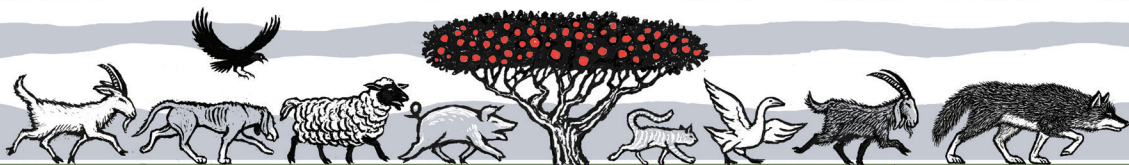




# THE BOOK OF BOY

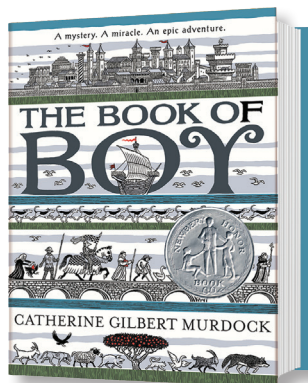


## Educator's Guide



# About the Book

Boy has always been relegated to the outskirts of his small village. With a hump on his back, a mysterious past, and a tendency to talk to animals, he is often mocked by others in his town—until the arrival of a shadowy pilgrim named Secundus. Impressed with Boy’s climbing and jumping abilities, Secundus engages Boy as his servant, pulling him into an action-packed and suspenseful expedition across Europe to gather seven precious relics of Saint Peter.



**Grades 3–7**

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Boy quickly realizes that this journey is not an innocent one. They are stealing the relics and accumulating dangerous enemies in the process. But Boy is determined to see this pilgrimage through until the end—for what if St. Peter has the power to make him the same as the other boys?

## Accolades for THE BOOK OF BOY

A Newbery Honor Book • Booklist Editors’ Choice  
An ALA Notable Book • Chicago Public Library Best Book  
Horn Book Fanfare • Kirkus Reviews Best Books  
Publishers Weekly Best Books • Wall Street Journal Best of the Year

★ “Light and darkness have never clashed with such fierce majesty and eloquent damnation.”

—*Kirkus Reviews* (starred review)

★ “A vivid, not-to-be-missed story.”

—*Booklist* (starred review)

★ “Fresh, immediate, and earthy.”

—*The Horn Book* (starred review)



# Discussion Questions

1. At the end of the first chapter, what do you know about Boy and the place where he lives? What does he mean by the pestilence that took the people who lived in the huts?
2. Why did Boy feel that “pilgrim man was dangerous” (p. 7)? Why does the pilgrim want Boy to come with him on his journey? How does he convince the Cook to let him go? What does he mean when he says to Boy: “’Tis good you are scared. Fear will make you careful” (p. 19)?
3. Describe Boy’s relationship with Father Petrus and why the priest was so important to him. Why was the priest so forceful in telling him “Never reveal yourself” (p. 26)? Does your understanding of what the priest meant by this change throughout the course of the novel?
4. Compare Boy’s memories of Father Petrus to his experiences with Secundus. How are the two men similar and how are they different? When do his feelings toward Secundus begin to change? What specifically does he learn about the pilgrim that changes his feelings?
5. What does Secundus mean when he says, “You have no notion of my burden” (p. 65)? Discuss the various meanings of the word “burden.” What does that concept mean to Secundus and what does it mean to Boy?
6. How does Boy’s sense of himself change throughout his journey? Why do you think he can communicate with animals of all kinds, as well as his goats at the manor? What does his connection to the animals mean to Secundus?
7. What reason does Boy have for wanting to go to Rome? How does that contrast with the reasons Secundus wants to go to Rome? Why is each of the relics important to the pilgrim, and why do you think he cannot touch them? How does Boy change as they retrieve each of the relics?
8. When and where does Boy begin to realize his true nature? How do animals help him along each stage of his discovery? Why do the rats on the ship act differently toward him than other animals? When does he discover the true nature of Secundus?
9. What does Boy learn from the time he spends in the tomb of St. Paul? Why do you think St. Peter refers to Secundus as “The one who found the way” (p. 210)?
10. What does Secundus mean when he says to Boy, “You saved me . . . you reminded me what it means to be human” (p. 239). How many ways have Boy and Secundus saved each other? Why does Boy always end the list of relics with the word “home,” while Secundus keeps insisting the last word is “tomb”? How did the tomb become a home for the pilgrim? How did Boy find his own way home?





# Extension Activities

## Terror of the Black Death

The background setting of this story is Europe in the year 1350, a time in history that was defined by a devastating plague that swept across the continent. Look up information about the Plague, also known as the Black Death, to learn the symptoms, treatment, and relentless spread of this disease. In what ways did it affect the lives of both wealthy and poor people? What do we know about the spread of disease that they did not know in 1350?

## A Century of War

Boy and Secundus are traveling through a country that has been ravaged by war and will continue to be at war for another century. Discover why the English and the French were fighting each other through this long period of time, and how the fighting affected the people of the French countryside? Discuss how historical events have affected people living in your own time.

## The Power of Pilgrimage

Look up information about the concept of “pilgrimage.” What are some of the reasons that people undertake a journey of pilgrimage? Where are some of the places that people have journeyed to over the centuries? Draw a picture of somewhere that you can imagine going on a pilgrimage—a place that would be important to you. What would you want to learn about yourself on that journey?

## The Lay of the Land

Using the map at the back of the book alongside a map of modern Europe, draw your own version of the path taken from the Manor to Rome. Draw in mountain ranges and your own vision of what the buildings would look like as they are described. Research ships of the Middle Ages and find a picture of a ship that you think might have carried Boy and Secundus from Avignon to Rome.



# About the Author

**CATHERINE GILBERT MURDOCK** has always been fascinated with the Middle Ages, adventures, and Rome. She traveled extensively researching *The Book of Boy*, and she had close encounters with a pack of hounds in France and a tomb or two in Italy. She is the author of several acclaimed novels for children and teens and lives outside of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.





## A Q&A with Catherine Gilbert Murdock

**1. We've seen some very creative Middle Ages-set stories in the past couple of years — *The Book of Boy*, *The Mad Wolf's Daughter*, *The Inquisitor's Tale*, *The Passion of Dolssa*. Why do you think medieval adventures are trending right now?**

**CGM:** Perhaps it's because we as a culture are starting to recognize how important it is to address faith, even (or especially) if we don't share the views of the people we are writing or reading about. Trying to understand the Middle Ages without religious faith is like trying to understand paint without color. The rest of it — castles, clothes, people (blacksmiths! knights! ladies-in-waiting!), food (pottage, meat pies, whole roast everything) — enthralling though it may be, doesn't really count if we don't get the basic fabric. Or it could just be cosmic dust drifting over from the medieval universe of *Game of Thrones*.

**2. Was it tricky to write about the fourteenth century from the mindset of the twenty-first without distorting the past?**

**CGM:** It mattered enormously to me that I capture the fourteenth-century mindset, both because I find it fascinating and because I believe it's so important to understand that people in different cultures have different values, priorities, and mores. It helped that with *Boy* I had a narrator who was both naive and broad-minded, so he (and thus the reader) could marvel at everything: "Now I'm sleeping in a bed with mostly clean sheets..." I love that detail of "mostly clean" — two

small words encapsulate medieval hygiene. Boy at one point describes a room so luxurious that "glass covered the windows." For fourteenth-century Europeans, a window was a hole in a wall to let in light, a hole that wealthier folk might cover with cloth or cow horn (really!) to block the wind. But the concept that you'd cover that hole with glass, well, *that* was luxury. These are small details, to be sure, and some readers will probably miss them. But I far prefer small details to lectures or bludgeons.

**3. How did you balance historical accuracy with accessibility for today's readers in the dialogue? There's a bit of "twas," but it never feels archaic.**

**CGM:** Thank you! I've learned that with dialogue, a little goes a long way. In writing contemporary stories, for example, the word "like" should be applied with caution, compared to what you might find in an actual transcription. One "like" per paragraph makes the point just fine. Similarly, it takes only a couple "forsooths" to alienate readers, especially younger readers chary of vocabulary. I was greatly inspired by *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell*; Susanna Clarke captures Napoleonic England not only with phrasing, but with delightful spelling tweaks such as *sopha* for sofa. *The Book of Boy* is sprinkled with 'twas and 'tis, and gems like *betwixt*, and the use of *pilgrim* and *crutch* as verbs. And of course I tried to evoke the era with somewhat old-fashioned idioms — "a crowd such as this has busy fingers,"

# Q&A Continued

for example. But I went out of my way during the revision process to replace more obscure terms so that even these sentences were composed of accessible words. The goal, as with all prose, was to season lightly.

## 4. In a story with so many surprises, how do you decide how much to reveal and when?

**CGM:** That's the essence of storytelling, isn't it? Especially in this type of book, which has a couple of huge reveals that I hope are loaded with detail and nuance. I had originally intended for Boy's secret (don't worry; no spoilers) to occur at the very end, with a Final Beautiful Sentence. My agent, who is omniscient, pointed out that this was far too late: readers would want time to experience and process this secret, so I moved that revelation to the middle of the story. But then the ending petered out — or rather the *endings*, because I wrote possibly a dozen different ones. None of them came close to working. At the eleventh hour my agent, in her omniscience, gently asked, "Where does Boy end up?" and I wailed "I don't know!" — which of course was the problem. You can't write an ending if you don't know where to go. I slept on it, and woke the next morning with the final chapter of the book, culminating — ta da! — in one Beautiful Sentence.

## 5. Which animal voice/personality was the most fun to invent?

**CGM:** The animals were wonderful to write, every single one! Trying to figure out how a goat would speak (answer: smugly), or a wolf (softly), or a songbird (quickly, with lots of

repetition). If I had to choose, I'd select the skinny old dog who near the end of the book meets Boy at his very lowest point. Poor Boy is in complete crisis, trying to figure out who he is, what he is, and where and how he's going to live, and he's joined by a dog who's only slightly brighter than a brick. When Boy tells her there's a bone in her future, her ears prick up: "A bone? What's future?"

Even now, it makes me chuckle. We all know a pet who's too dim to master the fundamentals of time and space — I've got a six-year-old cat who has trouble with stairs. But they galumph their way through life, being rescued from odd shadows and brown paper bags. I'd like to point out that the animals in this book don't solve Boy's problems: they're not magical plot-driven assistants. Nor are they insecure or fearful. They go about their lives with matter-of-fact ease, either dismissive of humans (the birds call people "earth crawlers"), or simply unconcerned. I'd like to think that their confidence inspires Boy to make peace with himself, and maybe it will inspire others too. We don't need approval from other earth crawlers. We just need to live, and find joy where we can.

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