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Also available as an e-book and in audio

THE SECRET LIBRARY

About the Book

Since Grandpa died, Dally's days are dull and restricted. She's eleven and a half years old, and her exacting single mother is already preparing her to take over the family business. Starved for adventure and release, Dally rescues a mysterious envelope from her mother's clutches, an envelope Grandpa had earmarked for her. The map she finds inside leads straight to an ancient vault, a library of secrets where each book is a portal to a precise moment in time. As Dally "checks out" adventure after adventure—including an exhilarating outing with pirates—she begins to dive deep into her family's hidden history. Soon she's visiting every day to escape the demands of the present. But the library has secrets of its own, intentions that would shape her life as surely as her mother's meticulous plans. What will Dally choose? Equal parts mystery and adventure—with a biracial child puzzling out her identity alongside the legacy of the past—this masterful middle-grade fantasy rivets with crackling prose, playful plot twists, and timeless themes.

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 in writing prompts for independent work. As participants engage in discussions and activities, encourage them to support their claims with textual evidence.

Discussion Questions

1. Activating Background Knowledge: Why are libraries an important place for people of all ages? In your opinion, is a trip to the library an adventure? Why or why not? What challenges do libraries face today (e.g., book challenges and bans, online platforms)? How should we address those issues?
2. In chapter 1, the author writes, “She pulled her shoulders back, held her head high. Confident. Assertive. Determined to get what she wanted” (page 1). What does this description suggest about Dally? How are Dally and her mother similar? How do they differ? If chapter 1 were told from her mother’s point of view, what might be different?
3. Describe the relationship between Dally and her grandfather. What made him special to Dally? In chapter 3, what does Grandpa share with Dally in his letter? As you read, consider how phrases from Grandpa such as “bone of contention” (page 23) and “No guts, no glory” (page 36) connect to the story. What is the figurative and literal meaning of each phrase?
4. In his letter, Grandpa writes, “The map is for you and you alone, and you know everything you need to follow it” (page 20). How does Dally decode the map? Explain the significance of each map notation. Have you ever drawn or followed a map? In chapter 25 (pages 182–183), what information is necessary to read the map? Explain the code based on the details in the book.
5. How does Dally’s wealth impact her relationships with classmates and people in the community? Dally says, “She had learned that she should never complain about the things she didn’t have. People had trouble understanding how you could have a lot of money and still be wanting” (page 28). Do you agree? Why or why not? What things doesn’t Dally have?
6. In chapter 4, the author writes, “Dally was biracial . . . she didn’t have a lot of experience being immersed in a Black community” (page 33). How does she feel about that lack of experience? Why isn’t she more connected to a Black community? How does community connection inform someone’s perspectives and identity? What parts of your identity make you feel proud?
7. Dally often recalls vocabulary words during her adventures. As you read, discuss italicized vocabulary words such as *oppression* (page 33) and *peril* (page 36). Why are these words important to understanding the chapter, characters, or themes?
8. What makes the Secret Library special? How is the library organized? How does Dally select books during her visits to the library? What would you choose? Why?
9. In chapter 16, why does Jennacake say travel is “more of an art than a science” (page 122)? What are the possible risks of traveling?
10. What do chapters 11 and 12 highlight about privilege? How are Katherine and Marcus treated differently in the mall? Can you think of other examples of inequitable treatment in our society? In your opinion, how can people deconstruct systems of oppression?

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11. In chapter 14, the author writes, “Dally felt steamed. It seemed no matter where she went, there were always a handful of grown-ups trying to dictate what she could and couldn’t do” (page 108). How are the grown-ups in the library like the adults at Peteharrington Place? What does Dally want from the grown-ups in her life? Explain. Can you relate? Why or why not?
12. When Dally travels back to 1850, what makes her stand out? How do the characters assist her after she first arrives? What is important to understand about race and society during the 1850s? When Dally says, “But this crew would rather listen to a white man?” (page 145), what does it mean? Why is this detail significant?
13. In chapter 29, Dally travels to a Juneteenth celebration. What does she discover about her family at the celebration? What is the significance of Juneteenth? Why is it important for Juneteenth to be a national holiday?
14. How does each visit to the 1850s expand the plot and change Dally’s perspective? What different emotions does Dally feel after each trip? In chapter 46, the author writes, “*Secret traveling is fun*, she reminded herself. But something had felt different today” (page 309). Why do her feelings begin to change as she gets more experience traveling?
15. In chapter 49, what does Dally learn about her destiny? In the next chapter, the author writes, “Her mother could try to lock her away in Peteharrington Place, but it truly didn’t matter. All too soon, Dally would be locked away someplace else” (page 342). Why is it difficult for Dally to picture a future in the library? How would you feel? Why?
16. In chapter 54 (pages 370–371), the author includes a Peteharrington family tree. What is the significance of the family tree? Did anything on the tree surprise you? Based on the conclusion and family tree, how are the challenges that each character faced resolved? What are the main themes that readers should take from Dally’s journey or the overall story?

About Kekla Magoon



Photo by Alice Dodge

Kekla Magoon is the author of many novels and nonfiction books for young readers, including *The Season of Styx Malone*, *The Rock and the River*, *Revolution in Our Time: The Black Panther Party’s Promise to the People*, and *X: A Novel*, which she cowrote with Ilyasah Shabazz.

She has received the Margaret A. Edwards Award, a *Boston Globe–Horn Book* Award, the John Steptoe New Talent Author Award, four Coretta Scott King Honors, a Walter Dean Myers Award Honor, and an NAACP Image Award and been a finalist for the National Book Award.

She conducts school and library visits nationwide and serves on the Writers Council for the National Writing Project. She holds an MFA in writing from Vermont College of Fine Arts, where she now serves on the faculty. Kekla Magoon lives in Vermont.

These questions were prepared by Dawn Jacobs Martin, PhD, associate clinical professor of special education at University of Maryland, College Park.