



The Ninja Librarians: The Accidental Keyhand

By Jen Swann Downey

A Common Core State Standards-aligned
Activity Guide for **Grades 4, 5, 6**

About the Book

Twelve-year-old Dorothea Barnes can hold her own in any fake Renaissance faire sword fight, but she despairs of ever finding something more important to do with her sword. Then, one day Dorrie and her brother Marcus chase an escaped mongoose into the janitor's closet of their local library, and they accidentally fall through a passage into Petrarch's Library, the sprawling headquarters of a secret society of librarians. *Ninja librarians*. Their mission: protect those whose words have gotten them into trouble—anywhere in the world and at any time in history! Dorrie would love nothing more than to join the society. But when a traitor surfaces, she and her brother are the prime suspects. Can they clear their names before the only passage back to the twenty-first century closes 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 nonfiction pieces have appeared in *New York Magazine*, *The Washington Post*, *Women's Day*, and other publications. *The Ninja Librarians* is Jen's debut novel for children.

Praise for the Book

“Well worth a spot on library shelves...
but it won't stay there long.”

—**Kirkus STARRED ★ Review**



Pre-Reading Questions and Activities

Ask your students to imagine that librarians really are ninja-action heroes. What special skills might they have? Who and what would they protect?

In the course of this book, our heroes travel to several different time periods. Where and when would students like to visit if they could travel back in time?

Read the dedication of this book to the class: "For my mother, Christine Swann, who believed in books." What do they think it means to "believe in books"?

.....

Post Reading

Vocabulary

As students read the book, have them write down words they encounter that are unfamiliar or interesting to them. Have them derive the meaning from context, and then look up the words in the dictionary to see how close they came to the actual definition. Come together as a class and have students share their lists. Work together to suggest synonyms and antonyms. Why do students think the author used this specific word and not one of the synonyms? In addition to reviewing vocabulary words, create a separate list of words unique to this novel. Can students think of other books that coin their own words?

RL 4.4, 5.4, 6.4; RF 4.4, 5.4; SL 4.1, 5.1, 6.1; L 4.4, 4.5, 4.6, 5.4, 5.5, 5.6, 6.4, 6.5, 6.6

Petrarch's Library

Petrarch's Library is full of amazing things, like people "reading" food out of books and sword fighting "lybrarians". Have students imagine there is an exchange program between Petrarch's Library and their school, and they are spending the summer there. Ask students to write a letter to a pen pal of their choice describing the visit. This letter should include detailed information about what they see, hear, and learn at the Library. What is the most surprising thing? Are they able to "read" anything out of books? Do they learn to use a sword? What are the other apprentices like? The lybrarians? Especially write about the Library itself, trying to make the setting as vivid as possible to their audience. Are there any wonderful things they discover that Dorrie did not? Have students publish their final papers via computer or photocopier and create a collection of "What We Did at Petrarch's Library."

RL 4.1, 4.3, 5.1, 6.1, 6.5; W 4.3, 4.4, 4.6, 4.10, 5.3, 5.4, 5.6, 5.10, 6.3, 6.4, 6.6, 6.10; L 4.1, 4.2, 4.3, 5.1, 5.2, 5.3, 6.1, 6.2, 6.3



What a Character!

There are four main ways in which an author develops a character: the physical description, what the character says, what the character does, and what others say about the character. Have each student select a character from the book and gather evidence from the text to create a list of character traits. Then have them organize this information in a chart using the four categories above. Come together as a class and compare the charts. Are there any techniques that the author uses consistently across characters to describe them and distinguish their personalities? Which technique does the best job of conveying to the reader who the character really is?

RL 4.1, 4.3, 5.1, 5.3, 6.1; W 4.4, 5.4, 6.4; SL 4.1, 5.1, 6.1

My Enemy

In *The Ninja Librarians*, Dorrie encounters more than her fair share of enemies. Some are true villains, like the murderous Mr. Biggs; some are just irritants, like the librarian who pursues her for an overdue book. Break students into small groups and have them create a list of all the enemies Dorrie encounters, and describe the conflict, including why they are at odds with each other. How are these enemies the same? How are they different? Come together as a class and compile a master list based on each group's contributions.

RL 4.1, 4.2, 4.3, 5.1, 5.2, 5.3, 6.1, 6.2, 6.3; W 4.4, 5.4, 6.4; SL 4.1, 5.1, 6.1

Changing Places

Discuss with students the concept of point of view and narrative voice and how they affect the reader's experience. In literature, point of view refers to the person who is telling the story. We learn about people and events through the eyes of this person. In *The Ninja Librarians*, Dorrie is the point of view character. Discuss as a class how the book would be different if it were told from Ebba's perspective. Then have students choose a passage from the book and retell it from a different character's point of view.

RL 4.1, 4.6, 5.1, 5.6, 6.1, 6.6; W 4.3, 4.10, 5.3, 5.10, 6.3, 6.10; SL 4.1, 5.1, 6.1

Theme On

Review what a theme is with the class. Remind them that while a theme is the important, underlying idea, it is usually not expressed directly—students must figure it out from the events, characters, and settings of the story. Working as a class, ask students to list the themes in *The Ninja Librarians*. Have each student choose one of the themes to explore in an essay. The essay should cite specific evidence from the text to illustrate elements of the plot, characters, and setting that contribute to the understanding of the theme. Break students into pairs and have them exchange their papers and revise them based on this peer feedback before submitting a final copy.

RL 4.1, 4.2, 5.1, 5.2, 6.1, 6.2, 6.5; W 4.2, 4.4, 4.5, 4.9, 4.10, 5.2, 5.4, 5.5, 5.9, 5.10, 6.2, 6.4, 6.5, 6.9, 6.10; SL 4.1, 5.1, 6.1
L 4.1, 4.2, 4.3, 5.1, 5.2, 5.3, 6.1, 6.2, 6.3



Real or Fiction?

The Ninja Librarians seamlessly mixes historical figures with fictional characters. Have students identify five characters from the book that seem to be based on real people. Using the Internet or library, research these individuals. Have students select one of them and assemble a brief biography of the real person to present to the class. Why did the author include this person in the book? How is the character similar to the real person?

RL 4.1,4.3,5.1,6.1; W 4.4,4.6, 4.7, 5.4, 5.6,5.7,6.4,6.6,6.7; SL 4.4,5.4,6.4

Reader's Theater

Break students into small groups to select 2 or 3 important scenes that will be effective when read out loud. Come together as a class to discuss the scenes they identified and have each group select a unique scene to perform. Once students have had ample time to practice, have the groups arrange their performances in the proper plot sequence and present them to the rest of the class. Encourage students to use distinctive voices when reading their character's part.

RL 4.1, 4.3, 4.7, 5.1, 5.3, 5.5, 6.1, 6.3, 6.5, 6.7; SL 4.1, 5.1, 6.1

I Can Summarize That Plot in Ten Sentences

Break the class into pairs and have them summarize the book in 10 sentences. Have students write neatly or type these summary sentences on separate strips of paper and trade them with another pair of students. Have each pair of students put the new set of summary strips in sequential order. When completed, have students discuss their solution with the pair who created the summary.

RL 4.1, 4.2, 5.1, 5.2, 5.5, 6.1, 6.2, 6.3, 6.5; SL 4.1, 5.1, 6.1

Plot Twists and Turns

The Ninja Librarians is a fast-paced adventure story, which wraps up with a very satisfying conclusion. However, there is plenty of unfinished business as well. From the escaped Mr. Gormly and the threat of the Stronghold to the manuscript Dorrie and Marcus lost in Athens, there are many loose ends still to be addressed. Working as a class, make a list of plotlines that are not resolved at the end of this book. Which ones are likely to come back to haunt our heroes in the sequel? Which plot twists surprised students the most?

RL 4.1, 4.3, 5.1, 5.5, 6.1, 6.3, 6.5; SL 4.1, 5.1, 6.1

Teacher's Guide prepared by We Love Children's Books, March 2014.