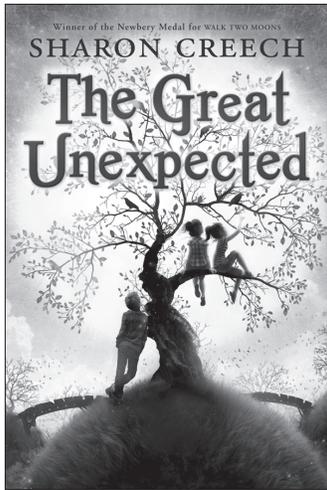


THE GREAT UNEXPECTED



Setting the Scene

In the little town of Blackbird Tree, a series of curious events unfolds when Naomi and Lizzie, two spirited orphan girls, meet the strangely charming new boy, Finn. Three locked trunks, the mysterious Dangle Doodle man, a pair of rooks, a crooked bridge, and that boy change their lives forever. As the story alternates between their small town and across-the-ocean Ireland, two worlds are woven together, revealing that hearts can be mended and that there is indeed a gossamer thread that connects us all.

Before Reading

Ask your students to read the Overheard Conversations at the beginning of the book. Discuss both exchanges. What do these conversations mean? What might they have to do with the story? Do your students remember having similar conversations with their families when they were younger?

Discussion Questions

1. In the prologue, Naomi recounts being told the story of the man pulling all he needs out of his donkey's ear. She worries that the man will pull out some unexpected horror. When Joe realizes this, he has her repeat that she is "not in the story" (p. 2). What does Joe mean by this? As the book progresses, does Naomi's tendency to place herself in the story continue? When and why is the story of the donkey's ear referred to later in the novel?
2. Finn is the name of several characters in *The Great Unexpected*. Name them and their roles in the story. What happens to Naomi's Finn? Who is he? How is he connected to the events in Ireland? How does he make Naomi feel?
3. Occasionally Lizzie says she needs "to go stand on the moon awhile" (p. 16). What does this mean? Why does she do this? What happens when Naomi tries to stand on the moon? How do their two different experiences with this practice illustrate the differences between the girls? In what other ways are Lizzie and Naomi different? In what ways are they the same?
4. Lizzie describes a book on their summer reading list, *The Great Unexpected*, as "way too long and too hard" (p. 45). Naomi thinks the book sounds like her life, "if you took the *great* out" (p. 45). Why do you think the author chose to reference the title of her novel this way? Do you agree with Naomi: is her life "The Unexpected"? Are the lives of all the characters in the book unexpected? Why or why not? What types of surprises happen in the novel?
5. Who is the target of Sybil's revenge? How does she orchestrate it? Who helps her? Why does she think it's necessary? She and Pilpenney often talk of having a murder (p. 140). What does this mean?
6. Near the end of the novel, Naomi thinks, "Did a delicate cobweb link us all, silky lines trailing through the air?" (p. 220). How are the characters in *The Great Unexpected* connected? Did any of these connections surprise you? Which ones? Were there any hints of these connections given in the story? If so, what were they?
7. Lizzie and Naomi play a game: "real or not real" (p. 205). What does this mean? When do the girls play it? Why do they have trouble telling the difference? Is it always easy to understand what is real and what isn't? Are there other instances in the book where it's hard to tell what is "real"?
8. It is both "reassuring and maddening" to Naomi that Lizzie does not tell lies (p. 89). Why does Naomi feel this way? How does Lizzie's honesty affect their friendship? How can something be reassuring and maddening at the same time?
9. Joe, Nula, and Naomi take "Sunday pauses" (p. 59), during which they take time to be happy with what they have. How is this different from the way Lizzie spends her Sundays? Compare and contrast the role religion plays in the two girls' lives. How does Lizzie's church and their work with the "unfortunate elderly" impact the story (p. 59)?
10. Dogs have many important roles in *The Great Unexpected*. Why is Naomi so scared of dogs? Why are there no dogs living in Blackbird Tree? What does the lack of dogs show about the people of the town? What kind of relationship does Sybil have with her dogs? Why must Naomi finally get over her fear?

