

THE HAUNTED SERPENT

This discussion guide is designed to help parents, teachers, librarians, and booksellers explore the story's ideas, themes, and meaning with middle-grade readers.

THEMES FOR DISCUSSION: *Friendship, Looking Deeper, Trust But Verify, Doing The Right Thing, Diverse Characters*



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. In *The Haunted Serpent*, Spaulding starts attending school for the first time. How do you think he feels about it? If you could talk to him, what advice would you give him?
2. Spaulding begins to suspect there may be something supernatural going on in Thedgeroot as soon as he sees the man in the suit by the pond in Chapter 1, but he has a hard time getting anyone to believe him. Imagine you saw something that could be supernatural. Would you investigate?
3. In Chapter 3, Marietta tells Spaulding, “You know how people tell you just be yourself? That’s terrible advice. You’ll never survive middle school that way.” What do you think she means by this? Do you agree or disagree?
4. Marietta reveals to Spaulding that she used to be picked on and teased by other kids at school, including Katrina. Now that Katrina is nice to her, Marietta is careful to stay on her good side. Why do you think that is? Would you try to be friends with someone like Katrina? Why or why not?
5. Friendship is a major theme in this book. How does Spaulding use his investigation to make friends? Does it work? Do you think Spaulding and Marietta are friends at the end of the story?
6. Many of the characters in *The Haunted Serpent* face challenges fitting in, including Spaulding, Marietta, and even Mr. Radzinsky. What are some examples of this from the story, and how does each character cope? Have you ever had a time when you had trouble fitting in? How did you handle it?
7. In Chapter 11, Marietta says Spaulding hates it when other people figure something out before he does. Do you think this is true? What parts of the story made you agree or disagree with her?
8. What are some of Spaulding’s strengths and weaknesses? How do they help or hurt his investigation? Do you think he’s changed by the end of the story?
9. Spaulding and his parents don’t live together because of his parents’ career. Even though his parents are well-known for their TV show, Spaulding doesn’t brag about it—in fact, he tries to avoid anyone finding out. Why do you think this is? How would you feel in this situation?
10. In Chapter 11, Marietta tells Katrina about Spaulding’s parents. Why? How does this affect their friendship? If you were Spaulding, what would it take for you to forgive Marietta?

LET'S DISCUSS . . .

STERLING
CHILDREN'S
BOOKS

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ACTIVITIES

1. Have readers try keeping notes about their lives the way Spaulding does. They might draw something that happened to themselves or a family member; a sketch of a friend or family member, a pet, etc. Remind kids that this isn't about style or being a "good" artist. They can try taking "research notes" for a week, or just try it for a day. Ask them to add notes about the drawing the way Spaulding does. What can be shown in the drawing without words? What are some things about the person, place, or thing that require words to explain? Did they make their notes funny or serious? How did they feel about their journaling? Did it help them take time to think about something in a different way, or notice details they might have missed otherwise?
2. Many of the illustrations in *The Haunted Serpent* use comedic devices like hyperbole, juxtaposition, repetition, and understatement. Define these terms with readers; then look for examples in the illustrations. For example, in Chapter 15, when Spaulding writes that "Lucy made a convincing case for bringing Daphne," the drawing shows that her argument was simply screaming; this is an example of both repetition (the two panels are nearly identical) and understatement. Next, let students try using one of these concepts to make their own one- or two-panel comics.
3. Spaulding and Marietta find out a lot about the history of Thedgeroot, from the mining shafts to the ley lines. Discuss your town or city's history with readers and find out how much the group knows about the area. Brainstorm some resources readers could consult to learn more, then break into groups and do some research. If possible, contact a local museum and arrange a field trip, or a visit from a speaker. When was the town founded? What brought people to the area? Are there any interesting beliefs or stories about the area?
4. Spaulding often mentions creatures and beliefs out of folklore. There are several interesting historic encyclopedias of folklore and superstition available online through Google Books; have readers break into groups and do some reading in one of these books. Let each group find a superstition or creature they're interested in and present it to the others. Discuss why they think this belief might have come about. Was it a story to explain a phenomenon that people didn't understand? Was it meant to teach a lesson, or give a warning about a real hazard? Was it just a fun story to scare each other with?