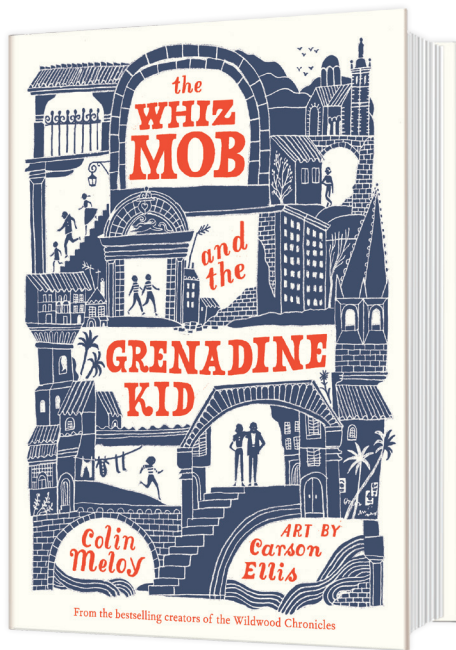


# the WHIZ MOB and the GRENADINE KID

Written by Colin Meloy; Art by Carson Ellis

## Educators' Guide



Grades 3-7

### About the Book

On a boring afternoon in a park in Marseille, while observing the crowd of tourists, Charlie Fisher becomes aware of a carefully orchestrated group of pickpockets who work with such finesse and adroitness that he is astonished to watch them. Suddenly, Charlie realizes that his own expensive pen has been snatched. So begins a new adventure for Charlie, son of an American diplomat—an adventure with the precarious friendship of a band of pickpockets that will lead him into acquiring new skills, a whole new vocabulary of thievery, and eventually, an international intrigue that could have dire consequences.

### Pre-Reading Activity

Using books or the internet, research the French city of Marseille. If you were going to visit Marseille, how would you get there? What sites would you want to visit? Choose one place in the city and learn about its history. As you read this book, imagine yourself exploring the different parts of Marseille that are mentioned in the text.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

### Key Ideas and Details

1. Why does Charlie tell the police that he gave the pen to Amir? What motivates him to protect Amir? Why do you think Charlie wants to learn the pickpockets' skills?
2. What does Charlie's father mean when he says that Charlie "always looked for companionship in the wrong places" (p. 27)? Why do you think Charlie is drawn to Amir and the Whiz Mob? Why does he dislike the children of his father's friends and associates?
3. What does Amir mean when he says, "Storytelling will suit you well in this business ... the best cannons are the best storytellers. But they're also good story listeners" (p. 70). How is storytelling similar to the pickpockets' trade? How do Charlie's observation skills help him learn to be a cannon? What story does Charlie tell his father about his new friends?
4. Why does Charlie trust the Whiz Mob more than his family? What is it about Charlie's family and his father's friends that he is rebelling against? Why does he stay with the gang after Amir decides to leave? Why do you think Amir leaves the gang?
5. Discuss the themes of friendship and family throughout the story. Do the members of the Whiz Mob treat one another as friends? Why does Charlie feel they are his friends? What does Amir mean when he says, "... on the whiz we might be family, but we ain't friends. You were my friend, Charlie" (p. 308)?
6. Discuss the theme of right vs. wrong in this book from the point of view of different characters. How do the Whiz Mob and the Headmaster view the "work" they do? How do they justify their trade? How does Charlie view their skills? How do the police and those they steal from perceive the mob?
7. How does Charlie know he can trust Amir to lead him to the School of Seven Bells? Why does Amir agree to take him, even though it is dangerous for him to return there? Why is it so important to Charlie to go to the school, and what does he plan to do once he gets there?

### Craft and Structure

8. Does the specific language of the Whiz Mob help or confuse your understanding of the story? Study the meaning of the words in the glossary at the back of the book. Why do you think this distinctive vocabulary has developed among the pickpockets' culture?
9. Compare the setting of Charlie's neighborhood in the Prado to the Panier where he goes to find the Bar des 7 Coins. How are they different? Compare the people who live in each neighborhood. How does Charlie feel when he gets lost in the Panier?

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...Continued from previous page

10. Discuss the metaphor of bread baking that Charlie uses to get over his “dark night of the soul” after the gang tricks him and steals his father’s document. How does this experience give Charlie a “renewed purpose and a keener sense of right and wrong” (p. 297)? What other purpose does the smell of baking bread serve for Charlie that morning?
11. Discuss how the author develops Charlie’s point of view in this book. What do we learn about Charlie’s life, how he feels about his family, and how he responds to the various members of the Whiz Mob?
12. Identify parts of the book in which the author is speaking directly to the reader. Why do you think the author chose to include those passages? How does the author’s point of view interjected into the story affect your understanding of the plot, setting, and characters?

## Integration of Knowledge and Ideas

13. Compare this book to others you have read in which children have to make difficult choices in their lives and/or make friends with those who live very different lives than they do. Watch the movie *Oliver* or read the book *Oliver Twist* by Charles Dickens and compare the life of the Whiz Mob to the children in that story. Compare the reasons each of them turned to the pickpockets’ trade.
14. Compare the motives of the Whiz Mob to the legend of Robin Hood in British folklore. Discuss the morality of robbing from the rich to benefit the poor. Consider the question of whether the ends can justify the means.

## EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

**Pickpocket in Training.** Look up information about pickpockets through the ages. What specific skills did a thief need to be good at stealing in this way? Compare the skills of a pickpocket with the skills of a stage magician: How are they similar and how are they different? How does the street magician in Marseille recognize what Charlie has been doing? Write a short paper about how the Whiz Mob might channel their talents into a more honest occupation.

**Touring Marseille.** Research the city of Marseille and see if you can recognize the places that Charlie visits on a map of the city. Write a paragraph explaining how the setting of a book can feel like ‘another character’ in the book. Why do you think the author chose the city of Marseille as his setting?

**What’s in a Name?** How does Charlie acquire the name of the Grenadine Kid? Discuss the importance of a name or nickname among the members of the Whiz Mob. How do their names reflect their personalities? Create a fictional group of your own with names and/or nicknames that are appropriate for each character. Develop a purpose for your group and write a story about how they carry out that purpose.

**School Rules.** In a small group with other students, discuss what you have learned in this book about the School of Seven Bells. Compare this school to ones you have read about in other books — Hogwarts, Camp Half-Blood, etc. How do you think children would be recruited for the Seven Bells? What choices would they have after they graduated? Compare this to the experiences of characters in other books and your own experience with school.



Photo by NashCO

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR & ILLUSTRATOR

**COLIN MELOY** is the author of the *New York Times* bestselling Wildwood Chronicles and is the singer and songwriter for the band the Decemberists.

**CARSON ELLIS** is the illustrator of a number of books for children, including the Wildwood Chronicles, and is the author and illustrator of the picture books *Du Iz Tak?*, a Caldecott Honor winner, and *Home*.

Colin and Carson live just outside Portland, Oregon, with their family.



Questions and activities prepared by  
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