Elaine attended Southern Methodist University in Dallas, Texas. While there she met [and married] her husband, Parker Scott. They later moved to Houston where they had two daughters, Cindy and Susan. When the girls were old enough to attend school, Elaine began to think about writing again. She started writing articles for magazines geared toward adults, but once she tried her hand in children’s writing she never looked back. “Writing for boys and girls was much more fun!” Elaine went on to write over fifteen books for children and has won numerous awards, including the *School Library Journal’s* Best Book of the Year in 1995 for *Adventure in Space: The Flight to Fix the Hubble* (Hyperion).

Elaine continues to live in Houston with her husband and their three cats, Laverne, Shirley, and Troy. They enjoy travel, reading, and eating seafood.

Books by Elaine Scott

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