

The Ninja Librarians: Sword in the Stacks

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
Activism
Justice
Equality
Ethics

Curriculum connections

Social Studies
History
Civics
Language Arts

About the Book

After stumbling upon the secret society of time-traveling ninja librarians, Dorrie and her brother Marcus have finally joined Petrarch's Library as apprentices. Their days are filled with interesting classes ("First and Last Aid: When Nobody Else is Coming"), training missions and apprentice chores—but they'll still have to find time to keep the Foundation from rising again, and enslaving society by stealing reading and writing from the world.

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.

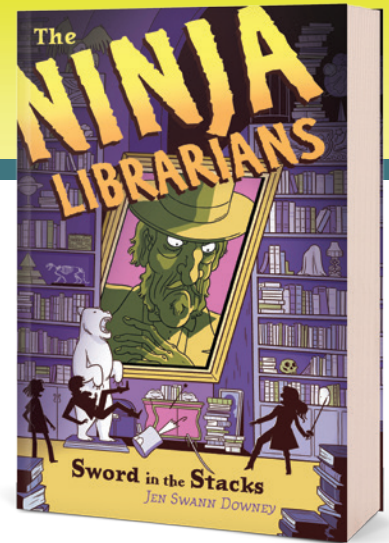
Praise for the Book

**"Put this in the hands of
adventure-lovers who like
a little substance with their
time travel and swordplay."**

—*School Library Journal*

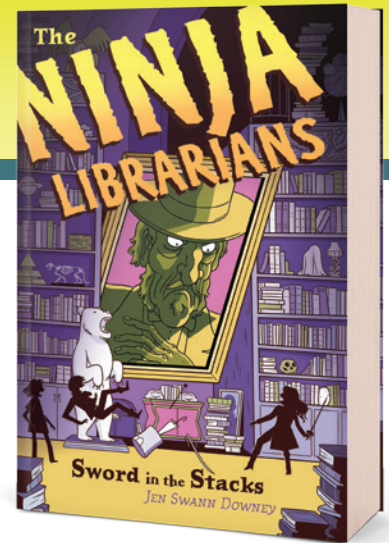
**"Dorrie's quest to join the heroic librarians
in protecting intellectual freedom...takes her
into deadly waters in this madcap sequel...
Never a dull moment in THIS library school!"**

—*Kirkus Reviews*

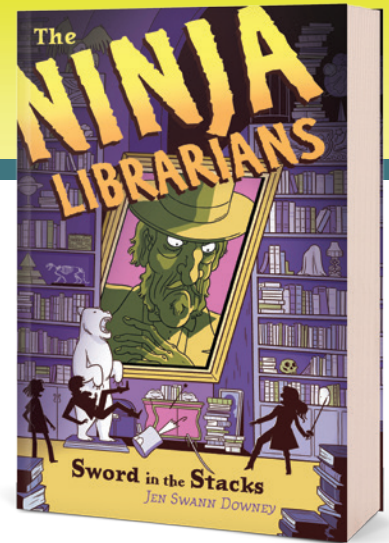


Discussion Questions

1. *Sword in the Stacks* is the second Ninja Librarians book. Did you read the first book, *The Accidental Keyhand*? If so, which book did you like better, and why? If not, did you feel like you were missing part of the story? Are you interested in reading the first book now? Do you think the author will write a third book about the Lybrarians? Do you like books in series more than stand-alone books? Why or why not?
2. How much do you know about what actual librarians really do? Can you name 5 or 6 things that would be in a librarian's job description? 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? Can you name other stereotypes the book turns upside down?
3. Do you know any librarians who might qualify for a place in Petrarch's Library? Why? List the characteristics and skills you would need to become a skilled Ninja Librarian. Do you admire the Ninja Lybrarians and the lybrarians-in-training? Are they doing important work? Can you find modern day examples of librarians protecting intellectual freedom?
4. Give the top five reasons it would be GREAT to be a Lybrarian. Next, name the worst five things about the job. Do you think Dorrie is ready to become a full Lybrarian? What characteristics does she have that would help? Would hinder? Are there other lybrarians-in-training who might be better at the job?
5. Name some of the book's themes. Choose one or two of these and discuss how the author develops them throughout the story using character, plot and setting. Discuss how well the author balances serious, complex themes with fast-paced action and humor.
6. In chapter 9, when discussing the Lybrarians' mission to rescue Algernon Sydney, Amo explains that Sydney's judge decided that "criticizing the government with words was the same as attacking it with weapons." Do you agree with this statement? Why or why not? Free speech is protected in the 1st Amendment of our Constitution. Can anyone in the United States say what they like about our government, without repercussions? In our country? In other countries?
7. Another example of free speech is given by Hypatia, who explains that the "Even Eye" is one of the most challenging of their principles to put into practice. Why is this principle important, and why is it so hard? Hypatia says their mission is to protect writers "even if the opinion induces sensation of anger, fear, loathing, or nausea in the librarian." Would you be able to protect, or even just to listen to, someone whose ideals and philosophy make you that uncomfortable? Could you defend their right to believe something you are radically opposed to?



8. Throughout the book Millie and her father Francesco, the head of security, are suspicious of and unfriendly to Dorrie. Discuss how her attitude towards both Francesco and Millie changes when she learns the truth about Millie's mother. Why does this make her more sympathetic to them? Does it make you more inclined to like them? Annie Knox says, referring to the ant-suffragettes: "They're frightened by what they don't understand." Discuss how this works out in modern society. Do you think that getting to know someone usually promotes compassion and understanding for them? How does this play out in society in regards to race, class, ethnicity? Does knowledge help change minds?
9. Who is your favorite Lybrarian and why? Your favorite Lybrarian-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. Whose apprentice would you like to be, and which job would you like to have? What are the skills you would bring to that job?
10. Which of the apprentice courses would you most like to take? Can you suggest some more courses that could be added? How would they be useful for a would-be librarian? What is the supply list for your new course?
11. Early in the book Mistress Wu says something that could serve as a "mission statement" for the Lybrarians: "We lybrarians don't go for silencing people with threats and abuse, and we swore to protect writers from such tormenters." A central theme of the book is the conflict between the Lybrarians and the Foundation. Can you suggest what the mission statement of the Foundation might be? Why are there always people on both sides of serious issues like these? Is it hard to decide who is "right" and who is "wrong"?
12. Imagine what the Foundation's stronghold looks like. We know that, like Petrarch's Library, it lies "outside time." If you were designing a movie or play set, what setting and architecture would you use?
13. A popular plot point in time-travel books and movies is this: if you change something in history, you might be changing things in the present. As Mistress Wu says, "The history you currently know isn't the history that always was." Why is this such a fascinating idea? Why is the concept of time-travel so interesting in general? Can you name some "wherens" you would like to be assigned to, or to visit? Where would you go if you were a Keyhand? Why? Would you want to change something in history if you could? What?
14. Dorrie and Marcus learn that Benjamin Franklin was a Lybrarian. Can you name some other historical figures who might have had the job? Defend your choice(s) – what skills or accomplishments gave you a clue?
15. Discuss Dorrie and Marcus' parents' reaction when they are told about the world of Petrarch's Library. How would YOUR parents have reacted? Would you want to leave your home and parents for the opportunity to study in Petrarch's Library? Would they have let you go?



16. In Mistress Wu's explanation about the Foundation to Dorrie's parents, she tells them that reading and writing were "closely guarded secrets forbidden to most people." Why would the Foundation want to hoard reading and writing? Why did they see those as dangerous skills to have? Discuss what it means to practice intellectual freedom as we do today. Has saying what's on your mind, or what you believe, ever gotten you into trouble? Share examples.
17. Discuss the Four Wolves. What are they and why would the Foundation claim that they are protecting people from the Wolves? Can you give examples of this from history? What happens when a government says it knows what is best for people, under the guise of protecting them? Do you know the meaning of the word propaganda?
18. Savi tells Dorrie, when she is worrying about the Librarians' suspicion of her that "one could waste a lifetime trying to prove one's worth to others rather than developing the worth itself." Do you think that is sage advice? Is it easy for you to disregard what others think of you? Can you suggest some ways Dorrie could develop her worth? Some ways you could?
19. In the book's climactic scene, Mr. Biggs forces Dorrie to give in, and she felt "as though a small piece of her core had just crumbled to dust." Discuss how fear can be a strong motivator for action—both good and bad actions. Have you ever felt this kind of fear, and made a decision that you weren't proud of? How do you make yourself brave when you're afraid? Do you think Savi's method of imagining himself dead would work for you?
20. Why doesn't Dorrie tell her friends about how Mr. Biggs had used her to make Vox Mortis? Do you understand why she didn't? Is it dangerous to have secrets from your friends? Why or why not? Have you ever avoided talking about something you were embarrassed about? Afraid of? How did it make you feel?

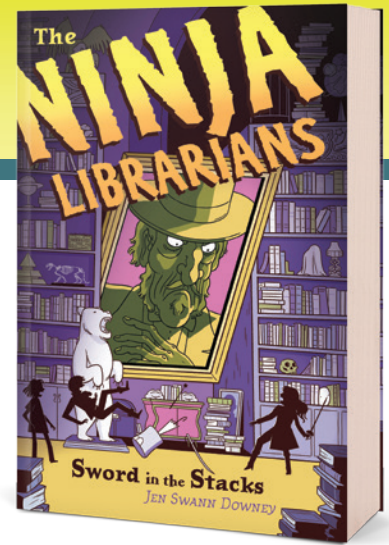
Activities

Plot and Character

- Make a chart depicting the main plot and all of the subplots of the book.
- Make a chart depicting the character arc of one of the characters. Where does the character begin? Where does the character end up? What changes for that character on the inside and on the outside?
- Choose two characters with differing points of view about something. Staying in character, write a short speech from each side defending their position.

Satire

- Read the real Cyrano de Bergerac's satirical essay *For Witches*. Find one more example of a satirical essay. Now try to write one of your own.



History

- Choose a person, place or organization mentioned in the book's glossary. Research and write a report about it.
- The Archivist tells Dorrie that he needs a "Rosetta stone" to translate Petrarch's language. Research and write a report on the real Rosetta stone.

Fantasy

- Make a recruitment poster for the Ninja Librarians.
- Design a map of Petrarch's Library.

Theme

- Divide readers into two groups, or into smaller clusters of two groups each, and prepare/perform one or both of the following debates:

Debate 1: A question of perspective: Foundation vs. The Librarians

Have one group write and prepare to defend the Foundation and the other, the Librarians. Use this scene on page 122 as a springboard for discussion. Hypatia says the Foundation "wishes to...criminalize reading and writing among all but a chosen few." Mr. Biggs replies, "we wish to rebuild for them the safe fold you destroyed...from our perspective, you are destructive meddlers."

Debate 2: Do the ends justify the means?

Use the scene on page 127 as a springboard for this debate, where the Librarians are discussing how to "persuade" Mr. Biggs to give them information. Hypatia says, "If we measure the means by the worth of the end, then we might as well be the Foundation." Della Porta says, "Desperate times call for desperate measures. How many lives might this man's silence cost? Is there no place for consideration of the greater good?"