

Holiday House Educators' Guide

Themes

- Family
- Fear
- Courage
- Prejudice/Bigotry
- Friendship
- Honesty/Dishonesty

Grades 5 up

A DIFFICULT BOY

M. P. Barker

ABOUT THE BOOK

It is 1839, and nine-year-old Ethan finds himself an indentured servant working for Mr. Lyman, a mean-spirited shopkeeper in Massachusetts. When Ethan and another young servant suffer blows by Mr. Lyman, the two boys find out what it takes to be a friend.

Ethan Root is only nine years old in the summer of 1839 when his father sends him to be an indentured servant for Mr. George Lyman, a wealthy merchant and landowner. It's very hard for Ethan to leave his family; but it's even tougher for him to make friends with Daniel, the other indentured servant. Daniel, called Paddy by Mr. Lyman, is a teenage Irish orphan. He is considered a difficult boy, and suffers physical blows from Mr. Lyman. For this reason, he sticks to himself and develops special ways of coping. When Ethan learns that Mr. Lyman is a liar and a cheat, he shares his knowledge with Daniel and Silas, Mr. Lyman's son, who also suffers from his father's wrath. With Silas's help, Ethan and Daniel muster up the courage to face off with their harsh master. What transpires is a life-changing experience.

PRE-READING ACTIVITY

Ask students to use resources in the library, or sites on the Internet, to find out about indentured servants. Have them write down the differences between the lives of indentured servants and slaves.

THEMATIC CONNECTIONS

Questions for Classroom Discussion

FAMILY—Describe Ethan’s family. At first, Ethan doesn’t understand why his father is sending him to Mr. Lyman to be an indentured servant. Explain what Ethan’s father means when he says, “The truth of it is, son, I need you to go.” (p. 1) How is Gideon Root a better father to Ethan than Mr. Lyman is to Silas? Mr. Lyman calls Gideon Root “simple” and “poor.” These are fighting words for Ethan. His family doesn’t have much money, but they are rich in other ways. Discuss how Ethan and his family might define “rich.”

FEAR—Discuss what Ethan fears the most about going to work for Mr. Lyman. He continues to experience fear throughout the summer. How are he and Daniel the targets of Mr. Lyman’s wrath? What does Daniel teach Ethan about fear? At what point in the novel does Ethan conquer his fear? What are the events that lead to this moment? How is Gideon Root afraid of Mr. Lyman?

COURAGE—Ethan leaves home to work for Mr. Lyman. How is Ethan’s courage tested throughout the novel? What is his most courageous act? Silas finally gains courage by the end of the novel. How does Ethan help Silas gain the courage he needs to confront his father?

PREJUDICE/BIGOTRY—Discuss the difference between prejudice and bigotry. How does prejudice lead to bigotry? What is Mr. Lyman’s attitude toward the Irish? Daniel Linneham, the Irish boy who works for Mr. Lyman, is called Paddy. How is this name a symbol of prejudice and bigotry? Cite the exact moment in the novel when it’s obvious that Ethan doesn’t have any prejudices toward the Irish.

FRIENDSHIP—At the beginning of the novel, Daniel isn’t very friendly toward Ethan. How does Mr. Lyman try to pit the boys against each other? Why does Mr. Lyman say that Daniel is “envious” of Ethan? Trace the development of Ethan and Daniel’s relationship as the plot progresses. At what point do the boys become allies? What other characters in the novel befriend Ethan? Discuss Silas’s relationship with Daniel.

HONESTY/DISHONESTY—At what point does Ethan realize that Mr. Lyman is dishonest? Mr. Lyman believes that a man needs intelligence and discipline. How does Ethan use his intelligence to prove that Mr. Lyman is cheating his father, Daniel, and other citizens of Farmington? What is Mr. Lyman’s idea of success? How is his success based on greed and wrongdoing?

CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS

LANGUAGE ARTS—At the end of the novel, Daniel goes west to work. Silas drafts a letter of reference from George Lyman for Daniel to take with him. He also gives Daniel

letters from Ethan’s father, Lizzie’s father, and Constable Flagg. Ask students to write a letter of reference from one of these characters.

Mr. Bingham, the bookkeeper at Mr. Lyman’s store, tells Ethan that there is a story behind each figure in the account book. Write a story called “My Pa” that Ethan might write at the end of the novel.

Ask students to think of English words that Ethan may want to learn in Gaelic. Then have them make a simple Gaelic picture dictionary (www.englishirishdictionary.com/) that Ethan may use to teach his younger siblings Daniel’s language.

SOCIAL STUDIES—Daniel is a Papist. Ask students to find out about the Papist church. What is the doctrine? How do they worship? Write an editorial for the Farmington newspaper that Mr. Merriwether may write called “The Papist: A Life of Blasphemy.”

Have students consider why Gideon Root had to send Ethan to be an indentured servant to Mr. Lyman. Draw up the papers that Gideon Root signed.

MATH—Ask students to brainstorm scenes in the novel that might require Ethan to use math skills. Such scenes may include the measuring of fabric at Mr. Lyman’s store, the horse race between Daniel and Mr. Stocking, the monetary damages when dishes are broken, etc. Then have students write at least two word problems for a math textbook at Ethan’s school.

DRAMA—There are numerous scenes in the novel that are very dramatic (e.g., when Ethan confronts Mr. Lyman). Divide the class into groups and ask them to pick a favorite scene and write it as a one-act play. Instruct them to cast the parts and perform it for the class. Suggest that they use music to add to the drama of the play.

MUSIC—Daniel chants Irish tunes that offer a faint remembrance of his mother. Ask students to search the Internet (www.contemplator.com/ireland/) for Irish songs from the 18th and 19th centuries. Select a song that might remind Daniel of his family and his homeland. Share the song with the class, and state why Daniel might find comfort or sorrow from the song.

VOCABULARY/USE OF LANGUAGE

Encourage students to jot down unfamiliar words and try to define them using clues from the context. Such words may include: contempt (p. 12), lucifer (p. 24), incantation (p. 30), cravats (p. 31), benevolent (p. 44), translucent (p. 68), vendue (p. 100), trepidation (p. 119), blasphemy (p. 169), rogue (p. 208), satiated (p. 209), reprieve (p. 241), and mastiff (p. 268).

Web Links

M. P. Barker Official Website

www.mpbarker.net

Check out this site to learn more about historian, archivist, and children's book author M. P. Barker.

About the Author

For nearly ten years, **M. P. Barker** worked as a costumed historical interpreter at Old Sturbridge Village in Massachusetts. She got a firsthand taste of 19th-century New England rural life by milking cows, mucking out barns, and doing other tasks that helped her bring realism and immediacy to *A Difficult Boy's* setting and characters. *A Difficult Boy*, M. P. Barker's first novel, is a PEN New England Children's Book Caucus Discovery Award winner. As an archivist at the Connecticut Valley Historical Museum, Barker visits a different time and place with every diary, letter, and photograph she catalogs. Find out more at www.mpbarker.net.

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