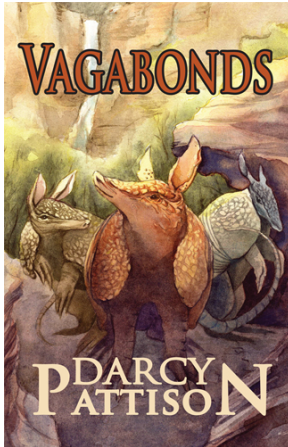




Mims House  
1309 Broadway  
Little Rock, AR 72202  
suefoster@mimshouse.com



**VAGABONDS**, by Darcy Pattison

Paperback ISBN: 978-1-62944-015-6

Library Paperback ISBN: 978-1-49521-402-8

Hardcover ISBN: 9781629440149

Ebook ISBN: 978-1-62944-016-3

Library of Congress Control Number: 2013920542

Category: Children's Fiction, Fantasy, Middle Grade, Preteen

Pages: 276

Grade level: 9-14 years old, Middle Grade

Lexile: 710L

## Explore American Fantasies – Discussion Guide By Darcy Pattison

As a long-time reader and fan of fantasy stories, I am often frustrated by the lack of truly American fantasies. Most fantasies involve folklore from the British Isles, the home of J.R.R. Tolkien and his classic books, *The Lord of the Rings* series. Since his book, fantasies mostly focus on legends and ideas brought from that culture.

American fantasies do exist, but they are few and far between. Notable American fantasies include the following:

- *Wizard of Oz*, which begins and ends in Kansas
- *Charlotte's Web*, set on a typical American farm
- *The Underneath*, set in the American south
- *Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH*, set in and around a fictional agency, the National Institute of Mental Health

When I decided to write a fantasy, I knew that I wanted an American fantasy. I am fascinated by the Ozark Mountains, especially the Buffalo National River area, the first river in the U.S. to be named a National River. I have hiked, camped and floated the Buffalo River for years. They say that the Ozark hills aren't very big, but the valleys sure are deep. It was a setting that I wanted to bring to life in a story.

Besides the U.S. setting, the themes are distinctly American. As a nation of immigrants, we know the pain of leaving loved ones behind in search of a new, and hopefully better, future.

Armadillos have been an invasive species for over 100 years as they have moved from the Texas-Mexico border all the way to the Ozarks.

The armadillos in the story are true to the natural history of the species. Armadillos are the only species besides humans who can contract leprosy. Litters are always four genetically identical quadruplets—four boys or four girls. Voracious eaters, they are opportunistic eaters, gobbling anything they find, which makes their travels easier. I tried to include these facts into the story and let them shape the story as much as possible.

I'd love to see more American fantasies, rather than those based on British or European tales. But it's difficult to build enough lore to base the tales on. We have Paul Bunyan and similar folktales, but they don't seem strong enough to serve as the basis for full-blown fantasies. Compared to Great Britain and Europe, perhaps, our country is too young still to have enough traditions to support fantasy worlds. Certainly, they'll be a different type of story. Will we recognize their worth or not? I hope so.

### **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

Many fantasy stories are based on folktales or legends. Discuss why the folktales and legends are useful to authors writing fantasies. Identify some local legends. Discuss what sort of fantasy you might write based on those legends.

When *The Underneath* by Kathy Appelt was published, there was a discussion about her use of Native American themes. Some argued that native stories shouldn't be used by non-Native writers. Others argued, however, that it wasn't any different than using the ancient British Celtic stories as the basis of a fantasy. If the landscape is barren, or empty of local legends, then there will never be American fantasies. Discuss the issue of using Native American legends as the basis for a fantasy. What else could form the basis for American fantasies? Landscape, historical or current events?

American themes were important to the author. Think about the history of the United States and discuss some important themes that might be explored in literature. Here are some examples: immigration, exploration of new worlds, relationship of explorers to native people, how a landscape influences a story, space exploration, and so on.

Pattison studied the natural history of armadillos. Research an animal and write a fantasy short story in which the animal acts realistically in some ways.