

Each Little Bird That Sings

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Book Summary

Comfort Snowberger has attended 247 funerals. That's a lot for a ten-year-old. But if your family runs the town funeral home and their motto is "We Live to Serve," then that's what you do. Yes, it's sad when Great-great aunt Florentine drops dead-just like that in the vegetable garden-but Comfort knows how to handle loss. What she can't handle is her crazy cousin Peach, who ruins every family occasion, and her best friend, Declaration, who suddenly won't speak to her. Aunt Florentine's funeral will be a time to remember. But all Comfort really wants to do is sit in her closet with her dog, Dismay, and hide.

Life is full of surprises. And the biggest one of all is learning what it takes to handle them.

Author Information

Deborah Wiles was born in Alabama into an Air Force family and spent her growing-up summers in a small Mississippi town with an extended family full of Southern characters. Today she writes about them and they live on in her stories.

Deborah is the first children's book author to be named Writer-in-Residence at Thurber House, James Thurber's boyhood home in Columbus, Ohio. She received the Ezra Jack Keats New Writer Award from the New York Public Library and the Keats Foundation in 2002, and is the 2004 recipient of the PEN/Phyllis Reynolds Naylor Working Writer Fellowship. She holds an MFA in Writing from Vermont College and taught "Writing Techniques for Teachers" at Towson University in Maryland until she moved to Atlanta. She also taught writing in the MFA program at Lesley University in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Her first novel, *Love, Ruby Lavender*, was an ALA Notable Children's Book, a Children's Book Sense 76 Pick, and a New York Public Library Book for Reading and Sharing. The book has also been nominated for 26 state book award reading lists, voted on by children. She has written two picture books, *One Wide Sky*, a Children's Book-of-the-Month Club selection, and *Freedom Summer*, winner of numerous awards including the Coretta Scott King/John Steptoe award for illustrator Jerome Lagarrigue. Deborah's novel, *Each Little Bird That Sings*, is a 2005 National Book Award finalist.

She lives in Atlanta, Georgia.

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Suggested Answers to Literature Circle Questions

1. When Uncle Edisto died, everybody cried before adjusting and carrying on with their jobs. List the types of activities that the family does when death comes calling.

On page 10, Comfort says, "Everybody cried, because death is hard." Then she states:

"We gathered together.

**We started cooking.
We called the relatives.
We called our friends.
We did not have to call the funeral home.
We are the funeral home.
I wrote the obituary."**

2. In Chapter 19, what does Declaration do to try to upset Peach when they are walking to the cemetery for Aunt Florentine's graveside service? What is the result of Declaration succeeding in upsetting Peach?

A.) Declaration begins to taunt Peach with things she knows will scare him. First, she challenges him to climb a tree, then a mountain. Then she becomes furious and shouts at him: "Go to the graveyard, Peach, where they throw dirt over dead people and leave them there for the worms!" Finally, Declaration encourages Peach to run toward the cemetery, to the shelter of Aunt Florentine's grave, where he'll find her "dead! Forever!" (pp. 147-151).

B.) On page 150, "Peach curled himself into a ball on the dirt road and began to wail." Then, he runs across the road and tumbles down Purgatory Hill. He clings to a pine sapling before running toward Listening Rock. He falls into Snapfinger Creek, which has become a lake during the storm. The children then become stranded in the current and struggle to reach Listening Rock, where they stay until they are rescued. In the meantime, Dismay has been released by Comfort into the current, never to be seen again.

3. At the end of Chapter 26, Declaration writes a letter asking Comfort's permission to attend the life service for Dismay. Comfort responds with a note that says, "Do not come." Why did Comfort not want Declaration to attend?

Students' answers will vary. Although Declaration finds Dismay's dog collar, signifying that Dismay has probably drowned, Comfort still seems to be angry with her friend. Comfort may still be upset with her for taunting Peach into running toward Listening Rock. Comfort may not be ready to face Declaration; Comfort blames Declaration for causing her to release Dismay into the current so that she and Peach are able to survive the flash flood.

4. What does Comfort mean when she tells Declaration, "You just need to go to more funerals. You get used to death if you live around it long enough" (p. 43)?

Students' answers will vary. Most will discuss that Comfort has attended so many funerals that she has become accustomed to the process surrounding death and dying. Death is no longer something secretive and scary, but has become a part of the life process itself for Comfort and her family.

5. Comfort prefers to conduct her thinking in her closet. On pages 71-72, the author describes to the reader what Comfort's closet, or thinking area, looks like. Illustrate how her closet is organized. Compare Comfort's thinking area with the place where you like to do your best thinking. How are the areas the same? How are they different? How did you discover your thinking area?

The closet is described thus: "It was cozy in the closet. I had an overhead lightbulb that I turned on and off with a pull of a long string. My small dresser was in the closet. My hanging clothes surrounded me.... A big piece of carpet with a cabbage-roses pattern all over it lay on top of the wooden floor. All around the edges of the carpet, I put my Essential Equipment. First a dictionary.... Next, stacks of *Discovering Our World Magazine*. My *Short* notebooks. An art tablet for drawing

and thinking; a mayonnaise jar full of number-two pencils...with good erasers; a wooden ruler...; a box of colored pencils; and my crayons." Students' descriptions of their personal thinking areas will vary.

6. Although it is unusual for a funeral home to conduct a life service for an animal, why do the Snowbergers and the community hold a "Life" service for Dismay, the dog?

Comfort insists, on page 215, that "I need to do something! I need to do something for Dismay. " It seems that the family is willing to assist Comfort in the grieving process for Dismay in whatever way is necessary. That process includes the familiar procedures of hosting a funeral for the deceased.

7. What approach would you use to help Peach become more accepting of death?

Students' answers will vary. Some may suggest that he needs to attend more funerals. Others may suggest that he needs to visit a counselor/therapist. Students may suggest that Peach join a support group to talk about death and dying. Someone may even question why he needs to learn to accept death.

8. On page 188, Peach explains that he "ran down Purgatory Hill and into the oak grove" because he was scared of death. However, he says that now he is "not so scared." Why are Aunt Goldie and Comfort so surprised by Peach's statement about death?

Students' answers will vary. Some may state that Aunt Goldie drops her ice-cream spoon onto the porch planks because she realizes that Peach has a very grown-up understanding of death. Others might suggest that Aunt Goldie realizes that her little Peach is beginning to grow up and may not need her for so much support. Perhaps Comfort stares at Peach as if he were from outer space because she expects him to have given a very different response that reflects having been taunted by Declaration. She might also expect Peach to say that he was scared of being alone with just two girls and a dog rather than with an adult who might have been more in control of the situation.

9. What conclusion can you draw when Declaration finds the dog collar in the drainage ditch near Lake Tallyhoma?

On page 120, Mama has reached the conclusion that "Dismay is...gone." She then continues to say that he is dead. Based on that information, the students can conclude that Dismay was swept away by the swift current and drowned or was killed by some of the debris that was in the current.

10. Comfort seems to have a comfortable relationship with her family. Describe the relationship she has with one of her family members. How does that relationship influence her actions and decisions in the story?

Students' answers will vary. Some may write about the relationship that Comfort has with her father. That relationship influences her decision to carry on with life even though it is not always pleasant or fun. Mr. Snowberger allows for grieving and then proceeds to attend to the task at hand: respecting the dead in the most efficient and noble manner possible. Comfort's mother has class and charm that allows her to express love for her extended family in less than ideal surroundings. Comfort, too, shows class in her daily life: she allows Peach to be a part of Aunt Florentine's visitation, despite his prior embarrassing show at Uncle Edisto's visitation. Comfort's relationship with her older brother, Tidings, seems to be typical: there is the joking and teasing one expects from an older brother. However, Tidings also seems to be very protective of his younger sister. He works hard searching for Dismay, writing letters and giving daily reports on the search in an attempt to keep Comfort's spirits high-even when he must be terribly upset himself.

Comfort tries to live up to Tidings's work ethic. Merry, as the baby of the family, is not yet as influential a presence in Comfort's life. However, Comfort loves her younger sister and is willing to assist with her care as necessary. Few students will decide to select Merry as a character for this response. Some students may discuss Comfort's relationship with Aunt Goldie, Peach, Uncle Edisto, and/or Aunt Florentine. Each of these people plays a role in Comfort's upbringing that teaches her to serve others willingly.

11. When the Snowberger family finds Aunt Florentine in the flower garden, they all work together to make sure that the arrangements are completed correctly. Imagine that you find one of your family members dead in the garden. What do you predict your response (and the response of your family) will be?

Students' answers will vary. Many students may say that they would call 9-1-1 or some other emergency service. Some may suggest that they would begin CPR. A few might suggest that they would begin to scream and cry, yell for help, or run away from the scene.

12. The Snowberger family seems to have unique names. The mother is Joy. The son is Tidings. The daughters are Comfort and Merry. Where do you think the family members got their names? What might be the name of the next Snowberger?

Discuss your choice.

Students' answers will vary. The Snowbergers' interesting names are all found in the traditional Christmas carol, "God Rest Ye Merry, Gentlemen." There do not seem to be any suitable family names left in the first stanza of the carol. However, there are a few other names students might select from the second through fifth stanzas, such as Angel or Mary. Students may select names such as Astray, Afright, Tempest, Storm, and Wind for a new pet. Some creative students may even suggest the name Carol, since this is the type of song that seems to have inspired the family's names.

13. In explaining why Peach cries at funerals, Mama says, "We each do something to cope with our feelings when life feels overwhelming" (p. 63). Explain what you do to cope with life. Would it be better if you tried something different? Or are your coping skills successful for you? How do you think others perceive your choices?

Students' answers will vary.

14. Uncle Edisto seems to possess a wealth of knowledge and often provides words of advice and wisdom to various family members. On page 129, when Comfort and Declaration are in the middle of an argument, Comfort remembers that he has said, "A real friend sees past the trouble and into your heart." What words of wisdom or saying(s) might you offer the girls to help them to resolve their differences? What is your opinion of Uncle Edisto's advice? What advice have you often heard? Explain why you remember that advice.

Students' answers will vary.

15. Imagine that *Each Little Bird That Sings* was written in the third person, instead of the first. How would the change in narrative perspective affect the story? Do you think the novel would be more or less powerful? Support your opinions with examples from the book.

Students' answers will vary. Some students will agree that the book is more effective as written, since it allows the reader to experience difficult emotions from a kid's perspective. Others will argue that the reader is not able to experience the feelings of others, such as those of Comfort's father when he loses his Aunt Florentine. All responses should be supported with examples from

the book.

Note: These questions are keyed to Bloom's Taxonomy as follows: Knowledge: 1 - 3; Comprehension: 4 - 5; Application: 6 - 7; Analysis: 8 - 10; Synthesis: 11 - 12; Evaluation: 13 - 15.

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