

A Curriculum Guide to

Doll Bones

by Holly Black

About the Book

Zach, Poppy, and Alice have been friends forever. They love playing with their action figures and toys, imagining a magical world of adventure and heroism. But disaster strikes when, without warning, Zach's father throws out all his toys, declaring he's too old for them. Zach is furious, confused, and embarrassed. He decides that the only way to cope is to stop playing . . . and stop being friends with Poppy and Alice. Then one night the girls pay Zach a visit and tell him about a series of mysterious occurrences. Poppy swears that she is now being haunted by a ghost trapped in a china doll, who claims that it's made from the ground-up bones of a murdered girl. They must return the doll to where the girl lived, and bury it. Otherwise, she says, the three children will be cursed for eternity.

Vocabulary

The following aligns with the following Common Core State Standards: (RL.6–8.4)

Some terms cited in the story will likely be unfamiliar to most readers. Ask readers to use reference books or electronic research sources to find out as much information as they can about the following words: apparatus, balked, brigands, contentious, crestfallen, cryptic, daunting, exhilarating, exasperated, incredulous, lockjaw, ominously, parody, portmanteau, silhouetted, tentatively, tetanus, trepidation, vividness.

Prereading Activity

Doll Bones is about ghosts, but is not a “ghost story” in the classic sense. Ask students to share some of their favorite ghost stories.

Discussion Questions

The questions below align with the following Common Core State Standards: (RL.5–9.1, 2)

1. What Zach loves about playing are “those moments where it seemed like he was accessing some other world, one that felt real as anything.” What is an experience you have had, while playing or doing something else, when you have felt the same as Zach?
2. Why is Poppy the best at playing villains?
3. Why is Zach so concerned about Poppy's brothers seeing him play with her and Alice?

4. What problem does Alice have with boys? How does Zach feel about the way Tom talks to her?
5. What is Poppy's home like? In what ways do you think it might affect who she is and how she behaves? What assumptions might you make about someone who lived in a home like hers? Why is Zach envious of Poppy's home? What does it remind him of?
6. What is the Great Queen and what is the legend the friends created about it?
7. What are Alice's complaints about her grandmother? What complaints do you have about your own parents or guardians?
8. How would you describe Zach's relationship with his father?
9. How does Alex feel about answering the questions he receives from Alice and Poppy?
10. What is the "mysterious thing" that happened to Zach over the past summer? How has Zach felt since? What does he notice about how people look at him and act around him?
11. What do you think it is that makes Zach feel suddenly "overwhelmed by a wash of terror"?
12. What does Zach sometimes find annoying about Poppy?
13. How does Zach feel about his father throwing away William and his other action figures? Has a similar thing ever happened to you? What is his father's reason for doing it? Zach's father thinks of the dolls as "just plastic." What do they represent to Zach?
14. Is all the anger Zach feels reasonable? Could there be a greater thing Zach is angry about that goes unmentioned?
15. Why is Zach unable to tell Alice and Poppy about what happened? Why do you think it's easier for him to just tell them he doesn't want to play anymore? What would you do?
16. What does Zach say to Poppy that makes him feel like a jerk?
17. What promise does Poppy make about the Great Queen?
18. What does Poppy tell Zach about her dream and the Great Queen?
19. Why does Poppy want Alice and Zach to go to East Liverpool with her? What is Zach's motivation for going along? What conditions does he demand of Alice and Poppy before agreeing to go?
20. What happens to Zach's doubts about Poppy's story when he looks into the bag?

21. Zach wonders “whether growing up was learning that most stories turned out to be lies”? What do you think? Are there any stories that you were told that turned out to be lies? How did you feel when you found out they were lies?
22. What things does Tinshoe Jones do and say that would make you think he is crazy?
23. Alice says “Everyone has a story . . . Everyone’s the hero of their story.” However, Poppy disagrees. She says, “There’s people who do things and people who never do—who say they will someday, but they just don’t.” Which do you agree with? Why is Zach inclined to agree with Poppy?
24. Zach wonders if he really knows what it means to have an adventure. What do you think it means to have an adventure? What sorts of things would you expect to happen on it?
25. What do the things Poppy brings with her on the quest say about her personality?
26. How did Alice, Poppy, and Zach become friends? Who would you say is the leader of the trio?
27. What does Zach dream about? What connections are there between the things he sees in his dream and the Great Queen?
28. Who or what do you think is responsible for trashing their campsite?
29. Why does Zach desperately want ghosts to be real?
30. Zach says he would want to be a ghost if he were murdered so he could haunt his killer. Under what circumstances would you want to be a ghost?
31. Why doesn’t Zach want to talk about the dream he had?
32. Why does adventuring turn out to be boring for Zach?
33. Why is Poppy so upset that Alice and Zach keep things from her?
34. Why does Alice throw the Great Queen in the water? What does Poppy accuse her of?
35. How does Alice react to Poppy’s revealing her secret to Zach? Has Zach been a bad friend to Alice and Poppy?
36. Why do you think Zach decides to tell Alice about his dream?
37. Why is Alice so desperate for there not to be a real ghost?
38. What do you think Poppy means when she says “growing up . . . seems like *dying*?”

39. What makes Zach realize he wants the quest to be completed the way Poppy imagined?
40. What does Zach's father say to him that drains him of his anger?
41. What does Zach learn about Eleanor Kerchner in the library? How does what he reads relate to the dreams he and Poppy had about Eleanor?
42. What makes Zach finally tell Alice and Poppy the truth about what his father did? Do you think they would have ever undertaken this quest if he had told them the truth from the beginning?
43. When the friends lay the Great Queen to rest in the cemetery, what does each character symbolically lay to rest?
44. Zach says, "Quests are *supposed* to change us." In what ways do the three characters change in the course of the story?
45. Zach says that with William and their heroes dead, they're going to be in a "world of chaos." How is adolescence representative of a world of chaos?

Postreading Activities

The activities below align with the following Common Core State Standards: (RL.7–8.2) (W.6–8.3, 7) (W.6–12.4)

1. Poppy calls the journey she, Zach, and Alice take a "quest." A quest is a journey in the course of which one advances spiritually and mentally, while physically traveling miles. The quester leaves the familiar for the unknown and is often accompanied by companions. The nature of the goal may not be clear at first and may only become fully apparent at the end of the quest. In the archetypal quest, the supernatural often plays a role. Discuss how *Doll Bones* fits the definition of a quest story. You may want to try using a graphic organizer for this. Ask students to write their own quest stories.
2. Superstitions are mentioned several times in the story. Ask students to explain their understanding of superstitions. Ask them to share superstitions they know. Working in pairs, ask them to use print and electronic resources to further research superstitions. Have them compile what they think are the ten strangest superstitions they find and share their findings.
3. Ask students to bring in a favorite doll or action figure and share how they came to have it and how they played with it.
4. There's a vivid description of Poppy's bedroom in the beginning of the novel. Have students write a detailed description of their own bedrooms, or of a room in their home.
5. Identify three conflicts in the story and explain how they are resolved.

6. Illustrate a favorite incident or scene from the novel.
7. Retell a favorite episode from the novel in your own words.

This guide was written by Edward T. Sullivan, a librarian and writer.

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