

The Tale of Despereaux: Being the Story of a Mouse, a Princess, Some... Study Guide

The Tale of Despereaux: Being the Story of a Mouse, a Princess, Some... by Kate DiCamillo

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Contents

The Tale of Despereaux: Being the Story of a Mouse, a Princess, Some...	Study Guide.....1
Contents.....	2
Plot Summary.....	3
Book the First: Chapters 1-10.....	5
Book the First: Chapters 11-15.....	7
Book the Second: Chapters 16-23.....	8
Book the Third: Chapters 24-33.....	10
Book the Fourth: Chapters 34-43.....	12
Book the Fourth: Chapters 44-52.....	14
Characters.....	16
Objects/Places.....	19
Themes.....	21
Style.....	23
Quotes.....	25
Topics for Discussion.....	26

Plot Summary

The Tale of Despereaux is a Newberry Medal book by famed children's author Kate DiCamillo. Despereaux is the story of an unusual hero, a mouse. Despereaux was born with his eyes open and lives his life that way, looking for adventure and love in places other mice fear to go. For this reason, Despereaux finds himself trapped in the dungeon of a castle while the girl he loves is facing certain desolation at the hands of a disappointed rat and a forgotten child. Despereaux must save the day despite being less than two inches tall. The Tale of Despereaux is a funny yet eye opening novel of heroism that will both entertain and inspire its readers.

Despereaux is born the last child to a self-centered, French mother and her adoring husband. Despereaux is the only of his litter to survive, leaving his family convinced he will not survive infancy. This, coupled with the fact that his eyes are open from birth, make Despereaux an oddity among his siblings. Despereaux only adds to his oddness when he refuses to be frightened of the humans, to search for crumbs as his siblings do, and when he reveals himself to the king and Princess Pea in order to listen to music.

Despereaux's brother informs his father of this odd behavior. The music is the last straw for Despereaux's loyal mouse father. Lester calls the Mouse Council together and tells them of Despereaux's latest behavior. After hearing that Despereaux has revealed himself to a human, the council feels it has no choice but to condemn Despereaux to death in the dungeon.

In an odd ceremony, Despereaux has a red thread tied around his neck and is sent to the dungeon under escort. When he arrives, Despereaux finds the dungeon to be a dark, sad place. Despereaux meets Gregory, the dungeon keeper. Gregory takes Despereaux under his care, protecting him from the hundreds of rats living in the dungeon.

Roscuro is a rat who is fascinated by light. Most rats do not like the light, but Roscuro cannot get enough. One day Roscuro goes upstairs and finds himself in a dining room in the middle of a dinner party. Roscuro climbs to the chandelier to get a better view of the festivities. Princess Pea sees him up there and cries out, causing Roscuro to fall. Roscuro falls into the queen's soup bowl, causing her to die of shock. The death of the queen devastates the king, causing him to outlaw both rats and soup in the kingdom.

Miggery Sow is a servant girl who is brought to the castle after a soldier discovers a man claims to have bought her from her father. Miggery becomes a servant at the castle, but she is so lazy and easily distracted that she is a poor servant. Miggery wants to be a princess someday, so when Roscuro suggests they kidnap Princess Pea together, Miggery jumps at the chance.

Despereaux returns upstairs after Gregory sneaks him onto his dinner tray after a meal. When Despereaux hides in the kitchen pantry, he overhears the plan Roscuro has

devised to lock Princess Pea in the dungeon. In love with Princess Pea, Despereaux tries to save her by telling the king where she is. However, the king does not believe Despereaux. It is then that Despereaux realizes he must save the princess himself.

Despereaux returns to the dungeon to save the princess, but loses his spool of thread that he planned to use to keep from getting lost. A rat offers to help Despereaux. The rat takes Despereaux to Princess Pea, but Roscuro does not intend to lose his prisoner. A fight begins. Roscuro smells soup on Despereaux's breath and is distracted. The princess promises to allow Roscuro to eat soup if he will allow her to go free.

Despereaux is hailed a hero and becomes Princess Pea's good friend. Roscuro is allowed to come into the light whenever he likes. Miggery Sow is reunited with her long lost father. Soup is returned to the menu of the kingdom.

Book the First: Chapters 1-10

Book the First: Chapters 1-10 Summary

Kate DiCamillo is an award winning children's author who claims she wrote this book when her best friend's son asked her to write a story about an unusual hero with large ears.

Chapter 1. Despereaux is born, the only surviving infant in his mother's last litter of babies. Despereaux's eyes are open when he is introduced to his older siblings, something that is quite unusual in mice. Despereaux's father, Lester, predicts he will not live.

Chapter 2. Despereaux is a sickly child, with large ears. Despereaux does not like to spend his days looking for crumbs as the rest of his family tends to do.

Chapter 3. Despereaux's brother and sister try to teach him to act like a mouse, but Despereaux is more interested in human things. When Despereaux's sister takes him to the library to eat the book bindings, he reads the books instead.

Chapter 4. One day Despereaux hears music and he goes to the princess' room, where the king is singing to her. Despereaux is so fascinated by the music that he comes out of his hole and reveals himself to the humans.

Chapter 5. Princess Pea sees Despereaux and speaks to him. Furlough, Despereaux's brother, sees this and rushes off to tell his father.

Chapter 6. Lester uses his drum to call the Mouse Council to tell them of Despereaux's latest act.

Chapter 7. Princess Pea compliments Despereaux on his ears, causing him to fall in love with her. However, the king makes him go away out of fear of all rodents. Before he leaves, Despereaux tells the princess, "I honor you," (p. 41) a line he learned from a book.

Chapter 8. The Mouse Council listens to Lester's story of his son's latest acts and decide he must be sent to the dungeon and sure death.

Chapter 9. Furlough goes to find Despereaux, but Despereaux is reading and is reluctant to leave.

Chapter 10. The Mouse Council tells Despereaux of his fate. They ask Despereaux to renounce his actions, but Despereaux refuses. Despereaux fates as he realizes there is no escape from his fate.

Book the First: Chapters 1-10 Analysis

The reader is introduced to Despereaux in these chapters. Despereaux is a tiny, sole survivor of his French mother's last litter of babies. Despereaux seems sickly and his eyes are open at birth, leaving everyone to believe he will not survive. However, not only does Despereaux survive, but he grows up with an interest in human things, an interest that sets him apart from not only his family, but his entire species. Despereaux is a unique creature with unique desires, causing those around him to question his actions and dislike him for them. Despereaux is a lonely creature, a creature whose name is fitting to his situation.

Despereaux falls in love with literature, particularly a chivalric love story. This story leaves Despereaux in a romantic frame of mind and causes him to fall in love with Princess Pea when she is kind to him upon their first meeting. This relationship will prove to be a pivotal one in Despereaux's life as it leads to his banishment from the mouse community. Despereaux is sent to the dungeon where he will surely be eaten by rats. It is important for the reader to note it was Despereaux's own father who began the process that sends Despereaux to his fate, because this not only illustrates the sad situation in Despereaux's own family, but sets up a situation that will later bring more illumination on the character of Despereaux's father.



Book the First: Chapters 11-15

Book the First: Chapters 11-15 Summary

Chapter 11. The threadmaster is called and he ties a red piece of thread around Despereaux's neck, marking him as a condemned mouse. As he does this, the threadmaster asks about the girl Despereaux loves and advises Despereaux to be brave for his fair maiden.

Chapter 12. As Despereaux is escorted away by two hooded mice, his mother calls out a farewell and faints.

Chapter 13. Despereaux is walked to the dungeon door in the castle kitchen. As they walk, Despereaux comes to realize one of his guards is his own brother, Furlough. When they reach the door, Furlough pushes Despereaux into the darkness, where he tumbles down the stairs.

Chapter 14. As Despereaux lays at the bottom of the stairs, waiting for the rats to come eat him, he begins telling himself the story of the brave knight and his fair maiden from the book in the library. A voice calls out to Despereaux, causing him to once again faint from fear.

Chapter 15. Despereaux wakes to find he is in the hand of Gregory, the jailer. Despereaux tells the jailer he needs to live to be with his beloved princess again. The jailer shows Despereaux the piles of kettles and spoons in the dungeon, the results of love. Gregory then asks Despereaux to tell him a story.

Book the First: Chapters 11-15 Analysis

Despereaux has been sentenced to death because his father told the Mouse Council about his unusual interaction with humans and then he is escorted to the dungeon by his brother. Despereaux's own mother seems more concerned about herself, fainting as her son is led away in the same breath in which she wishes him goodbye. Not exactly the kind of family every son hopes to have. It seems Despereaux is not leaving behind a family that loves him all that much.

Despereaux finds himself in the dungeon with Gregory, the jailer. Gregory points out several things to Despereaux that are important to the developing plot. The first is the rope tied around Gregory's leg. This rope is to keep Gregory from getting lost in the maze that is the dark dungeon. This rope will prove to be an instrumental prop in the life of another character soon to be introduced. The other important element Gregory points out to Despereaux is the stack of kettles and spoons in the dungeon. These two are a physical example of a law that will prove important as the novel continues to develop.



Book the Second: Chapters 16-23

Book the Second: Chapters 16-23 Summary

Chapter 16. Chiaroscuro is a word that means the arrangement of light and dark. It is ironic for a rat to have this name. This rat, called Roscuro for short, one day decides to chew on Gregory's rope. When Gregory discovers him, he uses a match to burn off half his whiskers as punishment. Instead of punishment, however, it introduces Roscuro to light, something that will come to fascinate him, despite the fact rats do not like light. Roscuro is told by another rat, Botticelli, that he should not admire the light and should instead focus on torturing prisoners as all rats do.

Chapter 17. A new prisoner comes into the dungeon and Roscuro is fascinated with a red cloth he saw thrown at the prisoner, the way the light shined through it. Botticelli tells him there is nothing upstairs for rats and that life is so much better in the dark.

Chapter 18. Roscuro goes to speak with the prisoner and learns the red cloth is what remains of a payment for the sale of the man's daughter. The man keeps the cloth to remind him of the child. Roscuro steals the cloth, but does not find in it what he thought was so fascinating when the light was behind it.

Chapter 19. One day Roscuro goes upstairs and finds a dinner party going on in the banquet hall. There is so much light and so many colors that Roscuro cannot help but enter the hall.

Chapter 20. Roscuro climbs onto the chandelier that hangs above the table to better see everything. Princess Pea sees him and calls out, but the party is so loud no one hears her at first. However, Roscuro hears the princess and the shock of the ugliness of the word causes him to fall into the queen's bowl of soup.

Chapter 21. The queen is so shocked not only by the rat in her beloved soup, but by him speaking to her, that she dies of shock. The princess glares at the rat as he runs from the room, breaking his heart.

Chapter 22. Roscuro watches the chaos in the banquet hall with growing resentment.

Chapter 23. The king makes a law forbidding soup in the kingdom, as well as rats. Men attempt to kill all the rats, but cannot find them all. Roscuro's resentment continues to grow.

Book the Second: Chapters 16-23 Analysis

This set of chapters goes back in time to explain the events that cause Roscuro to come to hate Princess Pea. Roscuro, a new character, is a rat who, like Despereaux, is fascinated with something that is very un-rat like. Roscuro admires light where most rats

avoid light. However, when Roscuro attempts to see the light, he causes chaos that ends in the death of the queen. Roscuro is a sensitive soul, therefore causing the death of the queen and wrath of the princess breaks his heart and causes him to become angry, bitter, and resentful.

The story teller suggests to the reader that Roscuro's experiences in the banquet hall will cause him to seek revenge against Princess Pea. While the reader already knows that Despereaux is in love with Princess Pea, the reader now knows that her safety and happiness are in danger with Roscuro wandering free in the castle. The reader does not know at this point what Roscuro might have planned, but it cannot be a good thing for the princess. It also seems that presenting the story as she does, the story teller is suggesting that Despereaux will become involved in Roscuro's plans in one role or another.

Book the Third: Chapters 24-33

Book the Third: Chapters 24-33 Summary

Chapter 24. When Miggery Sow is six, her mother died. A short time later, her father sells her for a hen, a red tablecloth, and a handful of cigarettes.

Chapter 25. Miggery Sow is left to live with a man who forces her to call him uncle. Uncle often hits Miggery Sow on the ear for not doing her chores properly. For this reason, Miggery begins to lose her hearing and her ears begin to resemble cauliflower.

Chapter 26. On Mig's seventh birthday, she sees the king, queen, and princess pass by Uncle's house. This sight gives Mig hope for the first time in her life.

Chapter 27. Mig tells Uncle she would like to be a princess one day. Uncle hits her for being fanciful.

Chapter 28. Shortly after the queen's death, soldiers come to Uncle's house to collect his kettle, spoons, and bowls to keep him from making illegal soup. When the soldier learns that the man called Uncle owns Mig, he takes Mig, too, because it is illegal to own a person.

Chapter 29. Mig becomes a servant in the castle. On the first day, Mig is set to take a spool of thread to the princess. Mig learns she and the princess are the same age. Later, Mig is punished for taking too long to deliver the thread.

Chapter 30. Mig becomes overweight now that she has plenty of food to eat. However, Mig is a poor servant and eventually is given the worse job in the castle, which is taking food to the jailer in the dungeon.

Chapter 31. Mig is not frightened by the dungeon because she is not afraid of the dark. Mig sings a song about wanting to be a princess, and this catches the interest of Roscuro.

Chapter 32. Mig watches Gregory eat his dinner, unaware that Roscuro is hiding under her skirts.

Chapter 33. As Mig climbs the stairs to the kitchen, Roscuro begins to speak to her. Roscuro tells Mig that he has a plan that will make her princess of the castle and the true princess her servant.

Book the Third: Chapters 24-33 Analysis

In these chapters, the reader meets Miggory Sow, a young girl named for her father's prize pig. The author states several times that no one has ever cared what Mig wants

out of life, including her mother, who died despite Mig's grief, and her father, who sold Mig as a servant. Mig has been taken from the cruel man who abused her so much she is nearly deaf, only to place her as a servant in the king's castle where she continues to suffer some abuse. At least in the castle, Mig is closer to the princess she so admires and she gets plenty to eat.

Mig is a sad, unfortunate young girl who was abandoned and abused all her life. This leaves young Mig ripe to be taken advantage of. The reader can see almost immediately what a good partner in crime Mig would make in Roscuro's desire to exact revenge against Princess Pea. It seems all the characters are in place now and the reader can only wait to see how the rest of the plot unfolds.

Book the Fourth: Chapters 34-43

Book the Fourth: Chapters 34-43 Summary

Chapter 34. Unbeknown to Mig, Gregory placed Despereaux on his dinner tray and she carried him into the kitchen. Despereaux overhears Mig's conversation with Roscuro. Then, in the kitchen, Mig begins to clear the tray and Despereaux falls into a cup of cooking oil. The cook orders Mig to kill Despereaux, but all she is able to do is cut off his tail. Despereaux escapes into the pantry and hides in a bag of flour.

Chapter 35. Despereaux has a dream of a knight in shining armor, but when the knight removes his helmet, there is nothing inside.

Chapter 36. Roscuro chews through Gregory's rope so he will become lost in the dungeon. Later that night, Roscuro accompanies Mig as she walks to the princess's room, reviewing their plan. Mig believes the plan is to take the princess to the dungeon long enough for her to teach Mig to be the princess so that Mig might take Princess Pea's place and Princess Pea Mig's place.

Chapter 37. Mig wakes the princess and forces her at knife point out of bed. Roscuro comes out of his hiding place and reminds the princess how they first met.

Chapter 38. Mig forces the princess into the dungeon.

Chapter 39. When everyone wakes the next morning they learn the princess is missing and Gregory, the jailer, is dead. Mig is also missing, but no one seems to care. Despereaux wakes to this chaos and sets off to tell the king what he knows.

Chapter 40. Despereaux runs into the Mouse Council on his way to the king. Due to the flour covering his fur, the council believes Despereaux to be a ghost. Despereaux's father asks for forgiveness and Despereaux gives it. The council, however, votes to forget Despereaux's visit ever happened.

Chapter 41. Despereaux tells the king what he knows, but the king refuses to believe him. Despereaux realizes he must save the princess himself.

Chapter 42. Despereaux goes to the threadmaster and asks for the spool of thread to help him find the princess. Despereaux plans to use the thread like Gregory's rope to prevent him getting lost in the dungeon. The threadmaster also gives Despereaux a needle to use as a sword.

Chapter 43. Despereaux rolls the spool of thread through the castle to the kitchen. When he reaches the kitchen, Despereaux finds Cook making soup, despite the law against it.

Book the Fourth: Chapters 34-43 Analysis

Despereaux is back in the kitchen after Gregory has saved his life by placing him on his dinner tray. Despereaux hears Roscuro's plan to hurt the princess, but he is so exhausted after outrunning Mig's attempt to kill him that he falls asleep. This allows Roscuro and Mig to kidnap the princess from her bed in the middle of the night. Mig believes the plan is for her to change places with the princess, to become the princess herself, but in reality Roscuro only wants Mig's help to chain the princess up in the dungeon for the rest of her life. If Roscuro must be relegated to the dark, he wants the princess to share his fate. Roscuro is a sad rat, the result of a broken heart and broken dreams.

Despereaux takes it upon himself to inform the king of what has befallen his daughter. It is no surprise to the reader that the king does not believe him, but it is ironic that a mouse is the only witness to this terrible crime.

At the same time one father is grieving his kidnapped daughter, taken from him just a month after his beloved wife died, another father finds himself faced with what he believes to be the ghost of a son he is responsible for sending to his death. It says something about a father's love that Lester has come to regret his own actions in Despereaux's fate and he asks for forgiveness. No one else involved in the situation wants to admit they have done anything wrong and even vote to pretend Despereaux's appearance after his death ever happened. This says volumes about the characters of these mice.

Book the Fourth: Chapters 44-52

Book the Fourth: Chapters 44-52 Summary

Chapter 44. Cook hears Despereaux moving the thread spool across the room. Frightened by the noise, the Cook is relieved it is only a mouse and not a guard to catch her making soup.

Chapter 45. Cook gives Despereaux a saucer filled with soup. Despereaux drinks the soup and assures Cook it is perfect. Despereaux then tells Cook he is going to save the princess and she wishes him luck despite the oddness of his assertions.

Chapter 46. Despereaux tells himself a story as he slowly descends into the dungeon once more. The thread gets away from Despereaux as they tumble down the stairs and is found by a rat.

Chapter 47. Botticelli the rat has found Despereaux. Botticelli agrees to help Despereaux find the princess simply because he likes the idea of torturing the mouse before eating him.

Chapter 48. Despereaux holds Botticelli's tail as he leads him through the dungeon. Despereaux can hear other rats following them in hopes of a quick meal.

Chapter 49. Mig, Roscuro, and the princess have been sitting in the darkness all day because Mig refuses to chain up the princess unless Roscuro keeps his end of the bargain and Roscuro refuses to lead Mig out of the dungeon unless she ties up the princess.

Chapter 50. Mig accidentally cuts off Roscuro's tail when Despereaux arrives and Roscuro blocks his entry into the room.

Chapter 51. Despereaux pulls his sword on Roscuro. Roscuro smells soup on Despereaux. Roscuro begins to cry. The princess forgives Roscuro and offers him some soup. The other rats leave because the kindness has ruined their appetites.

Chapter 52. Despereaux and the princess become good friends and have many adventures together. Roscuro is allowed to go back and forth from the darkness to the light, but finds he does not belong in either place.

Book the Fourth: Chapters 44-52 Analysis

Despereaux makes it into the dungeon and immediately runs into a dangerous rat. This rat likes to torture his victims; therefore, it is no surprise that he agrees to take Despereaux to his beloved princess in order to eat him in front of her. However, things do not always go as planned.

The cook is making soup. This is illegal because of the death of the queen; therefore, the cook gives Despereaux some soup to reward him for not being a guard. This is ironic because it was Cook who ordered Despereaux killed earlier in the story when he was brought from the dungeon by Mig. It is also ironic because in the end, the smell of the soup on Despereaux is what saves his and the princess's lives.

Characters

Despereaux Tilling

Despereaux Tilling is a mouse who lives with his family in a castle in the Kingdom of Dor. Despereaux is different from the other mice because he does not care to hunt for crumbs all day long and he would rather read a book than eat its bindings. One day Despereaux hears music, and he goes into the room of Princess Pea. Despereaux is so fascinated by the music that he enters the room and sits at the foot of the king. Despereaux is not afraid of humans, but instead loves their music and literature. When Despereaux meets Princess Pea, he quickly falls madly in love with her like the knight from a story he has read in the castle library.

Despereaux is sentenced to death for the crime of sitting at the foot of a human king. Despereaux is sent to the dungeon, but he tells the jailer a story and this inspires the jailer to let him go back into the light. Despereaux must return to the dungeon, however, when Princess Pea is kidnap and hidden there. Despereaux proves himself to be a hero even though he is tiny and has large ears.

Lester Tilling

Lester Tilling is Despereaux's father. Lester is overshadowed by his wife and forgotten by most of the mouse community. However, Lester is a loyal mouse who is a member of the Mouse Council. Therefore, when he learns that his son has come into contact with humans, Lester does his duty and tells the council of Despereaux's actions. This directly causes the ordered banishment of Despereaux to the dungeon, where he is expected to be eaten by rats.

Lester watches his son being taken away and begins to feel remorse. Lester believes he has done the right thing, but soon comes to realize that he has done his son a terrible wrong. Lester learns too late that family is more important than community and asks Despereaux for forgiveness. Despereaux proves his own strong character when he gives this requested forgiveness.

Antoinette Tilling

Antoinette Tilling is a French mouse who came to the Kingdom of Dor in the baggage of a French diplomat. Antoinette is married to Lester and is the mother of Despereaux. On the day of Despereaux's birth, Antoinette is more concerned with her appearance than with the deaths of the other babies in that litter. Antoinette announces that she will have no more children after Despereaux. When Despereaux is sent to the dungeon, self centered Antoinette makes a scene, but it is clearly for dramatics and not for love of her son, because Antoinette offers him farewell.

Furlough Tilling

Furlough Tilling is Despereaux's brother. It is Furlough who tells his father about Despereaux sitting at the foot of the king. Furlough dislikes his brother's actions because, like his father, Furlough is a strong believer in the community of the mice. When Despereaux is sent to the dungeon, Furlough is one of the masked guards who leads him there, pushing him down the stairs and into the darkness.

Chiaroscuro

Chiaroscuro, or Roscuro, is a rat. Chiaroscuro means arrangement of light and dark; therefore, it is an ironic name for a rat. Rats dislike light. Roscuro, however, discovers that he is fascinated by the light and would like to see more of it. Roscuro sneaks into the light and goes into the banquet hall during a dinner party only to become the catalyst that causes the death of the queen. Roscuro's heart is broken when he sees the hatred and disgust on the face of the princess in the aftermath of this event and it heals unevenly, leaving Roscuro filled with resentment and a desire for revenge. It is this need for revenge that causes Roscuro to kidnap and hide the princess in the dungeon.

Miggery Sow

Miggery Sow is a young girl who was named for her father's prized pig. When Mig is only six her mother dies, leaving her alone with her father. A short time later, Mig's father sells her for a hen, a red tablecloth, and a handful of cigarettes. Mig is then used as a servant by a mean man who often hits her in the ear, causing her ears to grow enlarged and cauliflower-like, as well as causing her to lose most of her hearing. Mig is a sad girl whose wishes have never been considered. Mig wants to be a princess, but this idea is ridiculed, causing Mig much pain. In the end, Mig is a vulnerable young girl who proves to be a perfect pawn in Roscuro's revenge scheme.

Princess Pea

Princess Pea is the daughter of the king of Dor. Princess is a kind little girl who tries to be nice to everyone. Princess Pea is even nice to Despereaux, complimenting his large ears in a way that causes him to fall in love with her. However, when the princess's mother dies in the chaos after a rat falls into the queen's soup, the princess looks at the rat with disgust and causes his heart to break. This leads to a revenge plot that will find the princess in the dungeon waiting for rescue. The princess proves her own heart to be kind when she forgives the rat for what he has done and gives him free reign of the light and dark in the castle.

The King and Queen

The king and queen of the Kingdom of Dor are kind people. The queen is a great lover of soup; therefore, when a rat falls into her soup bowl, it causes her such distress that she quickly dies of shock. The king loves his wife deeply and her death leaves him filled with pain. The king quickly outlaws soup and rats, hoping the absence of these things will keep the memory of his wife's death at a distance. When the princess also disappears, the king is lost without the two people he loved most in the world and refuses to listen to a mouse tell him the truth of his daughter's situation.

Cook

Cook works in the kitchen and finds herself forced to find suitable work for Mig after she has gotten herself moved through every servants' job in the castle. Cook puts Mig in charge of the one job no one else wants, taking food to the jailer. This leads to Mig meeting Roscuro and to unwittingly returning Despereaux to the light. In the end, Cook is the true hero of the novel because it is the soup she fed to Despereaux that saves his and the princess' life.

Gregory

Gregory is the jailer who lives in the dungeon. Gregory uses a rope ties around his ankle to keep from getting lost in the dungeon's maze of rooms and corridors. Gregory finds Despereaux when he first comes to the dungeon, and in exchange for Despereaux telling him a story, Gregory helps Despereaux return to the light. Unfortunately, Gregory is killed when Roscuro chews through his rope and he becomes lost.



Objects/Places

Book

Despereaux reads a romantic fairy tale in a book in the castle library when his sister takes him there to teach him to eat book bindings.

Locket

The rat, Botticelli, wears a locket that he often swings around when he is talking to someone.

Red Cloth

When a prisoner is brought into the dungeon, he is allowed to keep a red cloth. This cloth represents the day he sold his daughter. The prisoner keeps it to remember this terrible day. Roscuro steals the cloth and later makes a cape of it.

Soup Spoon

Roscuro wears a soup spoon on his head after the death of the queen to remind himself of his heartbreak.

Red Thread

The mice mark their condemned with a piece of red thread tied around their necks.

Spool of Thread

Despereaux takes a spool of red thread with him into the dungeon in hopes of using it to help him find his way back to the light.

Rope

Gregory ties a rope around his ankle so that he will not lose his way in the dungeon.

Sewing Needle

The threadmaster gives Despereaux a sewing needle to use as a sword against possible enemies on his quest.

Soup

The queen is quite fond of soup; therefore, when a rat falls into her soup bowl, she dies of shock. The king then outlaws soup from the Kingdom of Dor.

Music

Despereaux hears music and this causes him to sit at the foot of the human king as he plays and sings to his daughter.

Dungeon

The dungeon is the darkest place in the castle, a place where prisoners are taken and rats live. The mice send their criminals to the basement where they are eaten by the rats.

Kingdom of Dor

The Kingdom of Dor is the setting of this novel.

Themes

Different

Despereaux is clearly different from his family members from the moment of his birth. Despereaux is the only surviving infant in a birth of a litter, he is born with his eyes open, and Despereaux is born with large ears. These things set Despereaux apart from his siblings and his parents from the beginning. Compounding these differences, Despereaux is not afraid of humans. In fact, Despereaux sits at the foot of the human king when he plays music to his daughter. This causes a great deal of uproar in the mouse community, causing Despereaux to be sent to his death simply for being different.

Roscuro is different as well. Roscuro is a rat and rats do not like light. However, Roscuro is fascinated by light, but colors and beauty. Roscuro sneaks into the light and is surprised by how beautiful it all is. Unfortunately, this first excursion into the light leads to the death of the queen, an event that changes everything in the Kingdom of Dor. For this reason, Roscuro begins plotting revenge.

Being different is something that should be celebrated, but for these two characters it is something that leads to isolation and unhappiness. Roscuro responds to this isolation and unhappiness with the desire for revenge. Despereaux, on the other hand, response with forgiveness and heroism. It is not the differences that sets these two apart, but how they deal with those differences.

Bravery

Despereaux reads a fairy tale in the castle library about a knight who saves the fair maiden at a time when she is in danger. This story sticks with Despereaux and he reads it again and again. Despereaux wants to believe in happily ever after because of this book, but finds himself in a situation in which he begins to wonder if happily ever after exists outside of books.

Despereaux hears music for the first time and he moves into the princess's bedroom to hear better despite the danger this poses for a tiny mouse. Despereaux proves he is not afraid of humans and this allows the princess to hold him and compliment his large ears. Due to the fact that he was so brave, Despereaux finds himself falling in love with the princess.

When the princess is kidnapped, Despereaux realizes he is the only one who knows where she is and that he is the only one who can save her. Despereaux does his best to save the princess and in the end is rewarded by a lifelong friendship that will lead to many adventures. It is bravery that has changed Despereaux's life for the better; therefore, it is a theme of the novel.

Revenge

Roscuro is a rat who is fascinated with light even though rats are not supposed to like light. Roscuro sneaks into the light and ends up in the queen's soup bowl, a situation that ends in the tragic death of the queen. Roscuro sees the disgust on the princess's face and this causes Roscuro's heart to break. Roscuro also overhears that king ordering his death, causing Roscuro to resent these people for their unfairness.

Roscuro plots revenge against the princess, unconcerned with who he must hurt to see his plan fulfilled. Roscuro uses a poor girl who has been used all her life, never allowed to express her own desires. Roscuro hurting this girl the same way the princess hurt him. In the end, Roscuro sees that what he has done is wrong. However, Roscuro never finds happiness because his heart never truly healed properly.

Style

Point of View

The point of view of this novel is third person with authorial voice. The novel is told from the point of view not of one character, but of a story teller who is telling the story in an old fashioned, fairy tale style. The author often makes comments in the narration, reminding the reader to pay attention to key points and explaining certain techniques in the actual story telling.

The point of view of this novel is unique. The authorial voice is almost overwhelming at times, but it invokes the old style of narration in fairy tales, reminding the reader that this is, after all, a fairy tale. The point of view also expresses the thoughts and emotions of the story teller herself, telling the reader which characters are sympathetic, which are not, and which are somewhere in between. It is a strange point of view for modern readers, but it is a fun point of view that fits the fantasy of the plot.

Setting

The novel is set in the Kingdom of Dor, specifically in the castle of the king. The setting begins in the walls of the castle where the mice live, an area that is well lit and a seemingly peaceful place. The narration later goes into the dungeon, a dark, dank area filled with human despair and rats. The two settings are perfect opposites of one another, playing off of one another to allow the reader to see the contrast of the light and the dark.

The setting of the novel fits with the fairy tale style of the narration. The setting is a castle, a place that should be filled with hope and expectation for the characters, but can also be a place of fear and despair. This setting fills these requirements nicely, turning the dungeon into a place not only of human despair, but despair for the mice and happiness for the rats. The lighted sections of the castle hold the same sort of expectations, though the light is torture for the rats and happiness for the mice. The two settings create a wonderful metaphor for the light and darkness in human behavior as well as in fate. For this reason, the settings of this novel work well within the plot because it is ultimately fate that propels the plot.

Language and Meaning

The language of this novel is a direct, simple English. The author uses some language that its intended audience might not be familiar with, such as the word perfidy, but the story teller often explains these words or advises her readers to look it up in a dictionary. The author uses some foreign phrase as well, but these words are also either explained in the text or used in such a way that the reader does not need to understand the words to understand the context.

The language of this novel works well within the plot. The use of some difficult words is important to the plot not only because they fit with the characters in the novel, but they also support the old fashioned, fairy tale style of the novel. The use of foreign words fits with the character of Antoinette Tilling, a French mouse brought to Dor in the baggage of a French diplomat. The language, outside of these large or foreign words, is appropriate to both the characters and the intended audience of young readers.

Structure

The novel is divided into four parts and fifty-two chapters. Each chapter is extremely short, with many of them no longer than two pages, while others can be as long as ten pages. Each chapter is given the title of something important or someone important within the chapter, while each part is also given a name that is significant to the events that will take place in that section. The novel is written in such a way that it seems to be a story that took place many years ago and is being told by a charismatic story teller to an audience of rapt children.

The novel contains one main plot and several subplots. The main plot follows Despereaux Tilling as he attempts to save the princess from danger. The only problem is that Despereaux is a two-ounce mouse. One of the subplots follows the desire of Roscuro, a rat, to be in the light. Another subplot follows the life of Miggery Sow, a poor servant girl who has been used and abused her entire life. The main plot and subplots all come to a satisfying conclusion at the end of the novel.

Quotes

"This story begins within the walls of a castle, with the birth of a mouse. A small mouse."
Book the First: Chap. 1, p. 11

"And, executing a classic scurry, Furlough went off to tell his father, Lester Tilling, the terrible, unbelievable news of what he had just seen."
Book the First: Chap. 5, p. 33

"At least Lester had the decency to weep at his act of perfidy."
Book the First: Chap. 8, p. 45

"Despereaux marveled at his own bravery. He admired his own defiance. And then, reader, he fainted."
Book the First: Chap. 10, p. 56

"At the last moment, Antoinette came out of her faint and shouted one word to her child. That word, reader, was adieu."
Book the First: Chap. 12, p. 65

"As our story continues, reader, we must go backward in time to the birth of a rat, a rat named Chiaroscuro and called Roscuro, a rat born into the filth and darkness of the dungeon, several years before the mouse Despereaux was born upstairs, in the light."
Book the Second: Chap. 16, p. 85

"And he told himself, reader, that it was the cloth that he desired and not the light."
Book the Second: Chap. 17, p. 97

"The rat, reader, invited himself to the party."
Book the Second: Chap. 19, p. 105

"But then, as you know, what Miggery Sow wanted had never been of much concern to anyone."
Book the Third: Chap. 25, p. 130

"Alas, there was no one to comfort Despereaux. And there was no time, anyway, for him to cry. He knew what he had to do. He had to find the king."
Book the Fourth: Chap. 39, p. 202

"The princess bent down before the mouse. 'You are my knight,' she said to him, 'with a shining needle. And I am so glad that you found me.'"
Book the Fourth: Chap. 51, p. 265

"Even in a world strange as this one, a mouse and a princess cannot marry. But, reader, they can be friends."
Book the Fourth: Chap. 52, p. 267



Topics for Discussion

Who is Despereaux Tilling? What is unusual about him? What do his siblings try to teach him? Does he learn it? Why or why not? Why does Despereaux's family not want him to read? Why is Despereaux supposed to stay away from humans? What happens when he does not adhere to these rules? What does Despereaux do when his family turns against him? What does this say about Despereaux's character?

Who is Roscuro? Why does he like light? Why is he not supposed to like light? Why does Roscuro go into the banquet hall? Who sees him first? What happens when Roscuro hears himself being called a rat? For what reason? Where does Roscuro land when he falls? What happens next? For what reason?

Who is Miggery Sow? What has her life been like? What was it like for her when her mother died? Why did her father sell her? Who was her uncle? How did he treat her? What happened to Mig's hearing? Why is she considered a bad servant in the castle? Why is Mig sent to take food to the jailer? Is she afraid? Why or why not? What happens when Mig returns to the kitchen?

Who is Princess Pea? Why does Despereaux fall in love with the princess? What did the princess say about Despereaux's ears? Why does Roscuro dislike the princess? What does Roscuro plan to do to the princess? Who will help Roscuro with his plot? For what reason? What is Despereaux's role in Roscuro's plot?

Who is Botticelli? What is his role in Roscuro's revenge plans? What is his role in Despereaux's rescue scheme? Are these two roles opposing to one another? Why does Botticelli play these roles? What does Botticelli want from Roscuro? From Despereaux? Does Botticelli receive his desired end with either character?

Why does the king outlaw soup? Who does this benefit? In what way does this benefit this character? Why does the king outlaw rats? Why are all the rats not killed? How did Roscuro escape death? How is this ironic considered Roscuro's deep desires? What happens to these laws at the end of the novel?

Why does Gregory wear a rope around his ankle? Why does Roscuro chew on the rope? What does the story teller say this began? How might Roscuro's life have been different if he had not attempted to chew through Gregory's rope? How might Despereaux's life have been different if Roscuro had not chewed through Gregory's rope? Would the queen still be alive if Roscuro had never seen Gregory's rope? Explain.