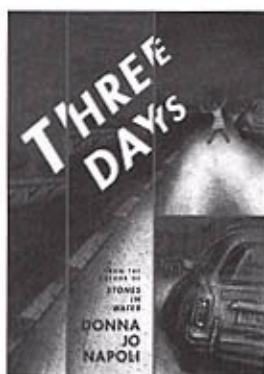
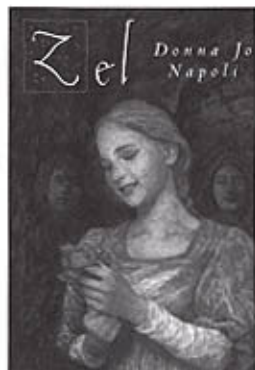




THE BOOKS OF DONNA JO NAPOLI

A READERS COMPANION



Dutton Children's Books • Puffin Books
Divisions of Penguin Putnam Books for Young Readers

ABOUT THIS READER'S COMPANION



Looking for a great book or author to discuss in your book group? Wondering what you'll write or talk about for those reports at school? Now that you've picked up this reader's companion from Penguin Putnam, we know you'll find the answers to your questions!

A great tool for learning more about books and authors, our reader's companions are designed to help bring writers and readers closer together. Each companion includes a book summary, discussion questions, thoughts from the author on writing the books, further reading suggestions, and Internet sites of interest. If you're looking for a topic or just something to muse over, inside you'll find information that will spark your interest and—we hope—get you hooked on a strong original voice in literature.

Enjoy!

Reader's companion © 2001 Penguin Putnam Inc.

Three Days jacket illustration © 2001 Janet Hamlin

Spinners jacket illustration © 1999 Donna Diamond

Stones in Water jacket illustration © 1997 Scott Hunt

Zel jacket illustration © 1996 Stephen T. Johnson

The Magic Circle jacket illustration © 1993 Leo and Diane Dillon

All or part of this companion may be reproduced for book group, classroom, or library purposes.

PENGUIN PUTNAM BOOKS FOR YOUNG READERS
A DIVISION OF PENGUIN PUTNAM INC.
345 HUDSON STREET NEW YORK, NY 10014

THE BOOKS OF DONNA JO NAPOLI

A READER'S COMPANION

BY CYNDI GIORGIS

COLLEGE OF EDUCATION,
UNIVERSITY OF NEVADA AT LAS VEGAS

CONTENTS



AN INTRODUCTION TO THE BOOKS OF DONNA JO NAPOLI
(INCLUDING COMMENTARY BY THE AUTHOR
ABOUT WRITING EACH BOOK)
PAGE 2

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION
PAGE 9

ABOUT THE AUTHOR
PAGE 10

FURTHER READING
PAGE 11

INTERNET SITES OF INTEREST
PAGE 13

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE BOOKS OF DONNA JO NAPOLI



THE MAGIC CIRCLE

A hunchbacked midwife known as the "Ugly One" adores her lovely daughter, Asa, and works hard to provide for her. But when a greedy neighbor, who conspires to receive a portion of each payment received by the midwife, encourages the Ugly One to enter into a pact with demons that gives her the power to cure all illness, she can not resist. One day, the Ugly One is tricked by the demons, and transformed into a witch. From that day, she has a powerful temptation to devour a child, but will meet with complete damnation if she does. She takes refuge deep within the forest where she begins to decorate her hut with candy made from beet syrup. Nine years later, she receives two unsuspecting, yet succulent visitors, Hansel and Gretel, who delight in living with the witch until they discover her ghastly craving. The Ugly One's first-person narrative provides insight into her constant conflict and extreme loneliness, while generating sympathy for her plight. This haunting novel comes to a surprising, yet satisfying conclusion that involves the very clever Gretel.

FROM THE DESK OF DONNA JO NAPOLI . . .

When my daughter Eva was ten, she asked me one day why there were so many evil stepmothers and wicked witches in fairy tales but no evil stepfathers and wicked warlocks. My little feminist heart started beating hard and I set about to find the worst female character I could in fairy tales and understand her motivation. So I picked the witch in Hansel and Gretel, because she eats children, and what could be worse?

I set the story in Germany, where the Grimm brothers came from, and read the original Grimm brothers' version. I stayed as faithful as I could to their frame, which is what I always do when I retell a fairy tale. But the original version is very short—a couple of pages—leaving so many questions. Who was she before she became a witch? Why did she become a witch? Why is she in the forest? Why doesn't she kill Hansel and Gretel immediately? How on earth could a little girl like

Gretel push a witch into an oven? Why doesn't the witch transform into something else and get out of the oven?

As I wrote the story, I became each of my characters. It was hideously disturbing. I dreamed demons.

ZEL

How would you feel if your mother claimed she loved you so much that she did not want anyone to take you away from her? What would you do if her solution were to imprison you in an isolated tower that was only accessible to others if they climbed up your golden hair? Napoli sets this suspenseful retelling of Rapunzel in fifteenth century Switzerland. Three distinct voices and perspectives are presented throughout the book: Zel, the innocent and spirited peasant girl who charms the few individuals she is allowed to meet; the possessive "witch" mother whose tragic past unfolds, revealing her scheme to extort a couple's newborn baby; and the young nobleman, Konrad, who falls in love and wants to marry Zel, yet finds himself in a futile search for her after she mysteriously disappears. Vivid characterization and striking language enrich this emotional story as each character engages in a life and death struggle.

FROM THE DESK OF DJN . . .

The story of Rapunzel is, at its heart, brutal and yet still so heart-rending. A mother locks her adolescent daughter in a tower for years. This is true abuse. That mother was also a witch, that is, she practiced magic. In the 1500's it was believed that one gained magical powers at great personal expense, typically, at the expense of the soul. Since she had given up so much to get that daughter in the first place, it was more than she could bear to give that daughter up to the forces that estrange children from their parents in adolescence, the forces of adult love. I do not admire the witch in this story, but I feel great sympathy for her.

This book was the most difficult one for me to write of all my books thus far. My editor, Lucia Monfried, and I went through thirteen drafts before Lucia finally said it was ready. The biggest problem for me was that there were three voices—that of the witch, that of Zel, and that of the young Count Conrad. Of course, it is a story in which braids play a central role and braids have three locks of hair woven together. So I got in my head the conceit of braiding the three voices: Zel,

Mother, Conrad, Zel, Mother, Conrad. The problem was, I'd get to a point in the story where the next scene mattered most to Mother, but it was Conrad's turn to speak. So I wound up moving scenes around and repeating scenes from different points of view—essentially doing a lot of unnatural things in order to make the braid neat. Finally, Lucia convinced me to let the voices come in when they needed to speak up, allow a natural, organic progression—even if it meant a messy braid. That's when the story took decent shape.

I was also, however, very lucky on this book. The American Association of University Women gave me a summer stipend to go to Switzerland and walk the mountains where Zel would have walked, and visit her town of Thün. I also spent that summer talking with a psychiatrist who had worked with people that were locked away in isolation, such as hostages. And I read quite a lot in the Swiss libraries about the Reformation in that country, and many of the details I learned made their way into the story. Finally, I visited southern France and kept looking for the right place for Zel to move after the demise of the witch—and I found it when I came across a place with sands of different colors.

SPINNERS

Donna Jo Napoli and Richard Tchen weave an engaging tale of a young tailor who loves his intended to such depths, that he unwittingly cripples himself while spinning golden thread for her, on a magic wheel pilfered from an elderly spinner. While the young (and pregnant) woman is amazed by the gold, she is repulsed by the tailor's abrupt change in appearance and, instead, chooses to marry the wealthy, aging miller. Devastated by his beloved's disdain and hampered by his "rumpled" leg (earning him the name of Rumpelstiltskin), the tailor decides to leave the village following the birth of his daughter, Saskia, and his former lover's death during childbirth. Years later, the odd, deformed man returns and discovers Saskia has become renowned for spinning spectacular yarns and threads. When the miller brags that his "daughter" can spin straw into gold, the stage is set for father and child to be reunited. Unknowingly Saskia rejects her father, which prompts him to bargain gold in exchange for her first-born child. Even though the ending to this familiar tale may be well known to readers, Napoli and Tchen's dramatic retelling will hold readers spellbound.

Rumpelstiltskin is as strange a character as any that occurs in the collection of Grimm fairy tales. We know nothing about his motivation for such perverse behavior. I saw him as a man who wants a child. And he does what he can to get it. His desperation is not so different, really, from that of the witch in Rapunzel.

This is the first novel I have coauthored—and it will be the last. I had wanted to write this story for a long time. Then I met Richard Tchen and we talked at great length about writing in general and pretty soon we were plotting out the storyline for this novel. Talking was the easy part—we seemed to agree on everything. It was wonderfully exciting to have a partner. But we often misinterpreted each other and we rewrote each other. We argued over just about everything. It turned out to be much harder to write a novel with a partner than alone. I consider it a great tribute to us both that we were still on speaking terms by the time the final draft went to the copyeditor. Since then Richard and I have coauthored a picture book, *How Hungry Are You?* and we hope to coauthor many more. But picture books are a different matter from novels.

Still, I believe that Richard's and my backgrounds combined in this novel in an interesting way. We focussed on how Rumpelstiltskin came to be so rumped. I'd been interested in physical deformities before—the witch in *The Magic Circle* is a humpback, for instance. But I took the deformity as a given, something she had not caused in any way. It was a contributing factor to why her fellow villagers could so easily turn against her, but it was just one of many. In *Spinners*, on the other hand, Richard and I offered an explanation for Rumpelstiltskin's deformity—one that made a close connection between his body and his soul. The notion that a handsome youth could be twisted into ugliness by an obsession that eroded his soul seemed precisely in tune with the time and place of the story—and for this reason, among others, I will always be grateful that I had the good fortune to work with Richard on this particular story.

Spinners is a different fairy tale than others that I've retold. No one in *Spinners* has any consolation. Rumpelstiltskin loses everything he loves. Saskia, the queen, is married to a man who would have killed her if she hadn't spun straw into gold—an offense that she can never be expected to forgive him for. *Spinners* is by far the darkest story I've ever worked on.

STONES IN WATER

Roberto, a Venetian middle school student, is excited to attend an American movie in his Italian village. When the film is abruptly halted, German soldiers rush into the theatre and capture the boys. Even though Germany and Italy are allies, the boys are transported on a train to a desolate work camp near Munich. At the camp they experience near starvation, in freezing conditions, and are forced to build a tarmac. Each day becomes a struggle for survival. When Roberto finally escapes, he must rely on his wits, perseverance, physical stamina and emotional willpower. As he walks alone from Germany back to Italy, he battles wild animals, eats slugs, suffers from acute exhaustion and, the most gut-wrenching of all, witnesses the realities of war. This riveting historical novel presents a unique perspective of World War II and the inhumanity experienced by many individuals regardless of their nationality or religious beliefs.

FROM THE DESK OF DJN . . .

I met Guido Fullin, a gondoliere in Venice, one summer in the early 1990s. That's when he told me that early in World War II he was taken by German soldiers from a movie theater, put on a train with a lot of other Italian boys, and brought up to Germany where he had to work for the war effort. He and his friends were moved from one work camp to another, in Germany, Poland, and finally Russia, where they were captured by American troops. The American soldiers were baffled to find children working for the Germans—and they gave them cigarettes and chocolate, the only gifts they could think of. To this day the smell of cigarette smoke makes Guido feel safe.

Guido's story stayed in the back of my mind. But I couldn't sit down and write about it. Not yet. World War II had always been an issue in my family. My mother's mother loved Mussolini because he brought roads and teachers to her isolated mountain village in Calabria. When she would praise Mussolini, my father would leave the house and my mother would go in the kitchen and bang around with pots and pans. My family was ashamed of the part Italians played in that war, and I absorbed that shame. When I listened to Guido's story, I wanted to learn what went on in Italians' minds as they faced WWII. Still, I didn't write the story. I couldn't face the research that it entailed quite yet.

Then the Gulf War broke out, when my youngest son was six. His teacher liked to cover current events, and she asked the students to vote on whether they thought

America was right to bomb Iraq. Robert, my son, was the only child in his class who voted no. That vote shook me. I was sure that if children knew what happens in a war, if they understood that many innocents die, they would never vote yes. So I began my research for *Stones in Water*. The International Red Cross in Geneva was kind enough to allow me access to their archives. I read about Italian, Polish, Romanian, Bulgarian, and Hungarian boys who were found in the workcamps in dreadful health. Then I went to Italian libraries and I read diaries of Italian soldiers, who talked about the disillusion of the war, the shock of realizing what was going on, the deprivations of body and spirit. I interviewed veterans of the war, many of whom had deserted (over half the Italian army deserted), and I interviewed Franco Berlanda, a member of the underground, who sent me to more materials written by other members of the underground. I interviewed a few of Guido's friends who had survived the workcamps with him. And I talked with Ukrainians who had grown up during the war. And I read history books and newspapers—I read and read and read. *Stones in Water* turned out to be as fervent an anti-war book as I probably will ever write.

THREE DAYS

Jackie is so excited to be with her businessman father for three weeks in Italy. Their time together is almost perfect until Daddy suffers a heart attack while driving the winding Italian roads. Jackie tries to stop speeding motorists for help but to no avail. Finally, a car containing two men pulls to the side of the road, examines her ailing father, and steers naïve Jackie to their car. She believes that these kind strangers will take her to the hospital or the police. But as they pass exit after exit, she realizes that they aren't planning to help her at all. So begins her three terrifying days of captivity, in a remote part of Italy where the countryside is unfamiliar, the language is confusing, and the captors are both kind and cruel. As she begins to understand her captors' motive for holding her in their home, she feels compassion for the young mother Claudia. However, Jackie longs to return home to America and her own mother. This suspenseful novel will grab readers from the first chapter and propel them through a fast-paced story until the exhilarating ending.

FROM THE DESK OF DJN . . .

Several years ago, an Italian girl was driving with her father when he had a heart attack. He pulled the car off the road successfully, but he died. The girl was only six years old, if I remember correctly. It took hours and hours before someone stopped to help her.

I thought about the nightmare that child lived through. And I thought about what might have happened to her if the wrong sort of person had found her. And, since I did a lot of traveling with my children to places where they didn't speak the language, this was a particularly striking idea to me. The birth of these awful thoughts was *Three Days*.

But, as in my fairy tales, my attention is always much more on why people do things than on what they do. Immediately, I was caught up in why someone might pick up a vulnerable child—why someone might want to keep that child. The German fairy tales are often about childless adults who suffer from longings for children. Or, at least, that's how I interpret them. And I used that same suffering as the basis of this story.

This book is a gift to children who have experienced loss. In the summer of 1998, my nephew died, leaving behind an eight year old son and a pregnant wife. I wanted desperately to help my grandnephew through this period. He came and stayed with me that summer, and we talked a lot, but I had a dreadful time trying to find books to read to him that would help him deal with his loss. I cannot wait to put *Three Days* in his hands.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. In what way does *Zel*, *Spinners*, or *The Magic Circle* compare to versions of fairy tales that you have previously read or heard? Are you able to gain an understanding of the issues and events that led up to a character's behavior that may not have been explained in other retellings?
2. Napoli's fairy tale retellings present a parent who appears to be selfless while believing that they are doing what is right for their child. How are parents, particularly mothers, portrayed in most fairy tales? How do these portrayals relate to today's parents within contemporary society? How do they relate to your own parents?
3. The theme of "sacrifice" is woven throughout each of Napoli's books. How does the protagonist and other characters in each novel define the concept of sacrifice? Who is doing the sacrificing? What have they given? What are the consequences of their actions? What are the sacrifices you feel you make in order to please your parents or your friends? Do others understand your decisions, actions, and behavior?
4. Another theme that appears in Napoli's books is that of survival. What have the characters done in order to survive their ordeal? Would you have made the same choices and decisions as the characters? What would you have done the same or differently?
5. The story plots for *Stones in Water* and *Three Days* were generated from events that actually occurred. Recall a newspaper headline or historical or recent event that you have read or heard about. Did you find out the complete details of how and why that happened or are there questions that still linger for you? How would you feel if that event had happened to you? What would you have done? How would you have approached and/or resolved the situation?

6. Each character in a fictional story or fairy tale may reveal characteristics such as love, pride, greed or revenge. How are these demonstrated in Napoli's historical novels and fairy tale retellings? Are these written in a believable manner? How are love, pride, greed and revenge exhibited throughout history and in the stories you have read?

7. Being imprisoned can mean many things. It can be a physical imprisonment such as in *Zel* or it can be an emotional one like that experienced by Rumpelstiltskin in *The Magic Circle*. As you read and reflect on Napoli's stories, can you delineate the types of imprisonment found within each novel? You might want to create a chart that enables you to compare and contrast what you discover.

8. Napoli's novels present excellent examples of well-crafted stories. These can be found through her well-defined characters, rich language, sympathetic situations, and compelling plots. Locate within each novel, passages, descriptions, and quotes that display these aspects of excellent writing. Try to create your own writing sample modeled after the examples you have discovered in these books. How can student writers learn the art of writing from the literature that they read?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Donna Jo Napoli is professor and chair of linguistics at Swarthmore College. She lives in Swarthmore, Pennsylvania with her husband Barry and the youngest of their five children. The other four are in college, graduate school, or medical school. She has three degrees from Harvard University: a B.A. in mathematics, and M.A. in Italian literature, and a Ph.D. in general and Romance linguistics. She has taught at the university level since 1970 and has received numerous grants and fellowships in the area of linguistics.

FURTHER READING



FAIRY TALE RETELLINGS

Ella Enchanted

by Gail Carson Levine.

HarperCollins

HC: 0-060-27511-1, \$15.89

PB: 0-064-40705-5, \$5.95

This lively Cinderella retelling presents an independent Ella who struggles against a childhood curse that forces her to obey an order she is given.

Mirror, Mirror: Forty Folk Tales for Mothers and Daughters to Share

by Jane Yolen (editor).

Penguin Putnam

PB: 0-14-029835-5, \$14.00

A collection of retold international folktales that will appeal to teenagers exploring their own relationships with their mothers.

Spindle's End

by Robin McKinley

G. P. Putnam's Sons

HC: 0-399-23466-7, \$19.99

PB: 0-441-00865-8, \$6.50

Briar Rose is cursed on her name day by Pernicia, an evil fairy, and is whisked away to be raised in a remote part of the country.

Beast

by Donna Jo Napoli

Simon & Schuster

HC: 0-689-83589-2 \$17.00

This version of Beauty and the Beast focuses on Orasmyn, a young Persian prince, who makes one wrong decision that sets a curse in motion and changes the course of his life.

WORLD WAR II STORIES



Don't You Know There's a War On?

by Avi

HarperCollins

HC: 0-380-97863-6

\$15.95 (\$23.95 CAN)

Howie Crispers reflects back to 1943 and the events that impacted his life while living in Brooklyn, New York.

Lily's Crossing

by Patricia Reilly Giff.

Bantam Doubleday Dell

HC: 0-385-32142-2, \$15.95

PB: 0-440-41453-9, \$5.50

Two friends' carefree summer days spent at Rockaway Beach in 1944 are disrupted by the changes brought about by America's involvement in World War II.

Witnesses to War: Eight True-Life Stories of Nazi Persecution

by Michael Leapman.

Viking Children's Books

HC: 0-670-87386-1, \$16.99

PB: 0-14-130841-9, \$7.99

The experiences of eight different children living in Europe who survived the "Germanization" during World War II without the comfort and protection of their parents.

Waiting for Anya

by Michael Morpurgo

Puffin

PB: 0-14-038431-6, \$4.99

In occupied France during World War II, an entire village helps Jewish children escape to Spain.

INTERNET SITES OF INTEREST



Donna Jo Napoli website

www.djnapoli.homestead.com Contains an interview and summary of Napoli's books.

National Geographic website

www.nationalgeographic.com/grimm/

An interactive site containing 12 tales based on the original Grimm Brothers stories.

To access Penguin Putnam's Reader's Companions online, visit us on the Web at www.penguinputnam.com

Books by Donna Jo Napoli

Novels

Three Days

HC: 0-525-46790-4

\$15.99 (\$23.50 CAN)

Spinners

HC: 0-525-46065-9

\$15.99 (\$24.99 CAN)

PB: 0-14-131110-X

\$5.99 (\$8.99 CAN)

Stones in Water

HC: 0-525-45842-5

\$16.99 (\$22.99 CAN)

PB: 0-14-130600-9

\$ 5.99 (\$8.99 CAN)

Zel

HC: 0-525-45612-0

\$17.99 (\$25.99 CAN)

PB: 0-14-130116-3

\$5.99 (\$8.99 CAN)

The Magic Circle

HC: 0-525-45127-7

\$15.99 (\$23.50 CAN)

PB: 0-14-037439-6

\$4.99 (\$6.99 CAN)

Middle Grade Books

Shelley Shock

HC: 0-525-46452-2

\$15.99 (\$22.99 CAN)

Changing Tunes

PB: 0-14-130811-7

\$4.99 (\$6.99 CAN)

On Guard

PB: 0-14-130118-X

\$4.99 (\$6.99 CAN)

Jimmy, the Pickpocket of the Palace

PB: 0-14-038037-X

\$4.99 (\$6.99 CAN)

The Prince of the Pond:

Otherwise Known as

De Fawg Pin

PB: 0-14-037151-6

\$4.99 (\$6.99 CAN)

Soccer Shock

PB: 0-14-036482-X

\$5.99 (\$8.99 CAN)

