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A Discussion Guide to

The Circle Opens Quartet

Book 1: *Magic Steps*

Book 2: *Street Magic*

Book 3: *Cold Fire*

Book 4: *Shatterglass*

by Tamora Pierce

About the Books

Continuing the spellbinding adventures begun in the Circle of Magic Quartet, the four books in The Circle Opens reunite readers with the four young mages who discover themselves, harness the power of their inborn magics, and find "family" under the tutelage and care of beloved teachers in Discipline Cottage at Winding Circle Temple. Now, four years later, these foster siblings, Sandry, a nobly born thread mage, Briar, plant mage and former "street rat", Daja, a Trader Smith mage, and Tris, a merchant weather mage, embark upon separate journeys, during which each is called upon to unravel mysteries involving magic, murder and madness, while simultaneously taking responsibility for teaching untrained mages in whom they have discovered magic, and doing for them what their teachers did for each of them. Struggles to teach with affection, as well as purpose, meshed with those to do battle and overcome evils of different kinds, stretch boundaries of magic and person and achieve resolution through the stronger, combined powers of teacher and student.

Magic Steps (Book 1)

Lady Sandrilene fa Toren finds more than she's bargained for when a horse ride with her great-uncle, Duke Vedris IV, Ruler of Emelan, leads her to a young boy with rare "dance" magic, and brings news of the first of a series of grisly and vengeful murders in the unscrupulous merchant Rokat House. Obligated to become mentor to a resistant Pasco, the son of a burly harrier family who see no practical value in Pasco's dancing, Sandry enlists her own teacher, Lark, and one of the most famous dancers in the Pebbled Sea, to assist her. When it is discovered that the murderers at Rokat House employ an "unmagic" that cloaks them in the invisibility of "nothingness" undetectable by powerful guarding spells, it becomes clear that Sandry and her free-spirited protégé must combine their unique talents to stop the killings. Using traces of collected unmagic, Sandry weaves a net that will draw the killers in when spelled with Pasco's dance magic. But, when Pasco is held hostage by the killers, as they struggle for freedom and life, Sandry must work swiftly, with strength and confidence, to save her student from being devoured by the hate and the nothingness enveloping him.

Street Magic (Book 2)

Stopping in Chammur on his way to distant Yanjing with his teacher, Rosethorn, Briar Moss discerns a powerful stone magic in an unknowing street urchin at a local market. Efforts to have Evvy begin training

with a local stone mage are lost when Evvy refuses instruction from the arrogant, "pampered lapdog", Jebilu Stoneslicer. Despite misgivings about his teaching abilities, Briar is moved by the ragged girl, and his memories of his own "street rat" days, and when Evvy is pulled into a local gang war, fueled and manipulated by Lady Zenadia doa Attaneh, a wealthy, cold, and dangerous noblewoman seeking to exploit her talents, Briar becomes both teacher and guardian. Swept up in gang warfare, Briar draws on his protective instincts, his own gang member background, his bond with plant life, and Evvy's stone magic to rescue his student from the lair of the villainous Lady and reveal her sinister game and the secrets that lie beneath her garden.

Cold Fire (Book 3)

Wintering in the northern Namorn city of Kugisko with her mentor, Frostpine, Daja Kisubo discovers that the twin daughters of her hosts have "ambient" magic and is obliged to instruct the girls in the art of meditation while they learn the rudiments of their magics in apprenticeships. When mysterious fires begin to blaze across this frigid wooden city, Daja meets Bennat Ladradun, a firefighter with a tragic past, and lends her ability to control fire to help in rescue missions. Impressed by his courage and firefighting crusade, and drawn by his understanding of the nature and moods of living fire, Daja crafts a pair of "living metal" fireproof gloves for her new friend and kindred spirit. Guided by Frostpine, Daja struggles to find creative ways to meet the needs of her two very different learners and works with Ladradun to locate a ruthless serial arsonist whose conflagrations besiege the town and threaten the life of one of her young charges. As the investigation deepens and suspicions smolder, Daja is forced to confront another side of her heroic friend and, with magical and loving support of her dear mentor, must face the unthinkable.

Shatterglass (Book 4)

Accompanying her teacher, Niko, to Heskalfos University in the city of Tharios, Tris Chandler learns quickly of the city's rigid class system whose lowest rung is considered untouchable, and happens upon Kethlun Warder, a glassmaker whose unrecognized power mingles both glass and lightning magic as the result of a freak accident. Tris is charged with teaching this broken man to control his magic as well as his temper, but there's much more at stake. A serial killer, known as "the Ghost", has been strangling *yaskedasi* women from Khapik, members of Tharios' low class of licensed entertainers, and leaving them in public places to "pollute" a city whose history of survival is based on purity. Thwarted by the city's obsession for cleansing, and its moral indifference to these murders, Demokos Nomasdina, an *arurim* law enforcement mage, risks his soul and First Class status in his own obsession to capture the killer. When lightning-sparked glass globes, blown by Keth, reveal images of murdered girls, and deepening relationships with *yaskedasi* women bring them closer to those targeted and left to grieve, Dema, Keth and Tris join hands, hearts and powers to track the killer down, even at their own peril.

Pre-Reading

Tamora Pierce has created a refreshingly multiracial world rich in the language, characteristics and customs of different cultural and linguistic groups. Using the detailed maps provided on the endpapers of each book, discuss the geography, the secondary world of *The Circle Opens*. List the names of each city to which each of our young heroes travels and, based on information provided in text, plot their relative location to each other. Identify each cultural group and the primary language spoken by each, emphasizing key "foreign language" vocabulary. Highlight cultural, religious or social beliefs/customs/traditions, particular to each, that serve to define identity.

Despite the medallions they wear, Sandry, Briar, Daja, and Tris are relatively young and inexperienced, perceiving themselves as students, reluctant and unsure about their abilities to teach those placed in their

charge. What makes a good "teacher"? Inspiration? Technique? Personality? Subject mastery? What makes a good "student"? Attentiveness? Imagination? Discipline? Is it possible for the teacher/student relationship to evolve? Is it possible to be both "teacher" and "student"? What do teachers and students owe each other?

Understanding Genre

In each of the four stories in *The Circle Opens*, readers are presented with fantasy elements that run counter to the natural and physical laws of our known world while, at the same time, illuminating concerns of the real world by clarifying the human condition and capturing the essence of our deepest emotions, dreams, hopes and fears. In employing fantasy elements, how has the author achieved an internal consistency requisite to maintaining credibility in all aspects of story? In what ways do these fantasy stories move beyond the whimsical to serve as a metaphors through which readers may discover aspects of themselves and cast light on the realities of life?

Setting

Each of the lands visited by our four young heroes is integral to strong characterization and plot development in this fantasy quartet. Set in a period like our Middle Ages, geographic and cultural aspects of our real world blend to frame the adventures which unfold in this secondary world. Using maps and historical references, study how the marketplaces, rooftop roads and shaded stone palaces of Chammur are suggestive of a Turkish outpost along an ancient spice route; how Kusisko's winding streets, carved wooden homes and frozen canals evoke 18th century Russia. How do such depictions of settings serve to move the reader beyond their own place and time? How do they lend credibility to the characters we meet and the journeys they make?

Character

Despite their magical abilities, *The Circle Opens* is replete with dynamic characters with whom young readers can identify. How are each of the main characters fully realized in the course of their adventures? Identify passages that attest to how they develop, grow and change within their own fantastic worlds without compromising believability and distancing themselves from the reader? Point to specific moments in which individual personalities and backgrounds (noble Sandry, street-smart Briar, stocky, strong Trader, Daja and hot-tempered Tris) serve to further and direct the course of their adventures?

Plot

The intertwined plotlines in *The Circle Opens* move forward in chronological fashion, revealing both internal and external conflicts faced by different characters and the means by which resolution is achieved. Chart the rising action in plot structure in each of these stories, noting: inciting incidents at each story's beginning, action/incidents that build conflict, the story's climax and denouement. How do magic and reality combine to play important roles in the conclusions of each of these adventures? Does each story end, as most readers might wish, with conflicts resolved in the "happily ever after" style typical of much folk literature? Suggest that readers rewrite the end of their favorite story to see how different individuals might shape the closing pages differently.

Theme

Given its strong mythological base, the ancient theme of good versus evil is a pervasive one in modern fantasy. Identify the characters in each story perceived to be "good" and "evil", supporting your opinions

with specific textual references. Is "evil" always a clear-cut, static entity easily distinguished from its counterpart "good"? Discuss the differences in the motivations and "evil" manifested by the bored Lady Zenadia doa Attaneh; the ruthless Alzena and Nuhar; the mad Bennat Ladradun; and a nameless *prathmun*. How do such differences and motivations demonstrate that "evil" may not always be a simple matter of "black and white". Do readers agree with Daja's assertion that *"Only an evil person would harm others to get at someone else"*. (p. 257)

It is said that, somewhere inside of us, we all possess a dark side that often remains hidden and dormant. When Tris teeters on the brink of taking the life of the Ghost murderer; when Briar envelops a mute in the fatal squeeze of branches, we see that dark side emerge in beloved characters. Identify other moments throughout these stories in which glimpses of this dark side in "good" characters are revealed. Are there circumstances in which acts of "evil" may be rationalized? What relevance do these perceptions of "good" and "evil" have for our world of today?

Style

Each of the tales in *The Circle Opens* is enriched by and derives both depth and individual expression through the author's choice of language and stylistic devices.

Sensory writing: Whether its the vivid physical portrayal of people from different regions and tribes, or a Namornese city with an obsession for color, or the fragrances of woods, herbs and spices, or the taste of steamed quinces with walnut and honey, or the aches of a body stretched in dance, or the sounds of music in Khapik, Tamora Pierce invites readers to see, hear, feel, touch and taste as though they were transported into the pages of her books. Select such passages and discuss how each provides readers with a proximity to setting, character, or story through carefully detailed sensory description. Choose a description found to be particularly striking and paint a response picture, representational or abstract, conveying images evoked and sensations created for them.

Simile: A metaphoric expression using "like" or "as", in which a word or phrase ordinarily used for one thing is applied to another, a *simile* employs vivid language to clarify or enhance an image in the reader's mind. Discuss the structure and impact of the following similes:

"As silent as a shark streaking toward prey, Alzena Dihanur ran across the cobblestones." (Book 1, page 101)

"I'm weak as an overcooked noodle." (Book 1, page 164)

"Nevertheless, she sent out magic like a calming bath..." (Book 2, page25)

"...the lines staggered across the page like drunken men ." (Book, 3, page76)

"Everyone knows a prathmun lies as easily as he breathes." (Book IV, p. 30)

"...said Poppy, her voice as tart as vinegar." (Book 4, page 54)

Search the books for other figurative descriptions of this kind. Share and discuss some of your favorites. Create your own similes in different descriptive writing tasks.

Plot Suspense

Authors may use various techniques for creating suspense and building tension in plot. In both *Magic Steps* (Book 2) and *Cold Fire* (Book 3), Tamora Pierce grants her readers foreknowledge, revealing the identity of the villains sought out by Sandry and Daja to them long before she enlightens her own characters. Whereas, in *Street Magic* (Book 2) and *Shatterglass* (Book 4), she employs foreshadowing to give readers clues and hints to anticipate later events, but withholds confirmation from both reader and character until story's revelatory conclusion. Ask readers to search for instances of foreshadowing in each of these books. What effects do foreknowledge and foreshadowing techniques have on readers and their interaction with story? If a culprit's identity is revealed early on, is suspense and tension significantly diminished/increased? In what ways may tension be built and maintained for readers who know more about coming events than their book heroes?

Discussion

1. Trader language, Namornese, Imperial, street slang, and the educated register of nobles and mages are integral aspects of dialog in *The Circle Opens* fantasies. How does the inclusion of these different languages and dialects lend depth to individual characters, and places, and breadth to social contexts? What effect do these language variations have on the quartet as a whole?
2. At some point during their travels, Sandy, Briar, Daja and Tris express their wish to go "home" to Discipline Cottage, their foster mother, Lark, and their foster siblings. What events prompt these feelings of "homesickness" in each of them? What does each seek in the comfort of "home". Recall an occasion on which you may have felt homesick. What provoked it and how was it resolved?
3. Wolf Moon, Rose Moon, Snow Moon...the monthly calendar of the full moon in Kugisko follows the chronology of seasons and celebrations in this northern setting. How do the distinctive names of these recurring moons reflect the climate and culture of this place and time? Using the *Farmer's Almanac*, compare/contrast the Namornese moon calendar with that of Native Americans. Create a personal moon calendar, designating moon names to symbolize a year in your own life.
4. The young mage who cast the dark "unmagic" spell of nothingness on the Rokkat House is a dragonsalt addict, whose needs for this vile drug allow Alzena and Nuhar to control him. Ben Ladradun is addicted to the excitement that comes from the thrill of setting a fire and the respect he gains in fighting them. Ask readers to list the illegal substances that may lead to addiction and discuss the physical and legal consequences of using them. Are there addictions, other than those to drugs, that may prove just as dangerous?
5. The intricate patterns on the hands of Yazmin Hebet, the most famous dancer in the Pebbled Sea, are referred to as "mehndi", the art of applying henna, a natural colorant in the form of a leaf paste, onto the surface of the skin. Used since ancient times, the lacy rhythmical designs reminds wearers of the magic that connects us all to the mystery of life. Using Internet or library resources, have students learn more about this decorative art, its origins, its symbolism and how it has begun to manifest in today's American culture.
6. The warring worlds and group dynamics of the Vipers, the Camelguts and other gangs on the streets of Chammur remind Briar of his former days as a gang member in Hajra his view that there was safety and identity in group numbers. Compare Briar's view with Evvy's, in which she states a gang is only good for hating and is "*just one more pack of wild dogs looking to tear me apart.*" (p. 181) How do their sentiments compare with yours? Do you believe that street gangs in the real

world are a menace or a safe haven for young people?

7. Briar's invocation of "Lakik Trickster" and Ben Ladradun's worship the trickster Sythuthan demonstrate that the mythologies of the different cultural groups met in this series include the folkloric trickster, who may be sly and mischievous or wise and helpful as s/he overcomes the insurmountable. Share trickster tales from different cultures in our own world with readers, including Africa's Anansi, the Native American Coyote, the Southern African-American Brer Rabbit. Create role-plays in which readers may step into their characters and act out their stories
8. Evvy's cats, whom she croons to and feeds, even when she, herself, doesn't have enough to eat; and Tris's recollection of a time when only the animals of the house cared for her demonstrate how nurturing animals can fill a very important void in the lives of the young and not so young. Do you have a special bond with an animal friend? What does this companion bring to you? Write a short poem about a special animal in your life.
9. When Tris meets a Tharian *prathmun*, she is given an unpleasant window into a rigid class system in which status is hereditary, ascribed and not achieved. Identify and react to the hierarchical groups into which the society of Tharios is divided and the positions occupied by each. Then, compare/contrast the Tharian social system with the caste system of ancient India, paying particular attention to the disreputable *prathmuni* and "untouchable" classes, and with the social system in the United States.
10. The ceremony of Last Rites held for Wulfric in the Temple of Harrier the Clawed; Briar's greeting in which he bows and touches hand to heart and then to forehead; the Tharian belief in reincarnation, suggest that different belief systems and practices in the secondary world of *The Circle Opens* are influenced by eastern religions such as Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism and Confucianism. Using Internet and library resources, review the history and fundamental beliefs, symbols, sacred books and practices associated with each. How might these eastern religions differ from Christianity?
11. The miniature trees nurtured and shaped by Briar displayed many of the varied classical forms particular to the art of "bonsai", in which miniature trees, grown in pots, are shaped by pruning, wiring and positioning, in a manner dictated by the natural shape of the tree and the culture and personality of its owner. Using library and Internet sources, research the origins and practice of bonsai and view images of basic pattern shapes including: the Broom, the Slanting, the Windblown, Cascades, the Double Trunk and the Clump. Suggest that readers choose and draw the shape most representative of their own personalities, writing a paragraph to explain their choice.
12. Discuss the significance of the following quotes in the contexts in which they were spoken as well as in the broader context of life in general.

"Too much education does ruin a perfectly good mind." (Duke Vedris IV, Book 1, page 213)

"Even an ill wind blows some good..." (Sandry, Book 1, page 165)

"Sometimes, thinking ahead was just as good as magic." (Rosethorn, Book 2, page 78)

"You're born with magic, it just gets frustrated if you get older and you don't do anything real with it, so it breaks out." (Briar, Book 2, page 90)

"Don't fight the body the gods send you." (Olennika Potcracker, Book 3, page 120)

"You don't know what you can do until you're tested." (Frostpine, Book 3, page 235)

"We are great believers in time... and the eternal balance of things."
(Jumshida, Book 4, page 237).

"It [teaching] is a matter of persuasion, not orders." (Book 4, page 120)

Other Fantasy Series to Compare and Contrast

A Wizard of Earthsea by Ursula LeGuin

The Dark is Rising by Susan Cooper

Time Quartet by Madeleine L'Engle

Chronicles of Prydain by Lloyd Alexander

The Enchanted Forest Chronicles by Patricia Wrede

The Blue Sword by Robin McKinley

Other Books by Tamora Pierce

The Circle of Magic Quartet

Sandry's Book

Tris's Book

Daja's Book

Briar's Book

The Song of the Lioness Quartet

Alanna: The First Adventure

In the Hand of the Goddess

The Woman Who Rides Like A Man

Lioness Rampant

The Immortals Quartet

Wild Magic

Wolf-Speaker

The Emperor Mage

The Realms of the Gods

The Protector of the Small Quartet

First Test

Page

Squire

Lady Knight

About the Author

Critically acclaimed author of modern fantasy for young readers, Tamora Pierce has written many fantasy quartets popular in the United States and overseas. She says of her beginnings as an author that, "after discovering fantasy and science fiction in the seventh grade, I was hooked on writing. I tried to write the same kinds of stories I read, except with teenage girl heroes-not too many of those around in the 1960s."

In addition to the richly detailed fantasy worlds and winning protagonists in the highly praised series *The Song of the Lioness*, *The Immortals*, and *The Protector of the Small*, the books in Tamora Pierce's Circle of Magic quartet introduced four unforgettable mages-in-training that captured the hearts of readers everywhere and were honored as ALA "Quick Picks" for Reluctant Young Adult Readers, *Booklist* Top Ten Fantasy Novels, VOYA Best Science Fiction, Fantasy and Horror (1997), and more. Now, at the urging of her many readers, who encouraged her through letters and e-mails to explore the lives of these four young mages further, Tamora Pierce has completed *The Circle Opens*.

Tamora Pierce lives in New York City with her husband, their three cats (Scrap, Pee Wee and Ferret), two parakeets (Zorak and the Junior Birdman), and a "floating population of rescued wildlife." Her website address is <http://www.tamora-pierce.com/>

Discussion Guide written by Dr. Rosemary B. Stimola, Associate Professor of Children's Literature at Hostos Community College/City University of New York and editorial/educational consultant to publishers of children's books.

- Subjects:

Biracial and Multiracial Experiences, Reading Comprehension, Literary Devices, Literature Appreciation, Research Skills, Descriptive Essay, Narrative Writing, Poetry Writing, Writing Prompts, Courage, Bravery, Heroism, Creativity and Imagination, Determination and Perseverance, Geography and Map Skills, Maps and Globes, Social Studies through Literature, Responsibility, Foster Care, Siblings

- Skills:

Literary Elements, Reading Comprehension, Maps, Online Sources, Reference Sources, Social Studies, Research Skills, Descriptive Writing, Narrative Writing, Poetry Writing