



The Ninja Librarians: The Accidental Keyhand

By Jen Swann Downey

Discussion Questions / Activities for Book Clubs, Educators, Parents
& Other Thought Provokers

For ages 10-14

Overview

Thematic connections

Intellectual freedom
Censorship
Philosophy
Knowledge
Justice
Ethics

Curriculum connections

Social Studies
History
Civics
Language Arts

About the Book

Twelve-year-old Dorrie had given up on finding something more important to do with her sword than act with it in plays. Then she stumbles into Petrarch's Library, the sprawling headquarters of a secret society of librarians, *Warrior* librarians. Their mission? Protect those whose words get them in trouble, anywhere in the world, and any time in history. Dorrie wants more than anything to become an apprentice, but events soon throw Dorrie into a pivotal role. To save Petrarch's Library and the people in it that she's come to love, Dorrie may have to erase herself from its history, forever.

About the Author



Jen Swann Downey has never visited a library in which she didn't want to spend the night. She lives in Charlottesville, Virginia with her husband and three children and feels very lucky they have not yet fired her. Her non-fiction pieces have appeared in *New York Magazine*, *The Washington Post*, *Woman's Day*, and other publications. *The Accidental Keyhand* was Jen's debut novel for children. *Sword in the Stacks* continues the adventure.

Praise for the Book

“Scrambles so madcap that it’s hard to turn the pages fast enough to keep up.”

—*Kirkus Reviews*,
Starred Review

“[A] melding of fantasy, adventure, and history... Readers who miss the collegial, magical setting of Hogwarts will enjoy exploring Petrarch’s Library.”

—*School Library Journal*

“Delightfully funny from the first page... Downey’s hilarious debut is perfect for any library-loving reader and those who never considered librarians to be cool.”

—*Booklist*



Discussion Questions

1. How much do you know about what actual librarians really do? What are some reasons someone might choose the profession of librarian? Can you name some stereotypes about librarians? How does this book smash those stereotypes?
2. At the beginning of the story, Tiffany Tolliver enrages Dorrie because she's written the words "Mr. Kornberger is a big fat fool" on the back of her t-shirt. Does Tiffany have the right to print that on her shirt and wear it out in public? What kind of right? A legal right? A human right? An ethical right? What is "a right"? Even if she has a legal right to publicly express her opinion that "Mr. Kornberger is a big fat fool", should she? Why or why not? Does everything protected as "free speech" have intellectual value? Should an insult be regarded as free speech? Why or why not?
3. On page 28, Tiffany makes fun of Dorrie's committed acting in Mr. Kornberger's play, saying, "You so wanted it to be real out there. You should have seen your face. Pathetic." Dorrie experiences deep anger and humiliation, and wanted... "to shout, "Take it back!" into her face, to squeeze her around the neck until she had to take her words back. Until they disappeared back down her throat like dirty water down a drain." Have you ever hated what someone else was saying? Have things people said ever made you powerfully angry? Why is it difficult to hear things we don't like? Is it just insults and criticism that are hard to hear? What about opinions we don't agree with?
4. Anger and humiliation drove Dorrie to want to shut Tiffany Tolliver up. What else might motivate people or organizations or a government to try to silence people? Can you think of real-life examples of one person or group of people trying to silence the opinions, or ideas of others? What about a desire to get or not lose money or power? What about fear? What about if someone thinks speech is dangerous? Is it ever right to limit "free speech". Under what circumstances?
5. On page 72, Phillip says: "In addition to making the world a quieter place to read and think, our lybrarians are also trying to keep people from having their tongues cut out, or being thrown into jail...just for scribbling the wrong thing on a piece of parchment." He also says the Lybrariad tries to keep books and other writings from being destroyed. What are the lybrarians trying to accomplish with these activities? Have you ever heard the term "intellectual freedom"? What does "intellectual" mean? Freedom? What does it mean when we put the words together? Why would the lybrarians care about protecting intellectual freedom? Do you think it's worthwhile work? Is a community better or worse off if intellectual freedom is protected?



6. Phillip also says that "...lybrarians, at least the ones we train, are doing more than it looks like they're doing.". Marcus says: "It looks like they're doing the shushing thing." Do you admire the lybrarians of Petrarch's Library? Are there ways in which real-life librarians protect intellectual freedom? Do you know any librarians who seem as though they might secretly work in Petrarch's Library?
7. Mr. Scuggans is a Passaic Public Library librarian, but in what ways do his concerns seem different than those of Hypatia and Phillip? Do you think Mr. Scuggans would want to serve the Lybrariad? Would the Lybrariad want his assistance?
8. Hypatia tells Dorrie and Marcus that "Once upon a time...the Foundation had complete control of the written word wherever they ruled...it's still possible that there are those who dream about its old power." How might controlling the written word give a person or a group of people power? How do ideas, information and opinions circulate in our world today? Are there people or organizations or businesses who influence if and how information flows or what opinions get heard in our world? Examples?
9. Francesco tells Dorrie and Marcus that: "The lybrarians of Petrarch's Library risk their lives every day. Sometimes just so a madman can safely proclaim that the universe is ruled by a blind fairy or a dancing goat or a talking soup ladle." Why might the lybrarians think it's important to defend writers who seem to be expressing nonsense? Out of a concern for equality? Fairness? Could there be another reason? What if an idea that is considered nonsense by most or all people in a community, turns out not to be nonsense? What if a group of people all believe something to be true, but it's not true? Does protecting the right of all to express ideas protect us -- as individuals and communities -- from our own potential ignorance? How might protecting all writers and writing lead to the development of knowledge? How might it set back knowledge?
10. Which part of Petrarch's Library seems would you most like to visit? Why do some people get very excited about libraries? What is special or valuable or interesting about a library? Mistress Wu mentions that libraries throughout history have been destroyed, sometimes through lack of care, but sometimes intentionally. Why might libraries have been purposely destroyed?
11. When Dorrie learns that from Petrarch's Library, one can reach other centuries, she thinks about the medieval Irish Monk she glimpsed through an archway. "Had he really been sitting in an entirely different time? One filled with ox carts and court jesters and bows and arrows? Her head hurt pleasantly at the thought. Back in Passaic, now was now, the past almost a dream, and the future unknowable. In Petrarch's Library, now must be something else entirely." Why do think Dorrie's head might have "hurt pleasantly"? If you could know the future, would you want to? If you had the chance to change the past would you? How would it change how you live your life if you could do one or both of those things?



12. When Dorrie begs Savi to let her serve him as a temporary unofficial apprentice, he asks: "And do you want to serve as this apprentice to a swordsman or a librarian?" Dorrie hesitates and doesn't really answer. Why do you think Savi asks her that question? What do you think the truthful answer would have been?
13. Dorrie asks Savi to teach her sword skills so that she can beat Tiffany when she returns to Passaic, so the t-shirt saying "Mr. Kornberger is a big fat fool" won't have to be worn, and Mr. Kornberger's "honor" protected. Savi agrees but he lays a condition on her: "After you vanquish your ill-mannered little nemesis and free yourself from having to wear the abhorrent shirt...you will instruct said nemesis that she is still entirely free to wear the garment if it so pleases her." Why do you think he insisted on that condition, even though the terms of the bet would have allowed Dorrie to stop Tiffany from wearing it?
14. Why did Dorrie and Marcus go to great lengths to get back the missing History of Histories page themselves, rather than tell the librarians that they'd lost it? Have you ever been tempted to do something you know wasn't fair, or "right" or ethical, in order to get something you badly wanted? This is called "means justify the ends" thinking. Can you think of a situation when the "means" might justify the "ends" and a situation in which a particular "means" might NOT justify a desired "ends"?
15. During the story, Savi tells Dorrie he's been assigned a mission: To find a missing manuscript written in the 16th century by a man named Cornelius Loos. A powerful bishop had destroyed it before it could be printed because he didn't like that it criticized the cruelty of the witch hunts he'd been organizing. Do you think that in our time, books or articles are prevented from being seen by the public? How could that happen? Is it important for people with less power to be able to criticize people with more power? Why?
16. Closer to the end of the book, Dorrie comes to Savi and says very clearly: "I want to apprentice to a librarian." Do you believe her? Why can she say this now, but couldn't say it earlier in the story? Were there specific experiences that made her more interested in serving a librarian, rather than just a swordsman? What did the experience out in Paris with Savi, teach or show her?
17. While Dorrie, Ebba and Marcus are out in Athens, Marcus makes friends with the musicians playing at the party. Some of the guests don't like that Timotheus the drummer is playing unusual rhythms. One guest kicks a hole in his drum, and says: "Let that be the last anyone ever has to hear of Timotheus." Does protecting intellectual freedom mean more than just supporting "free speech" in the form of speaking and writing? What other forms of expression exist? Marcus believes Timotheus deserves support and protection from the librarians. Do you agree or disagree with him on this?



18. Near the end of the story, Dorrie confesses to the librarians that she and Marcus were the ones who had taken the History of Histories page, and lost it. She says: "I know what I did was wrong, but I wasn't lying to hurt anyone?" Should her intention be taken into account? Does it make the fact that she lied more understandable? Acceptable? Does it make the lie okay?
19. Marcus finds the nerve to kiss Egeria because he thinks neither of them will remember once he's sent back to Passaic. How do you think he's going to feel when he sees her again?
20. Who is your favorite Librarian and why? Your favorite Librarian-in-training and why? Who is your favorite character in the book? Is he or she a lot like you, or very different? Give examples from your life to support your answer.

Activities

- On page 84, Phillip opens a book of haiku (a type of poem) by Basho. He reads out a melon to give Dorrie and Marcus for breakfast. Imagine two things you'd like to be able to read out of a book. Find a poem that you could read to get one of those desired things. Write a haiku or another kind of poem of your own that you could read to get the second desired thing.
- Assume you are being trained as a Librarian apprentice. Who in the past would you like to meet? Choose someone. Find out what year and place you'd have to get to in order to meet that person. Come up with five questions you'd like to ask that person, and three things you'd like to do with that person in his or her time. Also two common dangers of that time you'd have to avoid.
- Choose one of the historical figures listed at the back of the book. Research that person's life more deeply. Create a "Top Ten List of Why 'X' Would Make a Terrible Neighbor". Or a wonderful neighbor. Your choice!
- Make a convincing poster or video to recruit new members for the Librarian.
- Design a map of Petrarch's Library. Feel free to add rooms and areas that weren't in the book but should be part of the lay-out!
- The first ten amendments to the U.S. Constitution are known as the Bill of Rights. Look up the wording of the First Amendment which protects "free speech". Research whether or not the words that Tiffany Tolbert wrote on her t-shirt are legally protected. Why or why not?