

Guardians of Ga'Hoole

by Kathryn Lasky

About the Book

Prolific author Kathryn Lasky has long had a fascination with owls. After doing a great deal of research, she planned to write a nonfiction book about owls, with photographs by her husband, Christopher Knight. But because owls are nocturnal creatures, shy and hard to find, she changed course and decided to write about an imaginary world of owls. The result is this fascinating fantasy/fiction series suitable for readers aged 9 up - a classic hero-mythology story of friendship and adventure - which has been compared to the Redwall series, with perhaps a hint of Watership Down.

Kathryn Lasky takes us to a world after humankind, a world of owls, snakes, wolves, crows and seagulls. It is a landscape we recognize in some ways and one that is totally strange to us in others. Here, owls wage the timeless battle between good and evil. Here very distinct personalities come together and pull apart. It is adventure and fantasy, both very real and completely fantastic, philosophic and tender. These qualities combine to invite us inside that world and to give us much to think and talk about.

We talked with Kathryn Lasky as we prepared this guide, and many of her ideas are included in the questions and activities.

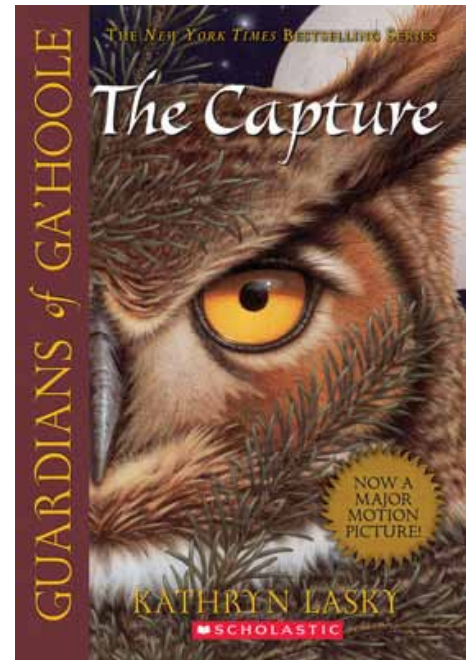
Summary of the Books

Books 1-6

Soren, a young barn owl of pure and noble heart, is owl-knapped shortly after hatching and taken to a forbidding place called St. Aegolius Academy for Orphaned Owls. Soren resists their brainwashing by remembering the legends of Ga'Hoole. Soren escapes and with new friends Gylfie, Digger and Twilight, makes his way to the fabled Great Ga'Hoole Tree. Adventures ensue and terrible new foes arise: The Pure Ones, a vicious cult of barn owls who believe that they are superior to all other owls and that they deserve to rule despotically over them. The owls of the Great Tree, a society based on equality and learning, are their sworn enemy. In Book Six: The Burning a cataclysmic battle ensues in which The Guardians triumph over the Pure Ones and Kludd, their High Tyto, is killed. Unfortunately, his mate Nyra escapes, and swears to carry on Kludd's vile mission.

Books 7-8

The Pure Ones have been defeated and Kludd, their leader, has been killed. But Nyra, Kludd's mate, has produced a hatchling, Nyroc, and she does all in her power to raise him to lead the Pure Ones. But Nyroc is a poor student of evil. He yearns for the Great Ga'Hoole Tree, a place he's heard of in forbidden legends. Defying his evil mother, he exiles himself from the Pure Ones and flies alone to The Beyond the Beyond seeking the legendary Relic - the Ember of Hoole. He then brings the relic, a talisman of his own goodness and proof of the ancient legends, to the Great Tree.



Books 9-11

These books go back in time to the age of legends and tell the true history of the founding of the Great Ga'Hoole Tree by the first king of the tree, Hoole. Much like the tales of King Arthur, these legends portray deeds of great heroism, and terrible treachery, in a time when magic was real. Evil magic - nachtmagen - threatens the young king Hoole, destroying his kingdom, and killing his father. After defeating treacherous lords allied to malignant hagsfiends, Hoole establishes the Great Ga'Hoole Tree in the Sea of Hoolemere.

Books 12-15

In these books, readers will find themselves back in the present day where the adventures of Soren, Coryn and the band continue at the Great Tree and in the surrounding kingdoms - but with a difference. After a millennium hidden away in Beyond the Beyond the Ember of Hoole is back at the great tree exerting a strange influence on the guardians and the tree itself. The remnant Pure Ones hover in dark places planning revenge for the devastating defeat they suffered at the end of Book Six: The Burning, while the Guardians struggle against them in a world subtly warped by nachtmagen.

Discussion Questions and Activities

Learning, Knowledge, and Truth

“Ignorance is perhaps the source of all evil....Knowledge is the most powerful weapon of all.” - Ezylyrb (Book 9: The First Collier, prologue xviii)

1. Owlets brought to the St. Aegolius Academy for Orphaned Owls (St. Aggies) are told that they are going to be taught the Truth. What is truth? What is the difference between truth told and truth learned?

2. The owlets are also told that questions are not allowed. “We discourage questions here as we feel they often distract from the truth....Never question but obey.” (Book 1: The Capture, page 31) Learning and the quest for knowledge are forbidden at St. Aggies. In fact the response to asking a question is severe punishment. But we know that questioning is the basis of learning. A good indication of the amount of learning going on in a classroom is the number of questions being asked. The following activity brings to focus the subject of how we learn.

Secretly designate two students, working independently, to record the number and types of questions that are asked during a typical morning in the classroom. The results can be tallied on a sheet according to the type of question: who, what, when, where, why, other, and by who asked it, teacher or student.

Report the results and have the class discuss how hard it would be to get through the day without being able to ask a question. How would it change the way they learn? How would it change the way they interact with each other and with you?

After lunch ask the students to follow the rule of St. Aggies: No questions allowed. Even you will have to refrain. You and the students will have to do what Soren and Gylfie did: rephrase questions into declarative sentences. Give a bell or buzzer to two students so they can sound it every time a question is asked. At the end of the day, the class should discuss their experience.

3. The issue of what is truth arises for Nyroc in Book 7: *The Hatchling*. At St. Aggies, the truth is whatever Soren, Gylfie, and the other captured owlets have been taught to believe. For Nyroc, his mother determines what is true. It is not until he goes out into the world that he discovers the real truth about the Great Ga'Hoole Tree and his uncle Soren and about his father's death. Young people, too, are faced with people who tell them what to believe. Ask students to discuss who influences their beliefs - parents, teachers, their peers, the media, etc. - and how they decide for themselves what to believe. Talk about how different people try to shape our minds to believe what they perceive as the truth, and what causes us to accept or reject a certain set of beliefs.

4. The nature of a society can be discerned in the values, knowledge, and ethics that parents and adults pass on to children. Discuss the similarities and differences in the values and beliefs that are passed on to the young at the Great Ga'Hoole Tree and at the enclave of the Pure Ones.

Destiny Versus Free Will

In Books seven and eight of the *Guardians of Ga'Hoole*, Nyroc (who subsequently changes his name to Coryn) is raised by his evil mother Nyra to take over command of the Pure Ones. She tells him it is his destiny to lead them. But Nyroc begins to feel that the beliefs and actions of the Pure Ones are very wrong, and he struggles against his mother's notion of his destiny. He finally asserts his own free will by leaving the Pure Ones. Ask students to compare this to other examples of the conflict between free will and destiny (or fate) that they may find either in works of fiction, in history, or in their own lives. See if they can find an example where destiny wins, and one where free will ultimately wins. What determined the outcome?

Friendship and Family

In times of trouble ... there can come a certain closeness, a kind of coziness of spirit. It was never so true as in the hollow of Soren and his mates, Gylfie, Twilight, Digger, and now Eglantine. (Book 3: *The Rescue*, page 143)

1. The owls Soren, Gylfie, Twilight, and Digger, who come to be known as "the band," pledge undying loyalty to each other. Time and time again they are there for each other, not only for aid in battle, but also for emotional and spiritual support. From the *Guardians of Ga'Hoole* books that they have read, ask students what instances they have found where this is the case. Ask them to talk about the friendships they have. How far would they go to help a friend? Would they put their own safety in jeopardy for the sake of a friend? Would a real friend put another at risk?

2. The relationships between siblings - both in the books of the *Guardians of Ga'Hoole* series and in real families - shape personalities and actions. Examine some of the siblings in the books: Soren and Kludd, The Rogue smith of Silverveil and Madame Plonk, Ezylyrb and Ighar, Soren and Eglantine, and others. Ask students which of these relationships are strong and supportive. Which are competitive and even destructive? How has each individual's life been affected by their sister or brother?

3. Many of the owls of the Great Ga'hoole Tree are orphans. This is not so for Nyroc. Ask students to examine the relationship between Nyroc and his mother. How is it the same and how is it different from human parent/child relationships? What is it that parents want for their children? Does his mother want the same for him?

History and Legends

Where there are legends, there can be hope. Where there are legends there can be dreams of knightly owls, from a kingdom called Ga'Hoole, who will rise each night into the blackness and perform noble deeds. Owls who speak no words but true ones. Owls whose only purpose is to right all wrong, to make strong the weak, mend the broken, vanquish the proud, and make powerless those who abuse the frail. With hearts sublime they take flight.... The Legend of the Great Ga'Hoole Tree (Book 9: The First Collier, opposite title page)

Soren, Gylfie, Twilight, and Digger go on a quest to find the Great Ga'Hoole Tree. They do not know if it is real or just a legend they were told as infants. Discuss why it is important for them to believe that it is real. In other fantasy books, belief in a legend, a story, or a magical object is at the center of the action. In *The Wizard of Oz* by L. Frank Baum, belief in the wizard is the source of the wizard's power and offers hope to Dorothy and her companions on their quest. Is it the same for the Great Ga'Hoole Tree? Can students think of other fantasies where this is the case?

“Ga'Hoolology”

Ga'Hoolology was devoted to understanding the physiology and natural processes of the great tree where they lived, which sustained their lives. (Book 3: The Rescue, page 103)

1. Other than the hollows where the owls live, the most special place in the Great Ga'Hoole Tree is the library. It is here where sacred texts are kept and where the owls go to read and study, reinforcing what they learn from their rybs (teachers). Some of the titles that can be found in their library are: “Hooties, Cooties, and Nooties: A Book of Owl Humor with Recipes, Jokes, and Practical Advice,” and “Tempers of the Gizzard: An Interpretive Physiology of This Vital Organ in Strogformes.” Ask students what other books they imagine could be found there. Using what they know from reading the *Guardians of Ga'Hoole* series, students can fill the library with books in a variety of genres. Ask them to list the books under different library classifications: fiction, history, biography, poetry, science, sports, how to, etc.

2. The characters in the *Guardians of Ga'Hoole* series have distinct personalities. For example, Otulissa is very status conscious, is constantly talking, and never misses an opportunity to let you know how smart she is; Mrs. Plithiver is motherly, always there to comfort Soren; Nyra will do everything and anything to conquer the owl kingdom. Beginning with these examples as shown in the chart below, ask students to list all the characters (owls, snakes, other bird species, wolves, etc.) they meet in the *Guardians of Ga'Hoole* books, making sure they include the guardians themselves, their friends and their enemies, in their chart. When they've completed the first three columns of the chart, ask them to think about any famous people whom these characters remind them of, either contemporary or historical, and to add those names in the last column.

3. As soon as the moonfaced owl and the other attackers had been driven off, Soren realized that he had dreamed of this very same moonfaced owl called Nyra before he had met her in battle... He told Otulissa about the dream later... “You have what they call the starsight,” she had said. “You dream about things and sometimes they happen. The stars for you are like little holes in the cloth of a dream.” (Book 5: The Shattering, page 123)

The old Rogue Smith could tell by the way Nyroc's eyes stared, unblinking, into the gizzard of the fire. Gwyndor studied the reflection of the flames in Nyroc's eyes... There were some owls that had the gift to look into the flames of a fire and find that gizzard, and with this came a special kind of vision.

(Book 7: The Hatching, page 24)

Discuss with students whether they ever have a sense that they can predict the future. Do events occur that they sort of knew were coming? Do any of their friends have this special sense? What other examples of extra-sensory perception can they think of? Do students believe that some people are more capable of this kind of perception, or tuned into it, than others? If so, why? Would they go to an astrologist, tea-leaf reader, or palm reader? Would they believe what such a person tells them about their future? Why or why not?

A fun writing exercise

Both Otulissa and Twilight have very distinctive voices in these books. Otulissa is very scholarly and likes to show off her knowledge and learning when she speaks - often at great length. Twilight on the other hand is boastful and blustery, often speaking with forceful emotion. Have students take an exciting incident from everyday life, real or imagined, such as a hurricane hitting their home town, and describe it first the way Otulissa might, then as Twilight would. When they've finished writing the two different accounts, ask students to describe to the group examples of words, phrases, or styles they used in their exercises in order to give the reader a strong impression of the characters.

Research

1. About Owls

I wanted the Guardians of Ga'Hoole to be the kind of fantasy in which I kept intact as much as possible the owls' natural behaviors, even though they could talk, make weapons, read, write, create works of art, etc. Therefore I had to do a ton of research. I have notebooks filled with my research. One weighs almost five pounds! I had to understand, for example, how owls see and the structure of their eyes." - Author Kathryn Lasky

Students, too, can research owls and find out more about what they are really like. Go to these Web sites:

Owling.com, the largest US Web site dedicated to owls:
<http://www.owling.com/owling.htm>

The Aviary, a Web site dedicated to lovers of birds:
<http://aviary.owls.com/owls.html>

The Owl Pages, a Web site devoted to shedding light on the mysteries of owls:
<http://www.owlpages.com/index.php>

Students can see photos of the owls they have read about, listen to their calls, find characteristics that are specific to different species, and more. Have each member of the group research an owl species, then present their findings to the whole group.

2. Good Versus Evil

"I have done a lot of delving into just plain history. I am especially interested in World War II. The invasion of the Canyonlands in Book 6: The Burning is based on what I found out about the Normandy invasion, right down to the owlpoppen." -- Author Kathryn Lasky

The Pure Ones see themselves as the true owl race. You might say they consider themselves the “Master Race.” Their goal is to conquer owldom by any means necessary and to destroy any owls they deem to be lesser than them. Does this ring a bell? Ask students to think back to what they have learned about World War II and Nazi Germany. Do they see many parallels?

The siege of the Great Ga’hoole Tree and the Battle of Britain are very similar. To rally the owls and remind them that they are on the side of right against the evils of the Pure Ones, Ezylyrb tells them: “So now we are at war. We will persevere at war. We will make war to the best of our ability. They are nothing but a mass of criminals. On our side there is quality and there is a cause that sparks the spirit and rouses the gizzard. For we fight for a good cause—the cause of compassion, of freedom, of the belief that no one owl is better than another due to birth, breed, or kind of feather.” (Book 4: The Siege, page 143) . During World War II, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill gave a similar speech during the Battle of Britain to keep the spirits of the British people up and to assure them that they were on the side of right. Students can read Winston Churchill’s first war speech given to the House of Commons on September 3, 1939, as well as others he delivered, at the Web site of the Churchill Centre:

<http://www.winstonchurchill.org/i4a/pages/index.cfm?pageid=389>

After students read and discuss these speeches, explore the similarities between them and the various speeches Ezylyrb gives during and after the siege of the Great Ga’hoole Tree in Book Four: The Siege.

Values

“First strike, we must make the first strike!” Otulissa urged. But Soren knew she would never convince Boron and Barran or any of the parliament members. It was absolutely against the tradition of the Guardians to strike the first blow, certainly not on the scale that Otulissa was planning. (Book 5: The Shattering, page 48)

1. Can anyone be perfect?

The values of the Guardians of Ga’Hoole are clear to them all. These include patience, dedication, working hard at their training, being resolute of heart, being compassionate, and having the strength to withstand the temptations of false dreams. This is a tall order. See if students can think of anyone in history or living today or a character from literature or film who embodies all or most of these ideals. How close do they think they come to being a “Guardian?”

2. Do the ends justify the means?

Soren and the band of owls are not perfect all the time. They make mistakes, and they break a lot of rules. For example, they leave the tree without telling anyone, they use foul language, they tell disparaging jokes about other bird species, and most seriously, they eavesdrop on the Great Ga’Hoole Tree parliament, not just once but many times. What’s more, they feel no remorse about it. What do students think about this behavior? Is it like the way they and their friends sometimes act? Focus on their eavesdropping. Even though they justify it as necessary to themselves, does that make it right? Have students talk about times they eavesdropped on their parents or a sibling or friend. Was it worth it? How do they feel when others eavesdrop on them or invade their personal space?

3. What defines your identity?

Both Soren and Coryn ask themselves what it means to be an owl. They wonder if their identities are centered in their brains, their hearts, or in their gizzards. They wonder whether they are defined by their skills, their appearances, or their beliefs. What conclusions do they come to? Students can ask themselves a similar question: What does it mean to be a human?

Language

“There is nothing more ordinary, less noble, more ignoble, less intelligent, more common, and completely vulgar than spronking the written word” Outilissa sputtered. “It is completely lower class.”

“Well, the book is spronk,” Dewlap growled.

Then Outilissa swelled up to twice her normal size. “Well, SPRINK ON YOUR SPRONK!” (Book 4: The Siege, page 35)

We asked Kathryn Lasky about the language in the book. Where did the words come from, and how did she keep track of them as she was writing? We asked, too, if she now uses some of the words she created for the series in her everyday life.

Some of the words, like “yarp” and “dwenking” I just made up. There is no rhyme or reason to them except that I liked their sound. They conveyed the meaning so well, at least I thought so. I mean yarp just sounds sort of like throwing up to me. The Krakish words actually have some roots in Norwegian. Krakish is the language of the Northern Kingdoms, and that made me think of Scandinavian countries. So I did go to a Norwegian language Web site and picked out a few words. Then I sort of mangled them a bit, turned them inside out and came up with this weird-sounding language. There is also a hint of Yiddish-like words thrown in.

Keeping track of them was a bit of a chore. I made a spread sheet with them all that serves as a kind of glossary for me.

And, yes, I have been known to use the words sometimes when talking --but just to my family. I was feeling queasy the other day, and I announced that I might just yarp. - Author Kathryn Lasky

Students can create a glossary of the unique words they come upon as they read the books. As Kathryn Lasky tells us, some of the words are wholly invented, and, as you read, you discover their meaning in the telling of the stories. Other words might be real ones that you are encountering for the first time. Have students check the words they put on their list in a dictionary. Ask the students to compile their own personal glossary of Guardians words, whether real or made-up. For each word, have the students write down: part of speech, definition, synonym, and an example of how to use it in an original sentence.

One example to get them started:

YARP: verb; to throw up; syn.: barf: I could have yarped when I saw that my best friend wore the same dress that I was wearing to the school prom.