ABOUT THE BOOK

Neftalí is a dreamer. He loves words, birds, forests, and the sky. But his father expects him to be practical, concentrate on his studies, and prepare for a career in medicine. Slowly Neftalí learns to believe in himself, defy his father, and trust his own vision—a vision that makes him grow up to become one of the foremost poets of the twentieth century.

This imaginative exploration of the boyhood of Pablo Neruda takes readers on a rare journey of the heart and imagination, and brings hope and confidence to every child who has struggled against the odds and dreamed of a larger world.

BEFORE READING

Look up information about the country of Chile—its geography, climate, political history, and indigenous people, especially the Mapuche. Find out what is unique about the part of the country near the city of Temuco, where most of this story takes place.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why does Father forbid Rodolfo to sing and Neftalí to daydream? What is the effect on the entire family when Father is at home?

2. What is the significance of Neftalí losing his mittens and his father’s hat in the first chapter?

3. Why does Rodolfo say about Father that he passes out invitations (to dinner) like overripe plums? What kind of man is José Reyes and why does he try to control his family so completely?

4. Compare Neftalí’s father with his uncle Orlando. How are these men alike and how are they different?

5. Why is Neftalí’s first trip to the forest so important to him? How does the trip affect his relationship with his father and his understanding of his own nature?

6. What is the significance of the chucao bird that Neftalí hears in the forest? See a picture of this bird: www.arthurgrosset.com/sabirds/chucaotapaculo.html
7. Throughout the story, the author has inserted bits of poetry. Discuss the meaning of this question in the Forest chapter:

Which is sharper? The hatchet that cuts down dreams?
Or the scythe that clears a path for another?

Why is that phrase inserted in this chapter?

8. Who do you think is the mysterious child who leaves the toy sheep for Neftali? Why don’t they meet? Why is the sheep so important to Neftali when he doesn’t even know who gave it to him?

9. What does Neftali learn about himself during the trip to the ocean and his summer there? Discuss the question inserted in the Lagoon chapter: “From what are the walls of a sanctuary built? And those of a prison?” Identify the sanctuaries you have found in your own life.

10. Why is the wounded swan so important to Neftali and why is he reluctant to share it with his sister Laurita? What does it mean to them when they do take care of the swan together?

11. Discuss the effect on the children of the swimming routine in the ocean. What feelings does Neftali have toward his father at the end of the summer?

12. Why does Guillermo ask Neftali to write to Blanca for him? How does she know who actually wrote the letters?

13. What is the importance of thirteen-year-old Neftali’s job with his uncle? Why is Uncle Orlando’s newspaper office burned to the ground? What does Orlando mean when he says, “many whispers can make a very loud noise”?

14. Find out more about the Mapuche Indians in Chile. Discuss their importance in this story. Compare their history to other examples of indigenous people who have been displaced, or had their rights violated, by new settlers and the spread of industrial society.

15. Discuss the question: “Is fire born of words/ Or are words born of fire?” How does this question relate to the fire in the newspaper office and later when Father burns Neftali’s notebooks?

16. Discuss Neftali’s comment that his father was “so controlled by his own past that he dared not allow anyone he loved to control their own future.”

17. What prompts Neftali to start to use the name Pablo Neruda? Discuss the question: “Does a metamorphosis begin from the outside in/ Or from the inside out?” What is Neftali’s metamorphosis? What events of his childhood do you think are the most significant in shaping his character as a man?

18. How do the illustrations in this book further your understanding of the words and ideas presented here? What part does the artist play in your experience of the story?
FOR FURTHER READING


WEB SITES

Events of Neruda’s life with photographs of his early years:
www.fundacionneruda.org/ing/biografia_ingles1904.htm

Temuco past and present:
http://www.geographia.com/chile/temuco01.htm

General information about native people of Chile:
www.beingindigenous.org/

More about the Mapuche people of Chile:
www.mapuche-nation.org/english/main/feature/m_nation.htm

For teachers – information on sharing poetry with students:
www.poetryfoundation.org/programs/children.html
http://poetryforchildren.blogspot.com/
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Pam Muñoz Ryan has written more than thirty books for young readers, and has garnered many awards including NEA’s Human and Civil Rights Award, the Virginia Hamilton Literary Award, the Pura Belpré Medal, the Jane Addams Peace Award, and the Schneider Family Award. Before becoming a writer, she worked as a bilingual teacher and an administrator, and has a master’s degree in education. She lives with her husband about thirty miles north of San Diego near the Pacific Ocean.

ABOUT THE ILLUSTRATOR

Since coming to America from Czechoslovakia, Peter Sís has worked as an artist and in film before becoming a children’s book author and illustrator. He has won the Sibert Award and three Caldecott Honors for his picture books including *Starry Messenger: Galileo Galilei, Tibet Through the Red Box*, and *The Wall: Growing Up Behind the Iron Curtain*. He lives in New York City with his family.
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Discussion Guide prepared by Connie Rockman, Youth Literature Consultant, adjunct professor of children’s and young adult literature, and Editor of the 8th, 9th, and 10th books in the H. W. Wilson Junior Authors and Illustrators series.
In the largest of worlds, what adventures await the smallest of ships?