

The Midwife's Apprentice Study Guide

The Midwife's Apprentice by Karen Cushman

(c)2015 BookRags, Inc. All rights reserved.



Contents

The Midwife's Apprentice Study Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Plot Summary.....	4
Chapter One, The Dung Heap.....	6
Chapter Two, The Cat.....	7
Chapter 3, The Midwife.....	9
Chapter 4, The Miller's Wife.....	11
Chapter 5, The Merchant.....	13
Chapter Six, The Naming.....	15
Chapter 7, The Devil.....	17
Chapter 8, The Twins.....	19
Chapter 9, The Bailiff's Wife's Baby.....	21
Chapter 10, The Boy.....	23
Chapter 11, The Leaving.....	24
Chapter 12, The Inn.....	25
Chapter 13, Visitors.....	27
Chapter 14, The Manor.....	29
Chapter 15, Edward.....	30
Chapter 16, The Baby.....	32
Chapter 17, The Midwife's Apprentice.....	34
Characters.....	36
Objects/Places.....	40
Themes.....	42
Style.....	45
Quotes.....	47



Topics for Discussion.....49



Plot Summary

The Midwife's Apprentice by Karen Cushman is a coming of age tale that tells the story of Alyce, a young girl in her teens during the middle ages.

The novel begins with a young girl, known only as Brat, sleeping in a dung heap. Awakened by teasing boys, Brat meets the midwife who sends her on her way. Brat is able to convince the midwife, Jane, to allow her to work for food, an arrangement that continues until Brat, now known as Beetle to Jane, becomes the midwife's apprentice.

Beetle works hard for the midwife, gradually learning the 'magic' that Jane does when assisting in the births of the village women. Though Jane sometimes treats the girl harshly, Beetle knows no other way and does not really think that she deserves much more out of life. In addition, since Beetle has lived on her own for so many years, she has no ability to dream or desire more for herself. Without realizing it, Beetle begins to learn how to be a midwife and it isn't long before she is called on to assist first one mother, then another. The results are mixed, but when Beetle helps one mother when Jane cannot, the girl begins to develop a reputation for herself.

Beetle's life changes rapidly while she is living with Jane and she learns more about herself as well. Formerly very timid, Beetle begins to have a bit of faith in herself and develops a sense of identity along the way. The girl begins to stand up for herself, shyly at first, but then a bit more forcefully. Beetle stands up to the boys that tease her, and even stands up to Jane, though she knows that her life will be a bit harder. To a young girl who is just beginning to find her way in life, the small victories are worth the battles she faces.

Jane sprains her ankle and Beetle has to take the midwife's place at the fair in order to purchase supplies. While at the fair, Beetle is told she is pretty and given a comb by one of the merchants. The comb as well as the gift of the compliment are enlightening to the girl, who begins to see that she might be worth more than she has always believed. As she leaves the fair, a man mistakes her for someone named Alyce, a girl who can read. Beetle wonders at the fact that someone might believe her able to read and decides that she should have a name of her own. From this point on Beetle takes the name Alyce.

In the village Alyce tries hard to convince others to call her by her chosen name and continues to struggle to find her identity. While being teased by the boys of the village, Alyce finds herself in a position to help one, a red-head named Will. Alyce does, even though she is frightened, and earns the friendship and respect of the boy. Alyce continues to grow emotionally while she learns more about being a midwife and about herself.

Alyce is requested at the side of a mother in labor, but the woman is unable to have the baby no matter what Alyce does. Jane arrives and easily assists the mother while Alyce watches. The girl quickly loses whatever faith she has developed in herself and runs away from the village, taking a position at an inn.



Alyce works at the inn, pleasing the owners Jennet and John Dark, but she is not happy. Feeling like a failure, Alyce goes through the motions of work and takes an interest in Magister Reese, a scholar who is staying at the inn. Amazed that the man can read and write, Alyce watches him from a distance, afraid to get closer. Reese, sensing the girl's interest and shyness, begins teaching her about reading and writing and before long Alyce has learned the skills.

Jane visits the inn looking for Alyce and the girl is shocked to hear that she is not the failure she believed herself to be, but had disappointed Jane because she gave up. On a stormy night, a couple arrives at the inn and Alyce, though very frightened of failing, helps the woman give birth to a son. Afterward the girl receives many offers of employment but decides that what she really wants is to be the midwife's apprentice. Returning to the village, Alyce is turned away at the cottage of the midwife but after some thought realizes that Jane is testing her. Alyce returns to the door and tells Jane that she has learned not to give up and will not leave when faced with failure. Jane admits the girl to the cottage and Alyce begins her life again, as the midwife's apprentice.



Chapter One, The Dung Heap

Chapter One, The Dung Heap Summary

A girl of perhaps 12 or 13 burrows into a dung heap in order to keep warm. The girl, known only as 'Brat', has no family, though at one point she is sure she must have had a mother. Despite this, all the girl remembers is the life she lives now, with no warmth and no caring, surviving by taking what she can and working where she can before being driven away by villagers when she has overstayed her welcome.

The girl sleeps, but does not dream, since she has no hope or dreams, and wakes to hunger and cold. Boys from the village taunt her, calling her 'Dung Beetle' until a woman of average age and looks stops them and sends them away. The woman wonders if Brat is alive and when she sees that she is, sends her on her way. Brat asks for a small bit of food but is told that beggars are not welcome in the village. Brat tells the woman that she can work for food and spends the day doing chores for the woman to receive a scrap of dried bread and a bit of ale. Brat is so thankful for the work and food that she sleeps in the dung heap again for the chance of more work in the morning.

Brat, now called 'Beetle' by the woman, works hard and becomes the midwife's apprentice.

Chapter One, The Dung Heap Analysis

In the first chapter, the reader is introduced to two of the main characters in the novel, the girl, known as Brat and then Beetle, and the midwife.

The girl, unsure of her own age, is about 12 or 13 and has lived as long as she can remember on her own, fending for herself. The girl does not appear to bear any ill will for her lot in life; she seems merely resigned to it. This is evident in the way she deals with the boys of the village who taunt her and tease. Brat does not try to protect herself or to fight back with words; she simply accepts that whatever treatment she receives is her due.

Another important note about the girl is that she does not dream while she sleeps, having no hopes or dreams of her own. This statement, again, emphasizes the fact that the girl simply wishes to survive, with no hope or desire to change the way she lives her life.

The midwife, with no name at this point in the novel, seems to be a straight-forward woman who has no time for nonsense. The midwife did not stop the boys from tormenting the girl out of a sense of duty, but because they were in her way. At this point it is hard to decide what type of character the midwife has, though she does allow the girl to work for her food rather than sending her off to whatever fate might bring.



Chapter Two, The Cat

Chapter Two, The Cat Summary

Beetle spends what time she can watching an orange stray cat lie in the sun and groom itself. Some days Beetle saves a bit of the little food she earns and leaves it for the animal, though she has so little for herself.

Beetle heads off to deliver some food for the cat and discovers the boys of the village tormenting the animal as they sometimes do. Beetle is horrified when the boys toss the cat into a sack with an eel to see which will survive a fight. Tossing the sack into the stream, the boys watch until it sinks to the bottom, then leave, assuming the eel has won.

Beetle is beside herself and after a few false starts pulls the bag from the water and slits it open before running to hide. The eel slithers away but the cat does not emerge. Beetle works up her nerve and drags the seemingly lifeless cat from the sack, wrapping it in cloth from her skirt. Beetle does not know any kind words, since she has not heard any herself, so she curses the cat, demanding that it live or she will kill it herself.

Taking the cat to the dung heap where she had slept herself, Beetle places the animal in the warmth with a few pieces of cheese nearby and leaves.

Two days later, Beetle spies the cat grooming itself while sitting on the fence. Beetle takes the cat some cheese and tells it of her life as she knows it, until the two fall asleep in the sunshine.

Chapter Two, The Cat Analysis

In the second chapter, the girl meets a stray cat and cares for it as best she can with the little she is given. The character of the girl is exhibited in this chapter, showing that despite her hardships she still cares for others. It is also clear that despite Beetle's wish to befriend the cat, she is afraid, possibly because rejection would be extremely hurtful.

The day that the boys toss the cat in a sack with an eel is a bit of a turning point for Beetle, because she goes out of her way to rescue the animal. Though she is afraid, Beetle pushes the fear aside in order to save an animal she considers to be her friend.

After rescuing the cat, Beetle curses it, demanding it live, demonstrating that her memories do not include any kindness, since she has no words that might suggest this. Regardless, Beetle expresses herself in the only way she knows how, using words that have motivated her in the past.

The survival of the cat and the fact that Beetle is brave enough to approach it is a small victory to most, but a huge victory to a girl who has known nothing of such things in her

short life. The fact that Beetle chooses to share the little she remembers of her life with the cat emphasizes that she considers the animal her true friend, in fact, the only one she has ever had.



Chapter 3, The Midwife

Chapter 3, The Midwife Summary

The midwife, Jane, is a stern woman who has earned her position in the village because of her strong, clean hands and the fact that she has had six children of her own, though none of them have lived. Beetle refers to the woman as Jane Sharp because of her pointed nose and sharp features.

As Beetle works for Jane she begins to learn the dealings of the midwife and the gruff way she deals with expectant mothers, refusing to help where there is not a payment worthy of her services. Though the villagers do not like the midwife's greedy ways, they need her, so her attitude is tolerated. Beetle is not necessary to the villagers, so she is teased and tormented while she goes about the chores assigned by Jane.

Beetle is not allowed to assist in the births to which the midwife is called, but sits outside, sometimes called on to fetch things from the cottage or brew a mixture of herbs that are needed. Beetle never gets to see the magic that takes place when a baby is born.

One day, the weaver's daughter, Kate, begins labor in the field and there is no choice for the midwife but to deliver the baby where the mother is. Jane sends Beetle to the cottage to get the supplies needed and the girl surprises herself by knowing what is needed by the size and shape of the bottles and the smell of what is in them.

Returning to the field, Beetle sees the midwife order Kate to deliver the baby, telling her that if an animal can do it, she can too. Despite the gruffness of Jane, Beetle is amazed at the birth, and admires Jane, at the same time realizing that the miracle of birth is as much hard work as potions and magic.

Chapter 3, The Midwife Analysis

The reader gets a look inside the daily life of Beetle as she works for the midwife, caring for the cottage and collecting the supplies that Jane needs in order to assist in the births in the village. Though Beetle clearly still thinks of herself as a useless girl, it is clear that she learns quickly and is able to take care of the needs of the midwife. Beetle is more than capable of brewing the different potions that Jane needs in order to conduct her business, but the midwife bars Beetle from taking part in the actual work of assisting in birth. It seems clear that the reason for this is not because Beetle is not capable, but because Jane does not want the competition. This will become clear later in the novel.

While Beetle works in order to keep the roof over her head, Jane gives the girl more and more duties, until it seems that the only thing Jane does is attend the births of those who can pay. Jane's greed in the village is well-known, and the villagers resent it. Despite the fact that Beetle is doing most of the work for the midwife, she is still



considered worthless in the village, and the villagers take their anger at Jane out on Beetle.

Beetle does not think this is odd, and seems to accept it as her due.

Beetle's first experience witnessing an actual birth teaches her several things. When sent to the cabin to fetch what is needed for the birth in the field, Beetle realizes that she has learned the contents of the many bottles on the shelves, and what Jane will need. The second is that Jane is not very kind to those for whom she works. Most importantly, Beetle realizes that assisting in the birth of a baby is as much hard work, if not more, than the ability to brew teas or potions.



Chapter 4, The Miller's Wife

Chapter 4, The Miller's Wife Summary

Summer arrives in the village and with it a strange abundance of bread. Beetle does not know from where the bread has come and does not care, since the midwife shares it with the girl. After a while, Beetle begins to grow curious, because Jane makes excuses to leave the house for various chores, but never takes the items she claims she needs to deliver. Beetle follows Jane at times, but cannot gather the courage to find out what the midwife is up to.

An opportunity presents itself when Beetle has to deliver a balm to a woman at the manor dairy. Beetle makes the delivery and collects payment, then hurries to a tree near the field where the midwife often goes and climbs it. Within moments, Jane appears, as does the baker and the two hug and kiss. Beetle is so shocked that she falls out of the tree and is spotted.

The baker, married with 13 children, and the midwife shout at Beetle about keeping what she has seen secret and she responds that she has no one to tell but the cat and he doesn't care. The girl returns to the cottage, knowing she will be punished.

The miller arrives looking for the midwife, but Beetle has promised to say nothing of her whereabouts. The miller drags Beetle with him, but she protests, afraid and unsure of herself. The miller's wife is in labor and Beetle does what she has seen and heard from the midwife many times, but demanding payment and calling the woman a cow only angers her. The miller's wife begins shouting and throwing things and Beetle cowers in fear.

Jane appears and orders everyone out, then slaps the miller's wife until she stops screaming. The baby is born and the midwife drags Beetle back to the cottage where she calls her names for weeks. Beetle does not mind, since she would rather have the midwife be mean than go hungry.

Chapter 4, The Miller's Wife Analysis

Beetle becomes a bit more aware of what goes on around her, an important fact, since her entire life until this point has been focused on simply surviving. When there is a sudden abundance of bread in the midwife's cottage and Beetle is allowed to enjoy it, she still doesn't think much of it, until, as stated in the novel, she is full. This is significant as well, showing that until this point, the girl has always been hungry. This is not to say that the midwife is cruel, necessarily, but simply that a girl such as Beetle does not have any more worth than the furniture in the cottage.

Beetle does take another step toward independence, first by following Jane when she sets off on her errands, then by arranging to be at the field where Jane always winds



up. Discovering that Jane and the baker are involved with each other is a bit of a shock to Beetle, but she really does not care much one way or another. Beetle does take a huge step forward when she speaks up for herself upon being caught. The girl, previously almost silent as she went about life, defends herself to the midwife and the baker, even though she knows she will suffer for it later.

The arrival of the miller takes the wind out of Beetle's sails when the frightened girl is taken to the laboring wife of the miller. Beetle is not sure how to handle things and does what she has seen the midwife do, demand payment and shout at the woman. Beetle does not have the same nature as Jane and the miller's wife grows agitated listening to the girl. It is clear to the reader that Beetle has a kind nature, and she cannot take the business of helping deliver a baby as casually as Jane.

Jane arrives in time to help with the delivery and her arrival is followed by her usual brisk nature as she slaps the miller's wife and orders her to calm down. Though it seems a harsh way to treat a woman having a baby, it seems that the villagers accept Jane's treatment since it is all they know.

Chapter 5, The Merchant

Chapter 5, The Merchant Summary

Jane readies to go to Saint Swithin's Day Fair in order to replenish her stocks of various items. Beetle wishes she could go to the fair as well, but is afraid to ask. The day before the fair, Jane trips over the blacksmith's pig and breaks her ankle, forcing her to bed. Beetle, afraid that this means the midwife cannot work and will have no need of her, is surprised when Jane tells her she will have to go to the fair in her place.

Beetle enjoys the sights and sounds of the fair, since it is her first visit where hunger has not been her main focus. As the day draws to an end, Beetle finally gets down to her task and begins to gather the items on her list.

At the booth of one merchant, Beetle sees a beautiful comb with a sleeping cat carved into the handle. Beetle has never had a comb, and though she loves it, she puts it down and begins to bargain over flasks. The merchant, charmed by the girl, gives her the comb with her purchases, and comments on using it on her curls and having a lover before nightfall.

Beetle is amazed at having something of her own, as she has never owned anything but her ragged clothing. Combing her hair, Beetle looks into a horse's trough and sees that her tangled hair is really a mess of curls after all. While staring at herself, a man approaches mistaking Beetle for Alyce, someone he wishes to read his race slip. The man at last realizes his mistake, but Beetle is amazed to have been mistaken for someone with a name and someone who can read. Beetle decides that from this point on she will be Alyce.

Chapter 5, The Merchant Analysis

This is a very important chapter in the novel, as Beetle's universe expands a bit more. The girl steps outside the very narrow life she has led once again when she takes the place of Jane at Saint Swithin's Day Fair.

The girl has been to fairs before, but only on the off chance of finding something to eat, and with no thought other than staying as out of sight as possible. On this day, Beetle has the right to be at the fair, is indeed a paying customer, and is able to enjoy the sights and sounds around her. In addition, no one at the fair knows of her as the midwife's apprentice, or as Dung Beetle, so she is free to act naturally, not duck and cower in fear of being taunted by the villagers.

Beetle is given several gifts on the day of the fair, only the first being a sense of freedom. When Beetle sees the comb she is drawn to its beauty, as well as the cat on the handle. Never imagining that she could have such a thing, Beetle is shocked when the merchant simply gives it to her after they bicker over the prices of the items she



needs. Not only does the merchant give Beetle the comb, he also comments on her hair and winks at her. Though these things seem insignificant, to a girl who has spent her life invisible to others, it is a revelation.

Beetle receives two more unlikely gifts that day. A man stumbles upon the girl while she examines her reflection in water, taking notice of herself for the first time. The man thinks that Beetle is someone named Alyce who can read his race slips for him. Though the man realizes that Beetle is not Alyce, the girl is amazed, not only that she might be mistaken for someone with a name, but for someone who can read. It is clear that the girl who has thought very little of herself for so long is waking up to the idea that she might be worth something after all.

Beetle takes a name for herself, Alyce, giving herself an identity, rather than accepting what others put upon her.



Chapter Six, The Naming

Chapter Six, The Naming Summary

Alyce announces her name to the midwife who is still angry and in pain from her broken ankle. Heading outside to share the news of her name with the cat, Alyce decides that since she has a name the cat should too. As Alyce lists a choice of names from which the cat should choose, several villagers go by and comment on her seeming insanity and her name.

The cat decides on his name, Purr, and he and Alyce set off on a walk, only to be cornered by the village boys that torment them. Though the girl is frightened by the drunken boys, she still works up the courage to whisper her new name when they call her Beetle.

The boys laugh and tease, claiming the girl has called Will, the red-headed boy, Alyce. A chase begins when Alyce slips away and she climbs a tree by the river. The boys circle the tree and taunt her some more until Will falls into the water and struggles to get out. His friends panic and leave the scene. Will calls out to Alyce to help him.

Though Alyce is afraid and says so, she manages to shift the limb where she is so that it is low enough for Will to grab onto. Once out of the water, Will remarks that the girl is brave, though he still calls her Beetle. Alyce reminds him of her name and denies that she is brave at all. Will corrects himself, but insists that she is brave, because she stayed when all of his friends had left him.

That night Alyce has a dream that the pope arrives in the village and calls her by her name. In the same dream, the king marries the midwife and the cat laughs.

Chapter Six, The Naming Analysis

Having a name is so important to the girl that she decides her only friend, the cat, should have one as well. That Alyce feels it important for the cat to choose his own name is also important, since she looks at him as her equal.

Alyce tells anyone who addresses her of her name, and grows a bit frustrated when Jane and the villagers don't take the information as seriously as she does. Even when confronted by the boys who frighten her, Alyce still whispers her name, declaring that she is as important as they are in some small way.

When Will falls in the water and his friends leave him, Alyce helps, even though she is afraid to do so. Alyce is capable of assisting Will, but having no self-worth, she has a very difficult time in believing that she can. Despite her fears, she does save the boy, one who has taken pleasure in tormenting her whenever the opportunity has presented

itself. Because of this, Will sees the girl in a new light, and Alyce sees herself differently as well.

Alyce's dream is significant for two reasons. The first is because someone as important as the pope calls her by her name. The second, and probably most important, is that before this night, Alyce has never dreamed at all.



Chapter 7, The Devil

Chapter 7, The Devil Summary

Things continue in the village as they have been, with Alyce working hard for very little and being taunted by most of the villagers.

A two-headed calf is born one day to Roger Mustard's cow, scaring the villagers. Because Alyce is not afraid of the dark, and has little value to the villagers, it is left to her to deliver messages and do errands after dark. This does not bother Alyce, since it gives her time to learn wood-working from Gilbert Gray-Head, as well as to learn about sin from the priest.

One morning, strange tracks are found in the village and Thomas At-the-Bridge is called because he knows animal tracks. Thomas is unable to identify what has made them. The tracks are followed at one point to the miller's door, where the miller is found stealing grain from his customers. Because it is thought that the miller has been tempted by the Devil, he is not punished severely, but only made to stand in the rain with his millstone around his neck for a day. Another instance has the priest and the villagers following the footprints to the door of the smith's barn. Inside, Grommet, the smith's daughter, is found in the arms of a boy from the manor.

Everyone claims to have seen signs of the Devil, or the Devil himself, and following the footprints leads to various villagers having been tempted to sin. By this point, the villagers do not wish to see the Devil, but only to find out who has been tempted by him. Two days pass with no sign of footprints until someone says they have found some on the Old North Road. All of the villagers rush to the scene, with the exception of Jane, who has been called to a birth, and Alyce, who is elsewhere.

The prints stop near a familiar tree where the baker steps out calling to Jane. The villagers leave the baker to his wife and head back into the village.

At the river nearby, Alyce steps out of hiding, takes something and tosses it in the water. From that day forward the Devil is never seen in the village again, and all of those who have tormented Alyce had their sins revealed for all to see.

A few days later, two blocks of wood carved into the shape of hooves wash up down stream. No one can figure out what they are, so they are added to the firewood to heat a stew.

Chapter 7, The Devil Analysis

The superstitions of the villagers are focused on in this chapter when a two-headed calf causes the residents to look at things as if there might be some demonic meaning. Because Alyce has spent most of her young life sleeping outside, she has no fear of the



dark. In addition, because Alyce has little imagination having spent her life too focused on survival to worry about fantasies such as the Devil.

By being the only person willing to go out into the village at night, Alyce is able to learn new things, such as wood-carving, as well as about the sins that people worry about committing. Not only does Alyce learn these things, but she is also able to observe the habits of the villagers around her.

The Devil's footprints begin to appear and the villagers, though frightened, are more curious about what their neighbors are doing. This curiosity leads many of the villagers to be caught in compromising positions; however, the usual punishments are withheld and a bit of mercy shown to them since it is clear the Devil is to blame.

At the end of the chapter, Alyce tosses something in the river and several days later hoof shaped blocks of wood wash ashore. It is clear that Alyce has exacted her revenge on the people who have tormented her during her time in the village. Though Jane has also tormented Alyce, it seems that she has been spared the embarrassment of the others. Whether this is intentional or not on Alyce's part is unclear, but it does seem that Alyce wishes no harm to the woman who has given her a chance to work and eat.



Chapter 8, The Twins

Chapter 8, The Twins Summary

Alyce spends a day gathering apples and heads back to the cottage only to hear noises that frighten her coming from a gully on the side of the road. Though afraid, she goes closer and discovers that Will is in the gully with his cow, Tansy. Will asks for Alyce's help, since Tansy is about to give birth. Alyce is reluctant, unsure of how to be a midwife to a cow, but Will promises to show her.

Alyce listens as Will tells her to sing to the cow, and when the girl says that she does not know how to sing, he tells her to croon. Alyce does as she is asked, patting the cow and whispering kind words like Will does. The day passes and evening comes, but before too long not one, but two calves are born. Will is thrilled with his bounty and when they return to the village Will tells anyone who will listen about what a great help Alyce has been. The girl is pleased and proud, but still shy.

At first things do not change, but Alyce continues to learn at the side of Jane the midwife. Before long, Alyce's knowledge comes to the attention of the villagers who begin to ask her the questions that they once asked Jane. The midwife, busy with her own life, does not notice this shift in things, and Alyce gives the midwife all of the payments she receives, since she believes that she would not have earned them without having learned at Jane's side.

On a day like any other, Alyce tells Purr about the birth of the twin calves again and as she does the words seem to have a melody. Alyce makes the words into a song, and continues discussing the events with the cat.

Chapter 8, The Twins Analysis

Alyce stumbles across Will Russet and his cow Tansy in the gully and reluctantly helps the boy and his cow. Alyce, who still does not trust herself enough to act as a midwife with a person, doesn't give herself much worth when it comes to an animal either. Despite this, Alyce does help, since she is the type of person who cannot turn her back on anyone in need.

Alyce learns at Will's side as he helps Tansy give birth to not one, but two calves. The gentleness of the boy and the way the kind words and crooning calm the cow amaze Alyce, whose only experience with birth has been the harshness of Jane as she makes demands of the mothers she assists.

Will's praise in the village makes Alyce a bit self-conscious but she cherishes the feeling, since no one has ever spoken kindly of her, let alone praised her good work. The bit of confidence that Alyce gets from Will's praise allows her to open her eyes to the fact that she might be smarter than even she has thought.



Alyce's belief in herself is obvious to the villagers, if not to herself. Gradually, Alyce gets more respect from those around her, who ask her advice and value her guidance. Though Alyce is happy to be of help, she still does not think of herself as the source of the assistance, and gives her payments to Jane.

Alyce's only friend is still the cat Purr, because the cat is the only living thing that listens to her opinions and seems interested. It is the cat who witnesses Alyce learn to sing, a huge step for a girl who has until this point had no reason to sing at all.



Chapter 9, The Bailiff's Wife's Baby

Chapter 9, The Bailiff's Wife's Baby Summary

Alyce is out collecting nuts for the midwife when she comes upon the boys teasing the cat. Without thought, Alyce threatens the boys with a flask of blackberry cordial that she says is rat's blood and viper's flesh, claiming it will make the boys act like women. Alyce is too startled to be afraid; since the boys are too startled to react, they leave the cat alone.

The midwife is summoned to the bailiff's house to assist in helping his wife, Joan, give birth. Alyce sleeps outside for most of the night and Jane sends her to the cottage for more supplies as dawn arrives. Alyce returns to Joan's house to find the midwife preparing to go to the manor to assist Lady Agnes who is in labor. The midwife tells Alyce to go to Joan, who is too tired to even notice the midwife has left. Alyce is afraid, but Jane tells her that the bailiff's child will die and when Jane returns she will take care of business and collect two fees in one day.

Alyce is afraid when Joan calls out that she wishes to die, though she seems calm and reasonable. When the woman's labor begins again, Alyce thinks what Jane would do in this situation and considers what Will Russet would do as well. Choosing Will's tactics, Alyce soothes Joan, massaging her and speaking kindly. Before long, Joan gives birth to a baby girl, breech but beautiful, whom she names Alyce Little.

Jane arrives and the bailiff tells her that she is not needed, that Alyce has handled things on her own. Alyce smiles for the first time that she can remember, and that night dreams of her mother.

Chapter 9, The Bailiff's Wife's Baby Analysis

Alyce gains more faith in herself when she confronts the boys who are teasing her cat. Not only is Alyce surprised, but the boys are too. The boys are also disappointed, since Alyce is no longer fun to tease. The boys in the village recognized before Alyce herself had, that she is no longer the victim she has been in life.

Alyce is forced to step up to the plate when Jane leaves to assist in a birth at the manor while Joan's labor fails to progress. Alyce is very frightened, even though she has seen Jane do her work many times. Left on her own, Alyce reflects on what she has learned about being a midwife, not just from Jane but also from Will Russet. Alyce, naturally kind, chooses to model herself after Will. Alyce shows kindness and compassion for Joan, as well as patience, something that Jane seems to lack.

Joan and her husband are rewarded with a healthy baby girl, but Alyce is rewarded with much more. Not only does the couple name their baby after Alyce, giving the name she

has chosen for herself validity, they also tell Jane that Alyce had been all they had needed.

Alyce gets another gift that day, the gift of the first smile she can remember, as well as a dream of the mother she has forgotten.



Chapter 10, The Boy

Chapter 10, The Boy Summary

Alyce spends more time watching Jane at work, learning the tricks of the trade and the girl learns that Jane has as much skill at what she does as magic and hidden 'spells'.

Alyce goes to visit Tansy's calves and discovers a small boy sleeping in the hay. The boy leaps up, apologizing and makes to leave. Alyce tells the boy he does not need to leave, but does recommend the dung heap as a warmer place to sleep.

The boy tells Alyce that he is no one, but she stops him, telling him that everyone is someone. Alyce goes to get the boy some bread and returns to find the village boys teasing him. Protecting the youngster earns Alyce his devotion.

The boy has no name, and decides that he should be Alyce too, then decides on the name of the king since he cannot have a girl's name. Alyce checks around the village and discovers that the king is named Edward, and the boy declares that he is Edward too.

Alyce sees Jane returning and sends Edward to the manor, telling him that he should say Jane sent him with a reminder of how helpful she was helping Lady Agnes give birth. Edward is sad to go, but Alyce knows that he will have an easier life working at the manor than sleeping with cows in the village.

Chapter 10, The Boy Analysis

Alyce moves forward with her life and tries to learn more about what midwives do, expanding her knowledge. Alyce realizes for the first time that there is not really any magic involved, but skill and perhaps some parlor tricks.

Alyce meets Edward, a small boy of about six who is in much the same position she was in when she arrived in the village. Alyce, once again demonstrating her caring nature, takes the boy under her wing and does what she can for him.

Alyce tells Edward that everyone is someone, though it is unclear if she believes this about herself fully at this point. Though she is learning more every day, and believes more in herself every moment, Alyce still has a long way to go.

Alyce stands up to the village boys in defense of Edward, something that it took her a long time to do for herself. Alyce also sends Edward to the manor, knowing that he can have a much better life than she can if presented with the right opportunities.



Chapter 11, The Leaving

Chapter 11, The Leaving Summary

November comes and Matthew Blunt arrives, asking for Alyce. Jane still does not know who Alyce is, calling the girl Beetle. Blunt tells the midwife that his mother is in labor and wants Alyce to attend, coming recommended by her sister, Joan, the bailiff's wife. The angry midwife sends Alyce away.

Alyce arrives at Emma Blunt's side and tries to do everything she can, but is unable to assist the woman give birth. Alyce sends for Jane who arrives triumphantly and is able to deliver the baby.

Alyce leaves the room quietly, a failure and turns her back on all she has grown to know, leaves the village behind her, with the cat at her side.

Chapter 11, The Leaving Analysis

The arrival of someone at the door who actually wants her is a bit of a start to Alyce who still feels unsure of herself in many ways. Despite her fears, Alyce goes to the Blunt house and does what she can, calling on all of the things she has learned from Jane. As the labor continues and the baby is not born, Alyce's self-doubt begins to creep back and she loses faith in herself.

Alyce watches as Jane is able to deliver the baby who she could not get to come and believes herself a failure. All of the progress that Alyce has made in the short time in the village is wiped away. Unable to face her failure, Alyce leaves the place that has become her home.



Chapter 12, The Inn

Chapter 12, The Inn Summary

Alyce wakes in the rain, unused to sleeping outside. Though she considers giving up, Alyce gets up and moves forward and finds a small inn about an hour from the village.

Before long, Alyce is working in the kitchen for John Dark, the almost blind inn keeper and his wife Jennet. Jennet is thankful for the hard working Alyce. As the weeks pass, Alyce finds her place at the Inn though she thinks of the village and the boy Edward, often.

The winter passes slowly and Alyce works hard, but finds no joy as the Christmas season comes and goes.

Alyce notices a thin man who has been sitting at the same table each day and watches him. The young girl cannot believe her eyes when she sees the man writing. Alyce asks Jennet about the man and is told he is Magister Reese, a scholar who spends his winters at the inn, exchanging room and board by keeping accounts for others.

Alyce works close to Reese, trying to see what he does without being noticed. The man tries to engage Alyce in conversation but she is too timid, so instead he speaks to the cat. Before long, Reese is showing the cat how to form letters, then words. Alyce listens intently, practicing the shapes of letters in the ash of the fireplace and the dust in the inn.

One afternoon Magister Reese talks to himself, wondering aloud what she wants. Alyce is surprised when he poses the question to her, and even more surprised when she answers. Alyce only wishes for a full belly and a place in the world, but thinks that she is too stupid to achieve her goal. Magister Reese responds that Alyce cannot be stupid since she can read as well as the cat.

Chapter 12, The Inn Analysis

Alyce once again finds a place for herself, working in the inn of the Darks. Though Alyce feels sad because of her failure, there is no sense of self-pity. Rather, Alyce is resigned, feeling that she had no right to expect better things for herself, and that getting her hopes up was her fault entirely.

While at the inn, Alyce continues to work hard, though there is a difference in her relationship with Jennet. The innkeeper is not harsh with Alyce, calling her by the name she has chosen and treating her with kindness. There is a sense of appreciation with Jennet, something which Alyce is not used to. Despite the fact that the relationship is much better than her time with Jane, Alyce still feels as if she does not quite belong,



and she thinks with sadness of her time in the village. Though Alyce really does not have a frame of reference for it, the village is the closest thing she has had to a home.

The introduction of Magister Reese is an important one for Alyce. When Alyce had been mistaken for someone who could read at the fair, it was one of the best days of her life. Meeting a man who could read and write is an amazing thing for the girl. Once again she does not feel worthy of being near Reese and shyly watches from a distance as he goes about his work and discusses his business with the cat. Alyce picks up what he 'teaches' Purr, and practices on her own, thinking that no one is noticing.

Magister Reese clearly knows what he is doing and is very cautious around Alyce, but recognizes her abilities regardless. The day he finally asks her what she wants in life, he is respectful of her desires and makes her small wishes sound as if they might be possible to obtain. By doing this before revealing the fact that he is aware of her ability to read and write, Reese easily makes Alyce aware of the progress she has already made.



Chapter 13, Visitors

Chapter 13, Visitors Summary

Alyce learns more about the way that Jennet runs the inn, working hard and using common sense. Jennet is very pleased to have Alyce working at the inn and helping her in such an undemanding way.

A man arrives at the inn and Alyce realizes that he works at the manor in the village. The girl works up the courage to ask about Edward, but the man has no idea who she is talking about. Alyce worries that perhaps she has even failed in helping the small boy.

A delivery of firewood is brought to the inn and Alyce is thrilled to see Will Russet walking with the wagon. The two greet each other happily and Will shares stories of the people who Alyce misses in the village. Will asks Alyce why she left and she replies that she was too stupid to be a midwife's apprentice. Will tells Alyce that she has guts as well as common sense and that she does not need to know everything in order to succeed.

Within a month Alyce is shocked to see Jane Sharp arrive at the inn. Alyce hides herself as much as possible, avoiding the midwife. Things change when Alyce sees Jane speaking to Reese as she is afraid that the midwife is telling the man how stupid Alyce was. Alyce gets closer and is relieved to discover that the two are talking about Jane as the midwife tells the scholar about her beliefs when it comes to being a midwife.

Alyce is shocked when Jane tells Magister Reese that she has heard that her former apprentice is at the inn. Jane tells Reese that maybe Alyce's leaving her was for the best. Alyce believes this is because she failed but learns that Jane is angry that Alyce had given up after failing, since risks need to be taken at times.

Chapter 13, Visitors Analysis

Alyce works at the inn, not unhappily, but missing the village that she has grown to love. A guest arrives who lives at the manor and Alyce is anxious to hear news of Edward. The girl is crushed when the man states he has never heard of the boy, since she believes that she had failed in finding a place for Edward. The fear that Alyce has, that she is not and never will be good enough surfaces again.

The arrival of Will at the inn brings Alyce joy, for she has missed the friend she made. Will gives Alyce news of the village and the people she has grown to care for, and asks why she left. After Alyce replies that she was too stupid to be the midwife's apprentice, Will tells her that she does not need to know everything in order to be a success. Alyce has spent her entire life feeling that she is not good enough and never will be, so the idea that she might have to change her attitude about herself is foreign to her.



The arrival of Jane Sharp at the inn causes panic in Alyce because she does not want Jane to see her, yet she is afraid that the midwife might speak ill of her to Magister Reese. Alyce takes the chance to listen in on the conversation and is not really surprised to hear that Jane is more concerned with talking about herself. Alyce does get a shock when she hears that Jane has come to the inn because Will had told her Alyce is there. The girl worries when Jane brings her up and is ready to accept Jane's poor opinion of her when she hears Jane say that she had been disappointed in Alyce for giving up.

Alyce can hardly believe her ears. The girl had thought herself a failure, and had believed that Jane had found her worthless. In reality, Jane had not been disappointed in Alyce as a person, but in her lack of faith in herself.



Chapter 14, The Manor

Chapter 14, The Manor Summary

Alyce decides to go to the manor to see about Edward herself. Taking care to take the back roads so she isn't seen, Alyce arrives and begins asking among the residents if they have seen Edward. Alyce grows increasingly alarmed until she is told that the boy has been working in the kitchen.

Relieved, Alyce heads to the kitchen and asks the cook if Edward is there. The cook, a friendly woman, comments on how Edward and Alyce look enough alike to be twins. Alyce assures her they are not even related, but the cook does not believe her. The cook explains that Edward has been helping her in the kitchen since he is too small to work in the fields, and sends Alyce to the hen house where Edward is gathering eggs.

Chapter 14, The Manor Analysis

Alyce goes to the manor to see about Edward herself, a big step for her since she is worried about having failed the boy. At first Alyce can find no one who has seen or heard of Edward and she grows more worried. Then she is told that the little boy has been working in the kitchen.

Relieved, Alyce heads to the kitchen and discovers that Edward is in the care of a friendly cook who obviously cares for him. Alyce is happy that she has been able to succeed in something, though she still worries that Edward might not recognize her, or be pleased to see her when he does.

The comments that the cook makes about how similar Alyce and Edward look might mean that the two are related in some way, though it is never expanded on in the novel. It is possible, since Alyce has no memory of her youth, only catching vague recollections in her dreams. Because Edward is also an orphan, it is possible that the two are siblings.



Chapter 15, Edward

Chapter 15, Edward Summary

As the afternoon passes, Alyce finds Edward in the hen house playing knights with the chickens. Edward is thrilled to see Alyce and hugs her tightly. Alyce is filled with happiness that Edward remembers her and misses her.

Edward asks Alyce if she has come to take him away, but before Alyce can say that she will rescue him from the manor he begs her to let him stay. Alyce is sad, a bit heart-broken but, at the same time, relieved that she has done something right for the boy. Alyce sighs, and then sighs again, and before she knows it, she is crying, the first time she has ever done so. Edward comforts her as best he can and the two head back to the manor kitchen.

Edward convinces Alyce to spend the night and the two have dinner and get ready for sleep. Edward tells Alyce all about his life at the manor and how he has found a place for himself. Alyce is happy for Edward and the two settle into a peaceful sleep.

The next day Alyce and Edward watch the men of the manor wash the sheep to prepare them for sheering. Edward helps reunite the lambs with their mothers and Alyce begins to help the man wash the sheep. When the work is done, the men herd the sheep back to their pastures and Alyce notices that for the first time her hands are white and clean.

Alyce is amazed at the soft, white skin on her hands and wonders if the rest of her is the same under all of the dirt. Alyce wonders if perhaps she might even be pretty as Will has told her. Heading to a deserted part of the river, Alyce washes herself and her clothes and discovers that she might be pretty after all.

Alyce says goodbye to Edward, but promises that she is not far away, and that she will visit him often. The two wave goodbye as Alyce walks away until the road turns and the only thing she can see is the road before her.

Chapter 15, Edward Analysis

Alyce is thrilled to see that Edward is healthy and well, and even more happy that the boy remembers her and is pleased to see her. Though Alyce had hoped to take Edward away with her, she learns that he is happy at the manor and does not wish to leave. Alyce is relieved that Edward has found his place, something that she has still not done, but sad that he does not seem to need her as much as she needs him.

Alyce sighs, and the release that sighing brings allows her to cry, something that she has never done. Though Alyce is not content with her life, it is clear that she is growing emotionally, or at least allowing herself to feel. At the beginning of the novel Alyce had been intent on surviving with no room in her life for anything else. As the story



progresses, Alyce is able to look inside herself and allow herself to feel things, and to question what it is that she desires.

Alyce's time at the manor is fun and she enjoys her time with Edward. While working with the sheep, Alyce discovers the simple pleasure of being clean and wonders if she is pretty as Will has told her. Alyce washes herself and her clothes, discovering that she might be more than she has thought, on the outside as well as within.



Chapter 16, The Baby

Chapter 16, The Baby Summary

Alyce is working at the inn as a storm approaches. A wealthy couple and their attendants arrive and are shown in but the man wants no service because he believes his wife is being attacked by a stomach worm. Jennet informs the man that his wife is about to have a baby, but he has difficulty believing it since his wife has been barren.

Jennet sends the man's attendant to the village to fetch the midwife, but he returns and tells them that Jane is not at home. Jennet does what she can to make the woman comfortable and Alyce watches from under the stairs, afraid to get involved in things.

Time passes and though Jennet tries to be a help she is unable to deliver the baby, finally covering the woman with her cloak and giving up. Alyce, under the stairs, is at war with herself, remembering her failures as a midwife's apprentice, yet also remembering the encouraging words from friends. Alyce finally leaves her hiding place and decides to help.

The girl helps the woman to her feet, walks her around, encouraging, praying, massaging and calling on all she has seen Jane do as well as adding things of her own. As dawn approaches, Alyce delivers a baby boy and presents him to his amazed father and mother.

The man declares Alyce a saint, able to make a barren woman give birth and changing a stomach worm into a baby. Alyce goes outside to get away from the noise and sees Magister Reese, who winks at her. Alyce smiles, then laughs, her first laugh, and Reese thinks that this laugh might be the true miracle of the day.

Chapter 16, The Baby Analysis

Alyce settles back into life at the inn until the night that the important and wealthy couple arrive. Though the woman is in distress, Alyce is unaware of the problem until Jennet tells the man that his wife is going to have a baby.

Alyce immediately hides herself as memories of her failures surface. Afraid of failing, Alyce watches as the others do everything they can think of to help the woman deliver her baby. As Jennet finally gives up, Alyce steps forward to help, with the help of the encouraging words she has heard about herself.

Alyce calls on all she knows and invents some things on her own as she helps the woman give birth to a healthy boy. Declared a saint by the father, Alyce knows that she is not a saint, but that she has finally overcome the doubt that she has had in herself all along. The laugh she breaks free as she sees Magister Reese outside of the inn is a

release to Alyce; she is finally free of the doubt that she has been carrying within herself.



Chapter 17, The Midwife's Apprentice

Chapter 17, The Midwife's Apprentice Summary

The important couple wants Alyce to accompany them to Salisbury to be a nanny to the baby boy and Magister Reese asks Alyce if she would like to go with him to Oxford where he lives with his widowed sister, so that the girl can continue to learn while helping him take care of his sister. Jennet, worried that Alyce might leave her, offers the girl a penny occasionally to stay on as the inn girl.

Alyce sits quietly and thinks to herself, trying to figure out what she wants for herself. After some reflection Alyce realizes that what she wants is to be the midwife's apprentice. Though Alyce knows that she will have to work hard with little encouragement, and that she will likely be hungry while she works, she will be content and happy. Alyce wants to be a midwife someday, and being an apprentice will take her on this path.

Alyce says goodbye to everyone at the inn and leaves with the cat. After they leave, the inn is renamed "The Cat and Cheese", though time will pass and no one will remember why. Alyce sings on the way to the village, happy that she has made the decision to return to the midwife. This is where she feels she belongs.

Arriving at the cottage, Alyce calls out to Jane and announces her return, telling the midwife that she has learned about babies, and how to read and write. Alyce tells Jane that she has also learned to laugh and cry, and that she is ready to be an apprentice. Jane asks Alyce if this is all she has learned and the girl replies that it is. Alyce is shocked when Jane refuses her.

Heartbroken, Alyce readies to leave the village, unsure of where to go, but knowing that she has failed. Heading toward the path, Alyce calls to Purr, but the cat refuses to leave. Alyce tries to reason with the cat but suddenly realizes that the cat is right. Jane had told Magister Reece at the inn that she needed an apprentice who would not give up, even in the face of failure. Alyce returns to Jane's door and tells the midwife that she will not leave, that she will never give up, and that she will not go away.

Jane opens the door and admits Alyce, and the cat follows her into the cottage. The two are home again.

Chapter 17, The Midwife's Apprentice Analysis

Alyce is a bit overwhelmed at the offers she receives at the inn. A girl who has lived her life with no purpose other than survival, Alyce now has many different places that she is wanted. The young girl feels happy, true happiness at the thought of being wanted, but knows that she must decide for herself what she wants and needs.



Thinking things over, Alyce realizes that though living and working with Jane had not not always been easy and that the midwife could be harsh in her ways, being an apprentice to the midwife is what the girl really wants to do. Alyce, her spirit happy, tells her friends at the inn goodbye and sings happily as she walks back to the village.

Alyce arrives at Jane's cottage, thrilled to announce that she has returned and is ready to be an apprentice. The girl is a bit surprised by Jane's lack of enthusiasm, since she is back and determined to do her best, no matter what. Jane is not impressed with the things that Alyce has learned and turns the girl away.

Alyce is devastated and turns away, ready to give up and move on, though she has no idea where she will go or what she will do. Purr lays down in the yard and purrs, refusing to go with her. Alyce tries to get the cat to see reason but suddenly realizes herself that the cat is right.

Jane had told Magister Reese that even though Alyce was not the worst apprentice she has had, she had been disappointed when the girl had given up after failing. Alyce realizes what it is that Jane wants to know that she learned and returns to the door of the cottage.

Alyce tells Jane that she is not going away, that she will never give up, no matter what.

Jane opens the door and lets Alyce in, pleased that at last the girl has learned the most important lesson, that even failing is a learning experience and a person must continue to try, no matter what.

Alyce returns to her duties at the midwife's apprentice, happy and content at finding her place in the world.



Characters

Brat, Beetle, Alyce

The main character in the novel *The Midwife's Apprentice* is a young girl of about 13 years old with no home or family of her own. Called Brat at the beginning of the novel, then Beetle after she is discovered sleeping in a dung heap, the girl eventually winds up with the name Alyce, after choosing it for herself.

Alyce arrives in a small village with no desire other than to find a warm place to sleep and a bit to eat. When Alyce is discovered sleeping in the dung heap by Jane, the midwife, her life begins changing in ways that she could not have imagined.

Alyce asks for food and when the midwife tells her that no one gets food without work, she offers to work for her food. Pleased at having eaten, Alyce works again the next day and finds that, for the first time in as long as she can remember, she has a roof over her head. Life with Jane the midwife is not easy, but the girl is happy to work for what she can have.

The girl names herself Alyce after she is mistaken for someone else while at the fair buying supplies for the midwife. By taking a name it is as if Alyce is also taking an identity for herself as she learns more about herself and the world around her every day.

Alyce wishes to be a midwife like Jane, but a bad experience while attempting to assist in a birth frightens her and makes her lose faith in herself. Afraid that she will always be nothing, Alyce leaves the village and takes a job as an inn girl. While at the inn Alyce learns more about herself, growing in maturity and learning to have some faith in herself.

Jane Sharp

The midwife in a small medieval village, Jane is described as a woman who is neither young or old, thin or fat. An average woman in general, Jane is a strong task-master, calling on Alyce to assist her and making demands for very little in return. Jane does not instruct Alyce in the ways of a midwife, guarding her secrets closely in order to keep the young girl as an apprentice rather than competition.

Jane is not encouraging to the girl, who she calls Beetle, and is sometimes abusive and cruel. Despite this, it does not seem that Jane is intentionally mean-spirited; it is simply the way she is. Jane treats the women she assists with the same callous attitude, angrily demanding them to follow her instructions, shouting at them when their labor does not progress, and demanding payment before she will help in any way.

Jane does have a life outside of being a midwife, which Alyce discovers one day when she spies on her mistress. Jane has been having a relationship with the miller, meeting



the man in a field outside the village. The miller, with a wife and many children of his own, is caught when Alyce orchestrates his discovery by the village priest and many of the villagers.

Jane seeks out Alyce when she is told that the girl is working in an inn outside of the village. Though the woman's harshness has been the focus of her personality throughout the novel, Alyce learns while listening to the midwife that she is angry at Alyce, not for failing, but for giving up. When Alyce discovers that she is not a failure she returns to Jane who accepts her as her apprentice again, after the girl reveals that she has learned such a valuable lesson.

Magister Reese

A guest at the inn where Alyce works, Reese exchanges his skills of reading and writing for his room and board. A thin older man, Reese spends the winters at the inn, sitting at a table, working for others and writing his book, "The Great Mirror of the Universe Wherein You Can Find Reflected All of the World's Knowledge", collected by Myself, Magister Richard Reese, MA, and Dedicated to His Ampleness the Bishop of Chester. The book is said to contain all the knowledge that Reese has acquired in his lifetime, a sort of encyclopedia.

Reese sees Alyce watching him and tries to engage her in conversation, but senses the girl's shyness and sense of despair. Reese engages Alyce's cat, Purr, in conversation instead, telling the cat about reading and writing. Magister Reese gives the cat lessons while Alyce is nearby, teaching the girl to read and write without her knowledge. Reese is encouraging without being forceful, allowing Alyce to realize that she is not the failure she believes.

Reese invites Alyce to stay with him and his sister in Oxford when he leaves the inn at the end of his visit. By this time Alyce has realized what she wishes to do with her life, and returns to the village to work once again as the midwife's apprentice. The young girl is able to gain her sense of self back with the gentle encouragement of the kind scholar.

Will Russet

Will Russet, named for his red hair, is one of the boys in the village and is around the same age as Alyce. At the beginning of the novel, Will teases and torments Alyce with the rest of the boys in the village. One afternoon, when the boys chase Alyce to the river she climbs a tree to escape them. While teasing Alyce, Will falls in the river. Afraid, his friends leave Will. Alyce, though afraid herself, manages to save the boy from the water. Will realizes that Alyce is not just a 'thing' to be teased and the two part ways with a better understanding of each other.

Alyce helps Will deliver twin calves when his cow Tansy goes onto labor one night and Will teaches Alyce that being gentle and kind is another way to assist as a midwife.



Alyce takes the lesson with her and uses it when she is called on to assist in helping the mothers in the village have their babies.

John Dark

The owner of the inn where Alyce works, John is married to Jennet Dark. John is called 'Dark' because he is almost blind. Despite his lack of vision, John has no problem finding ale when it is left on a table.

Jennet Dark

The wife of John Dark, Jennet runs the inn where Alyce winds up after she leaves the village. Jennet is the opposite of Jane Sharp, very willing to share praise with Alyce and kind to the young girl. When it is time for Alyce to decide what she wants to do with her life, Jennet offers to pay the girl a penny or two once in a while so that she will stay at the inn.

Edward

Edward is a young orphan boy who Alyce finds sleeping with the twin calves that she helped Will deliver. Alyce feeds Edward and sends him to the manor so that he can find a place to work and sleep. Alyce is pleased that Edward finds a place at the manor, but sad when the boy wishes to stay with the cook rather than leave with Alyce.

Joan

The wife of the bailiff, Joan's labor fails to progress and Jane Sharp leaves her with Alyce so that she can attend a birth at the manor. Alyce soothes the woman and is able to assist her in the delivery of her daughter. The baby is named Alyce Little, in honor of Alyce, the midwife's apprentice.

Purr

Alyce's cat, a stray that she rescued after the boys of the village tossed it in a sack with an eel and threw it in the river. The cat chooses his own name, as Alyce did, and she calls him Purr.

The Merchant

A merchant at the fair who gives Alyce a comb and tells her that she is pretty, the man is unnamed but plays a large part in Alyce gaining self-esteem.



The Miller's Wife

The wife of the village miller. Alyce is called to the woman's side when she is in labor but is afraid and is unable to help the woman.

Traveling Woman

A traveling woman turns up at the inn in labor and Alyce is able to assist her in delivering a baby boy. The woman had not even realized she was pregnant.

Traveling Man

The husband of the woman who arrives at the inn in labor, the man is amazed when Alyce seemingly transforms his wife's 'stomach worm' into a baby boy.



Objects/Places

The Village

An unnamed village in the middle ages. Alyce enters the village as an orphan with no prospects and winds up the midwife's apprentice.

The Cat and Cheese

The name of the inn where Alyce works. The inn is named after Purr, Alyce's cat, after the two leave to return to the village.

Salisbury

The town where the important couple lives. Alyce is invited to live with them there and care for their son.

Oxford

The town where Magister Reese lives with his sister.

The Manor

The estate in the village where Alyce finds a home. Alyce sends Edward to the manor to find a position and a place to stay.

The Field

A field outside of the village where Jane and the baker meet secretly.

Old North Road

The road that runs through the village.

The Dung Heap

The pile of dung where Alyce sleeps at the beginning of the novel in order to stay warm.

The River

The river in the village is the location where Alyce saves the cat from drowning, and later does the same for Will Russet.



Themes

Self-Doubt

Self-doubt, or a lack of confidence in oneself, is a major theme in *The Midwife's Apprentice*. The novel tells the story of a young orphan girl who is trying to find her place in the world. Known at first as Brat, then Beetle, the young girl struggles simply to find enough to eat and simply survive in the harsh middle ages. Finding herself in a small village after sleeping in a dung heap for warmth, it is clear when the boys of the village begin to tease her that the girl is resigned to her fate, never considering that she could be anything more than a nobody.

As the girl begins working for the village midwife she begins to learn about the work that is done, but does not seem to recognize that she is learning at all. Instead, Beetle looks at what she is doing as simply surviving, considering herself lucky to have a mat to sleep on by the fire and a roof over her head. Jane, the midwife, sees more in the girl and limits her contact with the mothers she assists, unwilling to have the girl become competition.

As the novel progresses the girl becomes more confident in herself, even choosing a name, Alyce. The name is chosen because a man at a fair mistakes the girl for someone named Alyce, someone who can read. The girl is amazed that she might be mistaken for someone who can read and begins to wonder if there is more to herself than she is aware. Alyce takes small steps in becoming more confident, along the way standing up for herself and others, and even helping a seemingly hopeless woman give birth to a baby girl.

Alyce falls backward when she is unable to assist another mother and leaves the village, once again sure that she is a failure in everything. Working at an inn, Alyce meets a man who teaches her to read and encourages her to seek what she wants in life. A visit from the midwife teaches Alyce that she is only a failure because she had given up, not because she had been unable to complete a task. Alyce realizes, in the end, that being a midwife is what she wants and after an internal debate also realizes that she is more than she ever imagined she could be, overcoming the self-doubt that has paralyzed her previously.

Perseverance

Perseverance is also an important theme in *The Midwife's Apprentice*. Alyce, the main character, has little faith in herself and her abilities at the beginning of the novel, though her survival alone is a triumph. Once Alyce arrives in the village her perseverance is evident quite often though she often refers to being very frightened. Alyce's resignation at her lot in life is also a type of perseverance, as she refuses to let things bother her, assuming that there is nothing that can be done about them. An example of this is the



way Alyce ignores the boys in the village who torment her, accepting their actions as part of her due. Simply by ignoring the boys' actions, Alyce is able to diffuse the situation and persevere, since the boys find no fun in tormenting the girl who will not respond.

Perseverance, defined as a staying to a course of action despite difficulties or discouragement is really the definition of Alyce herself, though sometimes the discouragement the girl faces is her own. Unable to believe that she is capable of being more than she is, Alyce struggles to realize that she has learned, and is growing emotionally every day. Her small steps to persevere provide the reader with insight into her internal struggles, since the obstacles she faces are really her own worries that she will fail. As Alyce begins to understand that she is capable of whatever she tries, she becomes more self aware and is able to make the steps to prove things to herself and others.

Alyce perseveres despite her own worries and the treatment she has received from others, and returns to the midwife in order to continue her apprenticeship. The girl learns that even in failure she is learning and will one day be able to achieve the dreams that she has only recently allowed herself to have.

Fear

Fear is an important theme in *The Midwife's Apprentice*, since it tends to rule the life of Alyce, the main character. Fear is an emotional response to some type of threat, either perceived or real. Alyce is afraid of many things, having spent all of her time and energy merely trying to survive in the middle ages. Arriving in the small village where she eventually makes her home, Alyce is afraid of the boys who tease her, the people who call her names, and the midwife herself, known as Jane. Alyce fears these things, but having known nothing but fear, she simply tries to struggle through the best she can. Fortunately, because of her survival instincts, she usually manages to win in the end.

An example of Alyce facing her fear is when the boys tie the cat into a sack with an eel and throw it in the river. Alyce has developed a kind of relationship with the cat, though she fears him too at the beginning. Despite her fear, Alyce manages to get the sack out of the water. Alyce then faces her fear of the eel, and then her fear that the cat has drowned. Overcoming all of the obstacles that had faced her, Alyce manages to save the cat and make a friend of the animal.

Alyce is also afraid of the midwife, though she endures the stinging words and slaps that she gets when she does not respond quickly enough to the tasks set before her. Alyce deals with the fear that she feels because it is the lesser of two evils. The girl could always leave the midwife, but the alternative is hunger and no place to sleep.

The biggest fear that Alyce has is a fear of failure. Afraid that she will always be worthless, Alyce is afraid to try and gives up easily in the face of failure. When Alyce is unable to deliver a baby and the midwife accomplishes the birth in triumph, Alyce runs

away, feeling that this one failure is the end for her. The girl eventually learns that fear is a learning tool, and facing up to her fears will allow her to learn more and accomplish her goals.



Style

Point of View

The *Midwife's Apprentice* is written in third person, with the attention focused on the main character, Alyce. The third person point of view allows the reader to understand the thoughts and feelings of Alyce as she tries to find her way through life. Since a large focus of the novel is the internal growth of Alyce, this perspective gives the reader a deeper insight into the struggles that the girl goes through in the story.

There is not much spoken dialogue in the novel, though at times the internal struggle that Alyce experiences is expressed as an internal dialogue of sorts. There are lengthy descriptive passages that not only describe the areas in the village where Alyce visits, but also her feelings about her experiences. As the novel progresses, Alyce's views of the people and places around her change as well, allowing the reader to see the personal growth that Alyce experiences.

Setting

The novel is set in and around a small village in the middle ages. There are many sites visited in the village as the main character, Alyce, is the midwife's apprentice and the two are called to different houses to assist in childbirth.

Alyce lives in the cottage of Jane, the midwife and sleeps on a mat near the fire. The cottage is small and filled with many different vials and jars containing the different things that Jane uses in her trade. Alyce cares for the cottage and learns how to be a midwife while assisting Jane in different homes in the area.

Another site that is prominent in Alyce's life is the inn, later named the 'Cat and Cheese' after Alyce and her cat stay there while Alyce is working. The inn has no name when Alyce arrives and takes a position as an inn girl. The inn, owned by John and Jennet Dark is small, but it is here that Alyce gets her sense of self back after helping deliver the son of a traveling couple.

The other area of the village that is important to Alyce is the manor, the home of a wealthy family. Alyce sends the young boy, Edward, to find work at the manor and visits him there to make sure that he is safe and happy.

Language and Meaning

The language of the novel is formal and old fashioned as the story takes place in a small village during the middle ages. The use of this type of language allows the reader to get a sense of the time period and a feeling for the events that take place and how



they affect the characters. The language can be a bit stilted at times, but once the reader adjusts to this it flows easily providing one a sense of immersion in the story line.

The language of the characters is also formal and dated, allowing the reader to get a sense of the types of characters and their levels of education, as well as their place in the village. The more educated characters speak in a more formal way, while the villagers and the uneducated speak in an almost slang type of dialect.

There is very little dialogue in the novel, though what there is also adds to the reader's understanding of the lives of the characters. The main character, Alyce, sometimes has conversations with herself, or her cat, giving the reader a better insight into her thoughts and feelings. While Alyce is an uneducated orphan, she tends to speak more formally than most, giving one the sense that she has more to offer than she gives herself credit for.

Structure

The *Midwife's Apprentice* by Karen Cushman consists of seventeen numbered chapters. Each chapter has a title that refers directly to the context of the story it contains. Though the novel is about the life of Alyce, the midwife's apprentice, each chapter is a self-contained bit of information about her life. Each chapter could stand alone as a small bit of the main character's life, but together they give the reader a better idea of what Alyce goes through in her journey of personal growth.

The plot is simple and straightforward, relating the tale of a young girl as she finds her place in the world while she learns to have faith in herself. At the beginning of the novel Alyce is fearful and afraid of failure, but she eventually learns that failure is as valuable as success when it comes to expanding one's expectations. The obstacles that Alyce faces in her journey are presented individually, allowing the reader to focus on them almost as the main character does.

The novel is short but enjoyable and the lesson that Alyce learns is presented to the reader as one that anyone can learn if they allow themselves to do so. The author gives the reader insight into the past, but teaches a lesson that is timeless.



Quotes

"If Beetle had known any prayers, she might have prayed for the cat. If she had known about soft sweet songs, she might have sung to him. If she had known of gentle words and cooing, she would have spoken gently to him. But all she knew was cursing: "Damn you, cat, breath and live, you flea-bitten sod, or I'll kill you myself.""

Chapter Two, The Cat, pg. 9

"Often she called Beetle in when it was over to clean out the soiled straw bed and wash the linen while Jane Sharp and the new mother sipped fever-few and nutmeg brewed in hot ale, and once she sent the girl back to the cottage to brew black currant syrup to fight a new mother's fever. Beetle began to think perhaps she was kept out not because she was stupid, but to keep her ignorant of the midwife's skills and spells. And she was right."

Chapter 3, The Midwife, pgs. 13-14

"The comb was hers. Beetle stood breathless for fear someone would snatch it back. Never had she owned anything except for her raggedy clothes and occasional turnips, and now the comb with the cat was hers. The wink and the comment about her curls, though Beetle didn't know it, were also gifts from the generous merchant, and they nestled into Beetle's heart and stayed there."

Chapter 5, The Merchant, pg. 30

"And so it was that Alyce learned about singing and making songs. Her song brightened the cold gray day so that a cowbird thought it was spring and began to sing in the old oak tree."

Chapter 8, The Twins, pg 53

"So it was that in the middle of the night, when the monks were rising from their beds for midnight prayers, and in the towns revelers were returning home full of beef and wine, and at the manor the midwife was delivering Lady Agnes of her first son, so it was that a calmer, more rested Joan, with the kind attention of the midwife's apprentice, brought forth a daughter, feet first but perfectly formed, whom she called Alyce Little."

Chapter 9, The Bailiff's Wife's Baby, pgs. 59-60

"Alyce backed out of the cottage, then turned and ran up the path to the road, she didn't know why or where. Behind her in that cottage was disappointment and failure. The midwife had used no magic. She had delivered that baby with work and skill, not magic spells, and Alyce should have been able to do it but could not. She had failed. Strange sensations tickled her throat, but she did not cry, for she did not know how, and a heavy weight sat in her chest, but she did not moan or wail, for she had never learned how to give voice to what was inside her. She knew only to run away."

Chapter 11, The Leaving, pg. 70

"Soon it was Christmas and the inn teemed with folk going away or coming home. Alyce hung holly and ivy from the charred beams in the hall. Musicians with their rebecs and



gitters and sackbuts came to drink and stayed to play. Ducks and geese on great skewers were turned in roaring fire until they were golden and juicy and so fragrant that the cat and the mice came in from the stables hoping for a bite or two. It was all colorful and warm, but Alyce enjoyed none of it. Her heart heavy, her eyes blank, and her mouth as tight as a hazelnut, she went about the business of Christmas as if she were mucking out a stable, muttering over and over to herself, 'I am nothing, have nothing, belong nowhere.'"

Chapter 12, The Inn, pgs. 75-76

"You ask a lot for an inn girl. I thought you'd say a sweetheart, or a yellow ribbon for your black hair.'

'No, this is what I want, but it is my misfortune instead to be hungry, out of humor, and too stupid to be a midwife's apprentice.'

'Not so stupid,' he said. 'You can read as well as the cat.'

Alyce smiled. And so winter turned to spring."

Chapter 12, The Inn, pg. 81

"Because she gave up,' continued the midwife. 'I need an apprentice who can do what I tell her, take what I give her, who can try and risk and fail and try again and not give up. Babies don't stop their borning because the midwife gives up.' She landed her sharp glance on Magister Reese for a moment, drank her ale in one long swig, and was gone."

Chapter 13, Visitors, pg. 88

"So Alyce learned about the sometimes mighty distance between what one imagines and what is. She would not be bringing Edward back with her to make her heart content, but she knew she had not failed him, and she breathed a heavy sigh of sadness, disappointment, and relief. It felt so good that she did it again and again until her sighs turned to sobs and she cried her first crying right there in the hen house with Edward arming the chickens for battle."

Chapter 15, Edward, pg 96

"Alyce pushed past them and stepped out into the warm night. The moon was round and as white as a new cheese. On a bench beneath the old oak sat John Dark and Magister Reese, sharing a mug of ale. Magister Reese winked at her and smiled. Alyce smiled back. And then she laughed, a true laugh that came from deep in her gut, rushed out her mouth, and rang through the clear night air. And that was the true miracle that night, the first of June- the month, as Magister Reese could have told her, named for Juno, the Roman goddess of the moon, of women and of childbirth."

Chapter 16, The Baby, pgs 170-171

"Jane Sharp! It is I, Alyce, your apprentice. I have come back. And if you do not let me in, I will try again and again. I can do what you tell me and take what you give me, and I know how to try and risk and fail and try again and not give up. I will not go away.'

The door opened. Alyce went in. And the cat went with her."

Chapter 17, The Midwife's Apprentice, pgs. 116-117



Topics for Discussion

Who is Alyce? How did she get her name?

What relationship does Alyce have with Jane, the midwife?

How does Alyce's technique with laboring mothers differ from Jane's? Where did Alyce learn her 'bedside' manner?

How does Alyce change during the novel? Is there one person who has more influence on Alyce than another? Why or why not.

Why does Alyce leave the village? What do you think makes her decide to return?

How does Alyce convince Jane to take her back?

Why did Jane think that Alyce was a good apprentice at the beginning of the novel? How does her opinion change?