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Discussion Questions for Circus Mirandus

1. What power did The Man Who Bends Light have? Why was Micah so disappointed when he discovered what that power was? Would you like to have the Lightbender’s power? Why or why not? If you could have any of the powers in this book, which one would it be and why?

2. Micah’s grandfather wanted The Man Who Bends Light to make an illusion that made it seem like his father had come home from the war. The Man Who Bends Light was a little hesitant to do so at first? Why?

3. If Micah’s grandfather knew the illusion of his father coming home wasn’t real—why do you think he asked the Lightbender to create it? What did he have to gain?

4. The Lightbenders illusions are a little like the things that people use to temporarily escape reality and entertain themselves—books, movies, video games, etc. If none of these things are real, why do we like them so much?

5. Micah is surprised when Jenny can’t see the circus, even though it is sitting right in front of her. Why can’t she see it when Micah can? Even after she sees the circus and all of its magic, Jenny is still trying to figure out scientific explanations for what she sees. Why do you think it is so hard for Jenny to believe?

6. Even though she struggled to believe in magic and embarrassed Micah a lot—do you think Jenny was still a good friend to Micah? Give examples from the story that show why or why not? What do you think makes a good friend?

7. Even though she doesn’t believe in magic, Jenny continues to support Micah in his search for Circus Mirandus. What do you think are her reasons for doing this?

8. Aunt Gertrudis thinks that she needs to protect Micah and stop him from hearing Grandpa Ephraim’s stories. Why do you think she feels the stories are so dangerous? What is she afraid will happen to Micah?

9. Aunt Gertrudis is really mean to Micah throughout the book. But when you see her as a little girl she was a very different person. Why do you think she became so mean? Who do you think is more to blame for her change in personality—Victoria or Aunt Gertrudis herself? Why do you feel that way?

10. Who do you think is worse, Victoria or Aunt Gertrudis? Give specific examples of things they did that made them the worst. What things did the other person do that made you think maybe they weren’t quite as bad? In real life are people either all good or all evil—or are they somewhere in between? Give examples.

11. Aunt Gertrudis once believed in magic. When Micah leaves the car to go and join Circus Mirandus at the end of the story, he invites her to come with him. She hesitates just for a
moment. What do you think was going through her mind at that moment? If part of her believed Micah, why do you think she chose to stay behind—especially when she seemed so miserable all the time? Why do you think someone would choose to be miserable?

12. After reading about what Aunt Gertrudis was like as a child, was there any part of you that wanted there to be a different ending for her? Why or why not? Do you believe people who make bad choices deserve a second chance—or do you think people should get what they deserve—end of story? Explain your answer.

13. Why do you think the author of this book chose not to save the life of Micah’s grandpa? Do you think his death was important to the theme of the story? Why or why not?

14. If you could have one miracle granted by the Lightbender, what would it be?
Magic, Faith, Imagination: Debut MG Author Cassie Beasley on “Circus Mirandus”

By Kiera Parrott on May 11, 2015

In Cassie Beasley’s forthcoming middle grade debut novel, *Circus Mirandus* (Dial, June 2015), a young boy believes wholeheartedly in the fantastical stories his dying grandfather has told him about a magical circus, and he thinks the elusive circus may hold the cure he so desperately needs—if he can find it. With an *SLJ* starred review, as well as stars and accolades from *Kirkus* and *Publishers Weekly*, this charming and tender fantasy evokes echoes of Roald Dahl and J.M. Barrie.

*Circus Mirandus* is your debut novel. What’s the story behind the story?

I wrote the first draft of the book that would become *Circus Mirandus* in June 2012. I was earning my MFA at Vermont College of Fine Arts, and all of my major projects up to that point had been YA novels. But I had the idea for a story about a boy and his grandfather and a magical circus, and it caught me in a way nothing ever had before. I loved it. I couldn’t let it go. So I wrote it in a week, and then I spent the next couple of years revising it. It’s been such a huge part of my life that I almost don’t know what to do with myself now that I’ve finished!

How did you dream up the magical Circus Mirandus? How did you decide on its name?

Once I had some of the characters in mind—the Lightbender, the manager, Rosebud—the circus started to build itself around them. Every magician at the circus has his or her own unique magical talent, and the way they contribute to the circus is based on that. The Lightbender has his show, of course, but Rosebud makes healing potions, so she’s the circus’s doctor. In some ways, it was a setting that grew out of the characters who inhabit it, and of course it’s the kind of place that I desperately want to visit. I’m glad you asked about the name because I spent a long time trying to come up with the perfect one. I searched online translators and looked at lists of words. When I found *mirandus*, it seemed to fit the place I wanted to write so well. It means wondrous and marvelous.

It’s so refreshing to see a fully developed, loving relationship between a grandparent and child. As the book opens, Micah stands to lose the only parent he’s ever known. And yet, despite the heavy premise, the book doesn’t feel bogged down by grief or sadness. There is still a sense of wonder and joy to Micah’s quest to save his grandfather. How did you achieve that balance?
I love Grandpa Ephraim! He was actually the first character to come to me, even before Micah, so their stories have been growing together from the beginning. His backstory is critical to the novel’s plot, and the chapters in which readers learn about his past are some of my favorites. I think the wonder and joy comes from the characters themselves. Grandpa Ephraim and Micah aren’t the type to despair. They are both the kind of people who can find hope in a situation that most would deem hopeless, so even though Micah is going through a difficult time, he’s still holding on to the belief that everything is going to be okay. I think that perspective is at the very heart of the story.

This book has been compared to the works of the great Roald Dahl—there’s fantastic magic rooted in a mostly realistic world, filled with clever and courageous kids and at least one cruel and ignorant adult who wields power over our hero. Who were your reading influences? Were there any particular books that sparked your desire to pen your own stories?

The first time I heard the comparison to Dahl I couldn’t believe it. I still can’t. I wanted to have powers like Matilda when I was younger. Who didn’t?

As for influences—from the writer’s perspective it’s not easy to get the distance you need to say, “Oh, I was influenced by such-and-such.” At least that’s been my experience. I think it’s because the stories that are most likely to have influenced you are the ones that you’ve read so many times that they’ve become as much a part of you as anything you make up on your own. But I never can resist the opportunity to talk about books. When I was younger, some of my favorites were Holes, The Princess Bride, and The Giver. I love Kate DiCamillo’s work. And I was the perfect age to grow up with the Harry Potter series. When I was in junior high, my mother refused to read the books, so I followed her around the house reading them aloud until she was thoroughly hooked as well.

Like many a Dahlian villain, Aunt Gertrudis is a character we love to hate. She’s mean, rude, dismissive, and infuriatingly stubborn. But we also get to see a bit of history and some hints about why and how she developed into the awful person she is today. How important is it to create backstory and motivation for secondary characters—especially villains?

It’s very important. It’s easy to fall into the trap of writing a character who is purely evil without any rhyme or reason for it, but villains have their own logic. They aren’t wicked or wrong in their own minds. Because of that, Aunt Gertrudis was one of the more difficult characters for me to write. The earliest versions of her were too bad. She wasn’t believable. But as I developed her backstory, I found Aunt Gertrudis’s true nature. She is so horrible, but she thinks she’s in the right. She sees herself as the defender of sense and practicality in the face of Grandpa Ephraim’s “nonsense stories.” It makes her a more effective villain I think.
Spook the Bird. Photo courtesy of Cassie Beasley.

I saw on Twitter that you have an African Grey parrot who may have served as the inspiration for the flighty, chatty, irrepressible Chintzy. Is that true? Is your parrot also named Chintzy?

I do! Her name is Spook the Bird because my family adopted her on Halloween three or four years ago, but she is very much the inspiration for Chintzy. She is definitely chatty. Actually, she’s yelling at me from across the room right now because she wants to sit on the sofa with me, but she’s been in a bitey mood lately, so I’m a little hesitant!

Children’s lit experts often talk about a “sense of hope” when discussing what differentiates a children’s book from an adult work. So much of the DNA of *Circus Mirandus* is about hope and faith and imagination. How do these elements come into play in your own life?

I mentioned Grandpa Ephraim and Micah’s capacity for belief in the face of overwhelming odds. It’s a quality that I so admire, and not just in fiction. I think their faith is part of what makes them compelling characters. Imagination and hope keep Micah going; they make him brave. I think most of us could do with a little more of that in our everyday lives.

The film rights for *Circus Mirandus* were acquired back in February—a full four months before the book publishes. How did that feel? What are your thoughts, hopes, and/or concerns about your work being adapted for the big screen? If you were the casting director, who would you cast as Micah, Ephraim, Aunt Gertrudis, the Lightbender?
It was a complete surprise! I still grin from ear to ear whenever someone mentions it. And, as thrilled as I was when I first heard that Stone Village was interested in acquiring the rights, I was even more delighted when I had the chance to talk to [film producer] Scott Steindorff on the phone. I am so pleased with his vision for the film. They are considering screenwriters right now. I’m not sure that I’m allowed to name names, but I will say that I’m only getting more excited as the project moves forward!

I do think *Circus Mirandus* is the kind of story that can be adapted very well to the screen. It’s got something for readers and viewers of all ages. And the circus itself—that’s something I can’t wait to see outside of my own mind.

It’s probably a good thing that I’m not going to be in charge of casting, because I’ve been trying to think of who I would cast as the Lightbender for weeks now, and it’s impossible. Other people have been happy to tell me who they picture when they read though, and so far my favorite suggestion has been Ewan McGregor. By the way, my editor has volunteered to be Bibi, the circus’s guardian, and I do think she’d make a wonderful tigress!

http://www.slj.com/2015/05/interviews/magic-faith-imagination-debut-mg-author-cassie-beasley-on-circus-mirandus/
A Conversation about Mystery with Cassie Beasley, author of Circus Mirandus

WEDNESDAY, JUNE 3, 2015

CASSIE BEASLEY AND I BECAME friends back in graduate school. I remember feeling drawn to her immediately—she was kind, warm, and clever. But there was another quality that stood out even more distinctly: she had a very particular twinkle in her eyes. A twinkle which I interpreted to mean, "Life is quite thrilling, isn't it?"

This week, Cassie's debut novel, Circus Mirandus, was released to huge buzz. The book has collected starred reviews and the film rights sold months before the release date. I read Circus Mirandus as an ARC and I can tell you that the "Life is quite thrilling" twinkle is reflected on every page. The world Cassie has created is full of mystery, wonder, and pathos. She moves effortlessly between emotional registers and her characters feel at once knowable and larger than life.

For this post, we decided to have a kind of free form conversation about the book that Cassie wrote and I enjoyed so deeply:

STEVE: For me, your book is really about the idea that others don't have the right to define the "realm of possibility" for us. Micah believes in a story about a magical circus that his grandfather has told him, and he believes in it even though everyone around him is pushing him in the opposite direction.

CASSIE: I love how you phrased that thought. I've never thought of it in quite that way, but that's such a perfect way of putting it. Because what we choose to believe in or put our faith in is so important, and that's not something that should be chosen for us by others, is it? And I think [Micah's classmate] Jenny is really interesting in that respect because she gets it on some level. Even when she is sure Micah's belief in the circus is incorrect, she's willing to express her own feelings without insisting on his agreement.

Which is exactly what Aunt Gertrudis never does.

STEVE: Right! Aunt Gertrudis isn't just repelled by Micah's beliefs, but also she hates the very idea that he has belief in something mysterious. Which becomes something that we love about Micah. Here's this boy whose aunt is mocking this story of the circus but he has faith, not just because he believes his grandfather, but I think also because he desperately wants to live in a world where magic exists.

CASSIE: Micah's belief in the circus is such a fascinating thing to me because I think, even if it turned out that Circus Mirandus wasn't real, his faith in it is of value to him. It keeps him moving forward. It banishes despair. Do you know what I mean? And when you contrast his attitude with, say, Aunt Gertrudis's, I think it becomes clear that what Grandpa Ephraim has given him with the stories is hope in the face of an otherwise consuming grief.

STEVE: I think that's a deep theme: hope matters. It has an absolute value, regardless of whether it proves well-founded or not. The other thought that your comment leaves me with is:
when bad stuff happens, go have an adventure. Grandpa Ephraim carves Micah a refuge that gives him respite from his grief.

CASSIE: "When bad stuff happens, go have an adventure" -- I think that's something Grandpa Ephraim himself might have said. I definitely do think there's an element of that in the story. The book starts with Micah feeling utterly helpless in the face of his grandfather's illness. He's desperate to make a difference, but he doesn't have a way to do it. The plan to find Circus Mirandus is a simple one, but it has such a huge effect on his attitude. It gives him a way to act.

STEVE: Searching for the circus is one thing, but there's also a scene late in the book when grandfather and grandson go to the movies (perfect choice on so many levels, because movies are also a form of "magic" and one which made circus magicians virtually obsolete). Why was that quiet moment-- as the book is catapulting toward the finish line-- so vital to the story you were telling?

CASSIE: The part where Grandpa Ephraim feels well enough to take Micah to the movies is one I worried about when I was writing. I wondered if readers might find it dull, or too much of a departure from the rest of the book, but it's actually one of the chapters that early readers have made a point of mentioning to me in a positive way.

I thought it was important to have it because the book starts after Grandpa Ephraim has already become very ill, and so I hoped that the long night out at the movies would give readers the chance to see him as Micah does. And I've had several people tell me that that part reminded them of time spent with their own loved ones, how sometimes after people are gone the memory of one or two shining, brilliant moments with them stands out forever. I wanted to give Micah and Ephraim a moment like that, and I wanted readers to share in it.

STEVE: It's one of my favorite scenes and one that affected me deeply after the loss of my own father. One thing I've realized over the course of the past year is that you can continue to learn about someone even after they're gone. I think Grandpa Ephraim gives Micah those "shining, brilliant moments" but also gives him a mandate for the future along the lines of Maude in this scene: https://youtu.be/0ZzNIA9uZ0g?t=104. Which makes me wonder, as Micah embraces the future, will he get new insights into Grandpa Ephraim? Will that relationship continue to evolve?

CASSIE: I think it has to, doesn’t it? Grandpa Ephraim has had such a profound impact on who Micah is and how he views the world. That kind of relationship never really ends, and as Micah grows up, I think he will find himself returning again and again to consider Grandpa Ephraim’s advice and actions. And how he views his grandfather’s choices will change of course, in ways both large and small, because that’s a big part of growing up. But I like to think that Micah will never grow up so much that he forgets what it is like to believe wholeheartedly in something that seems impossible to everyone else.

STEVE: Thanks so much, Cassie! And now for the speed round!

What's been your favorite part of the writing-editing-starred review receiving-movie contract signing-interview giving whirlwind you've been on? Hearing from children who've read advance copies of the book. I've heard from a few now, either through reviews they wrote themselves or through messages sent by their parents, and it's the best feeling in the whole world to know that they enjoyed the story.
How does it feel to see the book out in the wild? Thrilling, joyous, scary. Perfect. Any advice for the writers in the Middle Grade Mayhem community? Considering what we've been talking about in this interview, I think my advice had better be to have faith! Believe in yourself, in your work, in your ability to finish the first draft and in your ability to revise the fourteenth. And to that, I would add that you need to find other people who will support what you're trying to do. Micah wouldn't have gotten far without Jenny and his grandfather. I think there are always going to be those days when you decide your writing is no good, and you let yourself go completely sideways. It helps if you've got a friend who's willing to put up with your nonsense and help you get back on track.

http://project-middle-grade-mayhem.blogspot.com/2015/06/a-conversation-about-mystery-with.html