

A LEARNING GUIDE FOR



Scholastic Press

Circle of Secrets

ISBN 978-0-545-16561-7

By Kimberley Griffiths Little

Synopsis

“The summer I turned eleven,
I found out that ghosts were real...”

After her mother walked out on Shelby Jayne and her dad, Shelby thought she'd never speak to her mamma again. But with her dad leaving the country for work, it turns out she doesn't have a choice; Shelby has to move back into her mamma's house, deep in the heart of the Louisiana bayou.

Her new classmates tease and torment her, so Shelby's relieved to finally find a friend in Gwen, a mysterious girl who lives alone on the bayou. But Shelby can't help wondering if Gwen has something to do with the puzzling messages she finds hidden in the blue bottle tree behind her house. The only person who might be able to explain is her mamma—but Shelby's not ready to ask. Not yet. It may take a brush with something from the beyond to help Shelby see that the power to put her own ghosts to rest is within her reach.



Circle of Secrets

Pre-Reading/Prediction Questions

Discuss “circle” as a literary metaphor. Brainstorm some things that are circles or phrases and other ways this word is used (Examples: a ring, a circle of friends, circle of trust, etc.). Find commonality between them (Examples: round, start and end at the same point so you can't tell where it began, surrounds something else, etc.). Then discuss why the author may have used the word circle to describe secrets and what that might mean in the story.

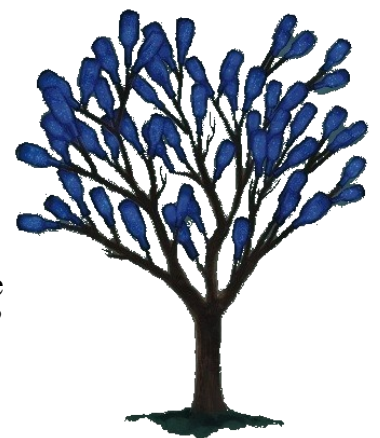
Where is the girl on the front cover? Why do people go to cemeteries? Have you ever been to a cemetery? What was it like? (Students should feel free to share personal experiences.)

What can you tell about the girl whose picture is on the cover? How old is she? Why do you think she's looking behind her?

Are ghosts real? Write your opinion and tell why. (Children may volunteer to share responses.)

In this story, two of the characters are separated. What does that mean? What are some reasons people get separated or divorced? How do the children of these parents usually feel when this happens? How does it change the children's lives? Does separation always lead to divorce? (This may be a sensitive subject for some children, so proceed with the discussion carefully.)

Critically acclaimed author Kimberley Griffiths Little weaves a haunting story of friendship and family and the power of faith, set against the lush backdrop of the Louisiana bayou.



Group Discussion/Journal Questions

Chapter 1

On the page before Chapter 1, how does the author describe ghosts? How does that help you predict what you might read about in the story?

Using the clues in Chapter 1, describe or draw a picture of the setting of this story.

Make a spider or bubble map for each of the characters introduced in Chapter 1 using the clues from the chapter.

Chapter 2

Write a list of five unusual things about Mirage's house and/or how she lives.

Add more details from Chapter 2 to your character maps you made for Chapter 1.

Write three or four sentences describing a *traiteur*. Why do you think people call Mirage a swamp witch instead of a *traiteur*? Give details from the story to support your answer.

Why does Shelby mistrust her mother?

Chapter 3

Draw a picture of the blue bottle tree based on the author's description.

What does Shelby find in one of the blue bottles? Why do you think she doesn't ask Mirage about it?

Compare and contrast the characters of Mirage and Grandmother Phoebe. How does Shelby feel about each person?

Chapter 4

Why is Shelby "more depressed than ever" after talking to LizAnn on the telephone?

What does Mirage tell Shelby about the charm bracelet? Draw a picture or make a list of the charms on it.

Make a prediction about what the key will open and who the girl is that Shelby sees out the window.

Chapter 5

What does Shelby find out about why her mother left her and her daddy a year ago? Do you think that was a good reason? Why or why not? If you were Mirage, what would you have done?

What does Shelby see in the antique store that she really likes?

Shelby finds another note in a bottle with different handwriting. Who do you think wrote it?

Chapter 6

Shelby starts school and meets several kids in the class. Write three or four details about each kid she meets.

Shelby is given a warning by one of the girls she meets. What does she warn her not to do?

Chapter 7

Shelby is uncertain about going to the pier with Tara, Alyson, and Jett. If you were Shelby, what would you have done? Why?

Chapter 8

In your own words, retell the story of the girl who died at the pier and what happened to her family and the deserted house out at the island.

Chapter 9

How does Shelby end up in the cemetery? The note in the blue bottle charm says, "She's dead. I'll never forgive myself." Who do you think wrote the note and who do you think is dead? Make a prediction.

Teaching Tip

Have students talk to a partner before writing their responses to the questions in their journal or sharing orally.

Chapter 10

Name at least three things that are mysterious about Gwen.

Chapter 11

What are three things that Gwen and Shelby have in common? Who do you think Gwen really is?

Chapter 12

Summarize the story of when Shelby's mother left her a year ago. What happened? Do you think Shelby should forgive her mother? Why or why not?

What does Shelby discover about the notes she is finding in the blue bottles? Write everything Shelby knows for sure about the notes. What do you think all of the notes mean?

Chapter 13

Shelby's feelings and thoughts about her mamma, daddy, and Grandmother Phoebe start to change in this chapter. What has changed and why?

Chapter 14

What secret does Mirage tell Shelby?

Shelby knows who wrote the notes in the blue bottles, but now she's more confused than ever. What do you think is really happening?

Chapter 15

Gwen says and does some strange things in Chapter 15. Briefly describe them.

Chapter 16

Shelby is starting to put the "pieces of the puzzle" together. Use the clues from the book and pretend you are Shelby—what do you think is happening or happened between Gwen and Mirage?

Chapter 17

What does Shelby know for sure about Gwen in Chapter 17? Do you think Shelby will see Gwen again?

How have Shelby's feelings for her mamma changed? Why doesn't she want her to sell the house?

It is late, dark, and stormy and Shelby's in the cemetery, not sure of how she will get home. What do you think is going to happen to her?

Chapter 18

As Shelby watches Gwen going through with the dare on the pier twenty years ago she thinks to herself, "sometimes standing your ground isn't the smartest thing to do." Do you agree with this statement? Why or why not?

Even though Shelby realizes that Gwen is ghost, she still goes out to find her and save her from drowning? Why do you think she does that?

Chapter 19

The charm bracelet is very important to Shelby throughout this story. Mirage says that every charm tells a story. List each of the charms you wrote after reading Chapter 4 and tell the significance or story of each one.

The new charm that Shelby's mamma gives her has three hearts to represent their family. How is this a clue to what might happen with Shelby's family?

Epilogue

In the first page of the book, the author writes, that "there are ghosts that hang around because they have unfinished business." What do Shelby and her mamma surmise is the unfinished business that brought Gwen back? What do Mirage and Shelby do to help Gwen finish it?

Who is Larissa's mother? What is the clue that helps Shelby figure that out?

Think of the circle metaphor discussed before reading this book: How is Shelby's near drowning and Gwen's drowning a circle?

What secrets did Mirage, Gwen, and Shelby keep?





Curriculum Connections

Teaching Tip

Students can feel a new connection to Circle of Secrets by doing a project that correlates with the setting, plot or characters in the book. Have the students pick one or more of the projects below to do either while they are reading the book or as a culminating project after finishing the novel. The idea is to have them choose something that interests them and have fun! These can be completed at school or at home. When the projects are finished, have the students share it with the class. They could also be shared at a parents' night or Open House.

HISTORY

Write a two-page research report on one of these topics:

- A) Mirage tells Shelby that the charm bracelet is from her great-great-great grandmother who was a slave on a plantation during the Civil War. Write your report on what you learned about this time period in U. S. history.
- B) Write your report on the history and role of *traiteurs* in Louisiana.
- C) Write your report on the history of the Louisiana Purchase and the role of the French people in the settling of Louisiana.

ANIMAL SCIENCE

There are several unique animals mentioned in the book that live in the bayous of Louisiana. They are listed below. Find a picture of each one either on the internet or from a book. Then, make a book that displays the pictures. Identify each animal, their habitat, and any interesting fact about each one.

alligator, nutria, owl, crawfish, thrush, whip-poor-will, cicadas, robin, dove, bobwhite

CULINARY ARTS

The eight food dishes below are mentioned in the book and are a regular part of Louisiana cuisine. Find a recipe of each dish either on the internet or from a cookbook. Then, make your own Louisiana cookbook that displays the pictures and recipes. Cook one of the dishes and share it with your classmates. Tell your classmates what the ingredients are and how you made it.

shrimp gumbo, beignets, dirty rice, biscuits and honey, sweet potato pie, grits, fried tomatoes, glazed yam cake

ART

Make a diorama or another type of three-dimensional art that depicts the bayou, pier, and island with Gwen's deserted house OR Mirage's house on the bayou. Use the author's descriptions from the book to help you add details.

BOTANY

Be a botanist! A botanist is someone who studies plants. Research plants native to the Louisiana bayou including elephant ears, cypress, purple water hyacinth, and Spanish moss. Draw and color picture of each one and describe it. Label each plants' parts, where it can be found, and its usefulness to either animals or people.



Teaching Tip

This is a project that the student can make for themselves or if it is done near a holiday time such as Christmas, Valentine's Day, or Mother's Day, it can be given as a gift to someone special in the student's life. The bottle can be used to put a message in, like in the story, or as a vase.

MAKE A BLUE BOTTLE

Materials Needed:

White glue	Glass bottle or jar (no lid necessary)
Small dish	Colored tissue in different hues of blue
Water	Paintbrush



Directions:

1. Pour glue into a small dish. Add enough water to make a thin consistency.
2. Tear or cut tissue paper into small pieces (no larger than 1 square inch each).
3. Paint a small amount of glue on one area of the jar.
4. Press a piece of tissue over the glue and then paint more glue over the top.
5. Continue adding more tissue pieces to the bottle in the same way. Paint glue over the edges of the tissue and overlap pieces until the entire jar is covered in tissue and with a final coat of glue.



About the Author

Kimberley Griffiths Little is the author of *The Healing Spell* and the critically acclaimed novels *Breakaway*, *Enchanted Runner*, and *The Last Snake Runner*. She is the winner of the Southwest Book Award and the Whitney Award.

She grew up reading a book a day and scribbling stories, while dreaming of one day seeing her name in the library card catalog. In her opinion, the perfect Louisiana meal is sausage gumbo and rice, topped off with warm beignets, although crawfish etouffee runs a close second.

Kimberley lives in a solar adobe house near the banks of the Rio Grande in New Mexico with her husband and their three sons.

Come visit her at www.kimberleygriffithslittle.com.

Books by Kimberley

Circle of Secrets, Scholastic Press
The Healing Spell, Scholastic Press
The Last Snake Runner, Random House
Enchanted Runner, Avon Books
Breakaway, Avon Books

