Because of Winn Dixie

L-I-T Guide
Literature In Teaching

By Kate DiCamillo

A Study Guide for Grades 4 to 6
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Meet the Author

Kate DiCamillo

As a girl, Kate DiCamillo always loved to read. Among her favorite books were *The Secret Garden*, *The Yearling*, and *Twenty-One Balloons*. “I read almost everything I could get my hands on,” she remembers. Kate was born in Philadelphia, but she moved to Florida when she was only five. She hoped to become a veterinarian, but changed her mind as she grew older. During her college years, she began to focus more on writing. Although she graduated from the University of Florida in Gainesville with a degree in English, one of her first jobs was at Disney World in Orlando. She also worked at a children’s camp.

Kate moved to Minnesota and there found employment in a children’s book store. Influenced by what she read, she began to write her own stories. “Every well-written book is a light for me.” Her first novel, *Because of Winn Dixie*, was based on her own experience. “I was lonely in Minnesota and couldn’t afford to go home. It was the first time I didn’t have a dog.” The story’s main character, Opal, is a lonely girl who adopts a dog named Winn Dixie, and the tale is set in Florida. Kate’s first effort in writing a novel earned her a Newbery Honor Award in 2001.

The author’s second book, *The Tiger Rising*, was published in March 2001. This novel was deemed a National Book Award Finalist and won other honors as well. *The Tale of Despereaux*, a novel about a brave mouse who falls in love with a princess, brought Kate the greatest honor of all—the 2004 Newbery Medal. Kate wrote the book for the son of one of her friends. “He wanted a story about an unlikely hero,” she recalls. It took her three years to complete the novel and honor his request. Other popular books by Kate DiCamillo include *Mercy Watson Fights Crime*, published in 2006, and *The Miraculous Journey of Edward Tulane*, published in 2007.

Kate presently lives in Minneapolis, Minnesota, and is busy working on her newest projects, a picture book and a middle-grade novella. She enjoys answering mail from her young readers. “It’s thrilling when a kid writes to you,” she states. The author looks ahead to writing more children’s novels. “I’m at the mercy of whatever character comes into my head. Every day I get up and write two pages and only two pages. It’s an easy goal that I know I can do, whether I am working on a novel or not.”
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STORY SUMMARY

Ten-year-old India Opal Buloni, called Opal, has recently moved to the small town of Naomi, Florida, with her father, who is a preacher at the local church. Ironically, Opal’s life at the Friendly Corners Trailer Park, where the family lives, is a lonely one because no other children reside there. The few children Opal knows from church are not very friendly to her. It has been seven years since her mother deserted the family, and Opal longs to know more about her. However, her father is busy with church work and rarely mentions his wife.

One summer day, Opal walks into the Winn-Dixie Market, and her life begins to change for the better when she encounters a dirty, scruffy, but lovable homeless dog. She brings the stray dog home, and after much prodding, persuades her father to keep the dog, now named Winn-Dixie after the market, as a pet. Winn-Dixie becomes a needed companion for Opal, helping her make new friends.

At the Herman W. Block Memorial Library, Winn-Dixie helps Opal establish her first new friendship with Franny Block, the librarian who loves to tell family stories. Because of Winn-Dixie's expensive taste in collars and leashes, Opal gets a job at Gertrude's Pet Shop in order to pay for the purchases. While at the pet store, she meets and befriends Otis, a shy ex-con guitar player, whose musical talent keeps the pet-shop animals happy. Opal and Winn-Dixie also connect with Gloria Dump, a kindly half-blind woman, who always takes time to listen to Opal's problems and offers her wise advice.

One night at a neighborhood party there is a thunderstorm and Winn-Dixie, who is terrified, vanishes. Opal and her father leave the party to search for him. They once again experience a sense of loss, but this time they are able to comfort each other. Opal finally realizes that her mother will not return and that she must move on with her life. When Opal and her father return to Gloria's house, they learn the good news that Winn-Dixie has been found hiding under Gloria's bed. Opal's loneliness is gone and she happily faces the future surrounded by new friends, family and, of course, Winn-Dixie.
Pre-Reading Activities

THINKING AHEAD

In order to better understand Because of Winn-Dixie, the following real-life topics can be assigned to cooperative-learning groups to investigate and then discuss with classmates as a whole.

TOPIC 1.: Responsibilities of Pet Ownership
   What are the main responsibilities that pet owners have?
   How can owners satisfy their pets’ needs?

TOPIC 2: Single-Parent Families
   What are the main problems that single parent families must face?
   How can these problems be rectified?

TOPIC 3: Phobias (Pathological Fears)
   What are some common phobias?
   How can these phobias be modified?

TOPIC 4: Making and Keeping Friends
   Why are friendships so important to people?
   What are some ways that we can make and keep friends?

ABOUT THE WINN-DIXIE MARKET CHAIN

The Winn-Dixie Market chain started as one small general store, the Clark Mercantile, in Burley, Idaho. Carl Davis worked there along with his younger brother, William. In 1914 William Davis purchased the store and in 1925 he moved the store to Florida and renamed it the Davis Mercantile. After their father's death, William’s sons continued to acquire more stores and renamed the chain Table Supply Stores. In 1939, the Davis brothers merged their stores with those of Bill Lovett, head of Winn and Lovett. The company continued to grow, and by 1955 there were 117 stores and the name was changed to Winn-Dixie Stores, Inc. The company is now based in Jacksonville, Florida, and there are a total of about 520 markets. The Winn-Dixie slogan is “Getting better all the time.”

If you could own a chain of retail stores, what kind of stores would you like to own? Think of a name for the chain. What would be a good slogan for the stores?