

Guidelines for Discussion

MANY MOONS

by James Thurber

Magic, Promises, and Perceptions

The moon has always occupied a special place in myth and legend. It seems much more mysterious than the sun, partly, no doubt, because it is constantly changing its apparent shape, partly because it gives off such gentle and soothing light, and partly because it looks so wraith-like in the daylight sky. The various "double moon" effects have also stimulated the imagination of both poets and plain people. ("I saw the new moon yestere'en, with the old moon in her arms.")

James Thurber's story, *Many Moons*, invites us to view and think about the moon in a fresh way, both as it is in itself and as it may appear to people. In doing so we may increase our powers of observation as well as our capacity to enter imaginatively into the lives of others. We may also learn to think more clearly about appearance and reality, and how the two are related.

At the core of this delightful story is the irrationally extravagant wish of a princess and the ridiculously indulgent promise of her father, the King, to satisfy that wish. Already at the beginning of the story we have an invitation to think about the institution of giving presents (some of them not even useful to the recipient!), the indulgent concern of parents for ill children, and the wishes of those who are seriously ill. These serious topics are introduced, not with the solemnity of heavy-handed moralism, but rather with the engaging whimsy of a fairy tale.

The Wise Owl questions are aimed at two broad goals: first, to encourage students to reflect on the practice of giving presents, especially as a way of thinking about what it is to express affection and concern for loved ones who are ill; second, to invite reflection of the perception of size, shape, and distance. Other topics, such as the concept of magic, come up along the way. The questions have been divided roughly into four categories. Naturally, as class discussions deepen, you may find that these categories overlap and illuminate one another.

Giving and Getting Presents (Questions 1 and 2)

We love to get presents and we love to give them, too. There are traditional occasions for exchanging gifts; for example, on holidays, birthdays, anniversaries. But we also find many other occasions to give and receive gifts. What are some of the different reasons we give presents?

Princess Lenore's father wanted to give a present that was very difficult to give. Have you ever wanted to give a present that was impossible or difficult to give? Why was it difficult?

Promises (Question 3)

A promise is something made to be kept. Are there different reasons why we make promises? Invite students to talk about promises they have made, whether or not they have been able to keep those promises, and why they made them.

What is magic? (Question 4)

We call someone a magician even though we believe that there is an explanation for the tricks he or she performs. Sometimes we use the word "magic" to describe things or events for which we have no explanations.

Is there a difference between "real" magic and magic tricks? One young student, when considering this problem, explained that most magic was just tricks, but that real magic involves a miracle. Are there other distinctions that can be made?

Perception: What do we know about size, shape, and distance?

(Questions 5 — 9)

At an early age we learn to judge that the car off in the distance is a regular size car, not a miniature. How do we learn this? Are there times when we can be mistaken?

Sometimes young children cover their eyes and think that everything disappears. In the same spirit, Princess Lenore thinks

that a different moon comes up each night. How do we know this is not the case? We feel certain that she is mistaken. How can we be sure? What reasons could help us make our decision? Could we be justified in thinking it is a different moon? How?

Wise Owl Question 8 involves the "bent-stick" illusion, one of the oldest perceptual illusions discussed by philosophers. Producing this illusion with a pencil and a glass of water makes vivid one of the most persistently tantalizing phenomena of nature.

Although there are certainly experts in the psychology of perception, experts from whom we can all learn a great deal, there is a way in which we must be our own experts about what we see, hear, feel, taste, and touch. Students should be encouraged to reflect on how things get admitted to their minds through the "doors of the senses."

SAMPLE DISCUSSION

Following is a transcript of a discussion that occurred during the try-outs of the Wise Owl questions. This dialogue provides examples of the way young children think and of the guidance teachers may offer.

Question 2 — A, B, C, and D

The Princess Lenore asks for a present. She says she wants the moon.

- A. Some people collect buttons of different sizes and shapes and colors. A very unusual button might make a nice present for a person with a button collection. Think of some strange things people might like to receive for presents.

- B. Sometimes it is especially nice to give someone something that is very hard to get. For example, you might give someone a little rock you got from the top of a very high mountain. Why is it sometimes nice to give a present like that?
- C. Are some things impossible to give as presents? What? (a cloud? a rainbow? a snowflake? a bubble?)
- D. Think of something it wouldn't make any sense to ask your mother or father for. Why wouldn't it make any sense to ask for it?

Teacher: Today we get to talk and think about presents. Remember what Princess Lenore asked for?

Kate: She wanted her father to get her the moon.

Teacher: Yes, she wanted the moon. That's certainly an unusual present. Let's think a little bit more about presents. Think about this: Say a person is a great collector of buttons. This person collects unusual buttons from all over the world, buttons of different shapes and colors and sizes. You've been thinking about getting a present for this person, and one day, in a store that sells old clothing, you find a button that came from the uniform of a Civil War soldier. That might make a very nice present for a person with a button collection. Now let's try to think about some strange things people might like to receive for presents.

Ted: My babysitter loves things with owls on them. She has stuffed owls and glass ones. And she's got owl note paper and owl posters. Everything she has is owls, so one day me and my mother were in this really junky store. And we found an egg timer with an owl on it. So we bought it for her and she really likes it.

Teacher: I like that example. Not many of us would really appreciate an owl egg timer, but because Ted's babysitter has a special interest in owls, it was a good present for her. Anyone else have an idea?

Sarah: I like to get stamps for presents because my father and I collect them. But not many people think to give me stamps for a present.

Nancy: Maybe you should ask for them.

Ted: Yeah, maybe nobody knew you wanted them.

Nancy: I've got one. My Nana loves the purple jelly beans. So whenever we have some in a bag, we all put the purple ones for Nana in another little bag and save them for her. I don't even like purple jelly beans, and neither does anyone else in my family.

Teacher: Good examples. Think about this. Sometimes it can be especially nice to give someone something that's very, very hard to get. For example, you might give someone a little rock you got from the top of a very high mountain. Why is it sometimes nice to give a present like that?

Gail: Because it's so special.

Teacher: What makes it so special?

Gail: Well, like it's something that you got all by yourself. And it doesn't really cost anything, but it's something you just did by yourself.

Nancy: It shows the person how you care about her.

Teacher: Tell me more about that. Why does it show that you care about her?

Nancy: Well, if you got her the rock, it isn't something that everybody else would get her. It's a different thing.

Ted: Yeah! It's really special because there is only one piece of rock that is that rock, and you got it for her. And maybe you had to climb up a snow mountain for ten days to get it.

Teacher: It makes me think of the word *unique*. A unique present is one that is unlike any other. Each of you is a unique person.

Stephanie: It's like we're one of a kind. I heard that somewhere. And the rock, that's one of a kind too.

Teacher: OK, so let's think a little more about why it is nice to give a present like that.

Sarah: Well, it's what Nancy said, because you give a special present and it shows that you really think the person is special.

Teacher: Are some things impossible to give as presents?

Ted: Yes!

Teacher: Like what?

Ted: Well, like...like...I don't know.

Stephanie: Well, like a wave.

Sarah: When you wave your hand or a wave at the beach?

Stephanie: I mean a wave at the ocean. If you try to get it, it's just water and it isn't a wave anymore.

Gail: That's a good sample.

David: She means example.

Teacher: Who can think of something else it's impossible to give as a present? Mariya, what can you think of that would be impossible to give as a present?

Mariya: I don't know.

Teacher: How about a rainbow? If I wanted a rainbow, could you get one for me?

Mariya: No.

Teacher: Why not?

Mariya: Because it isn't made out of anything. You can't touch it.

Teacher: How about something you can touch, like a snowflake?

Mariya: That would melt. Your warm hand would make it just melt.

Ted: Some things you just can't give as a present.

Nancy: That's what I was going to say too. Like in the story. Princess Lenore asked for the moon. But you can't really have the moon.

David: Right, just like you can't get a rainbow or a snowflake for a present.

Teacher: Can anyone think of something it wouldn't make any sense to ask your mother or father for?

Kara: An elephant!

Teacher: OK, why wouldn't that make any sense?

Kara: Because we live in an apartment. We don't live in a zoo!

Sarah: But maybe some child could have an elephant somewhere. I wouldn't ask for some sunshine.

Teacher: Why wouldn't it make any sense to ask for that?

Sarah: Because nobody can give it to you. You can't catch sunshine.

Ted: Yes, you can, like with a solar panel. That's what we have.

Teacher: Is that catching the sunshine, or the heat from sun? I really don't know exactly how they work, do you?

Ted: I think you get energy from the sun.

Teacher: Maybe we can ask Mr. Poritz (science teacher) about solar panels. Does anyone else have an idea of something it wouldn't make any sense for you to ask your parents for?

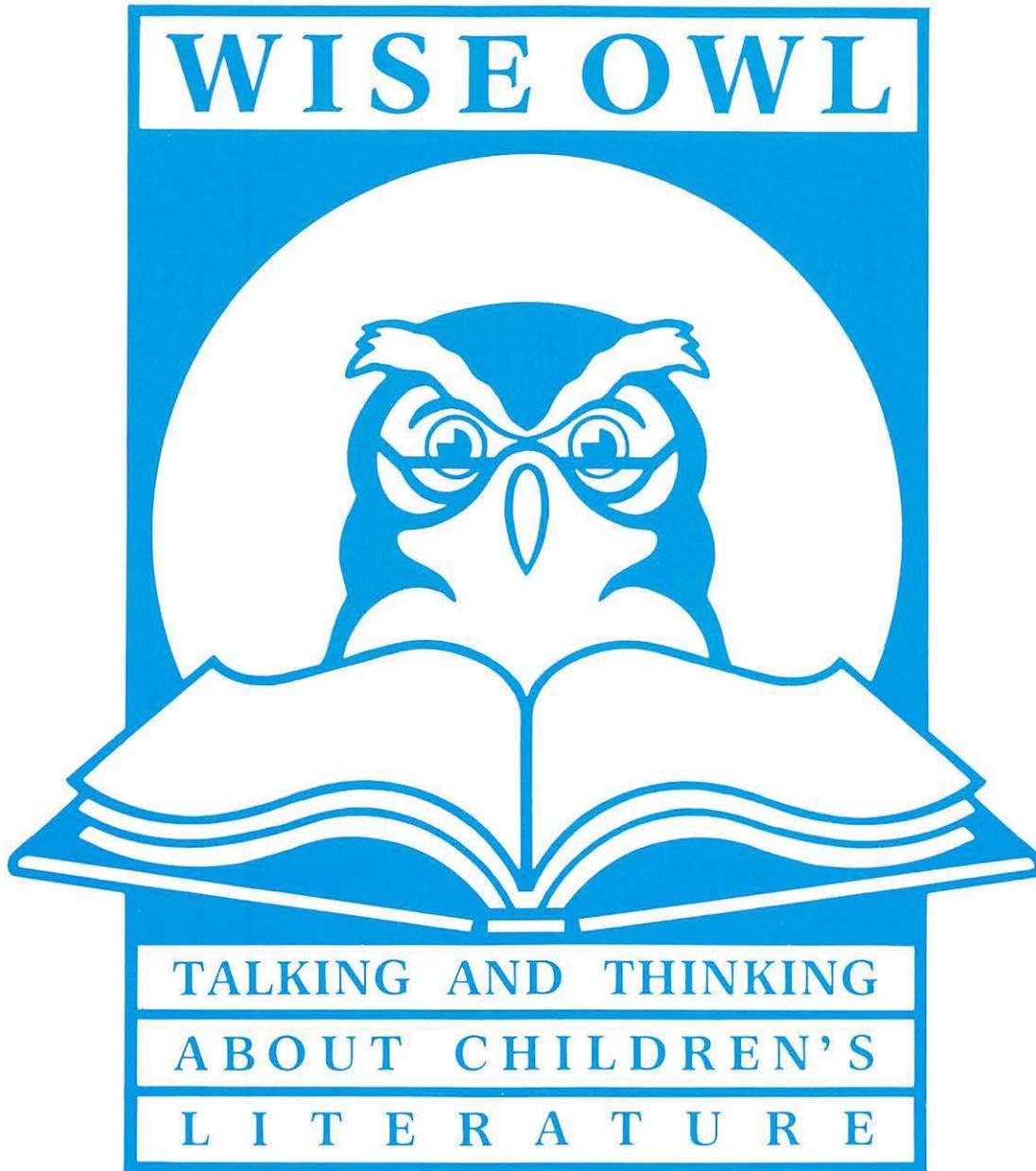
Stephanie: A star.

Teacher: Tell us why that wouldn't make any sense.

Stephanie: It's the same as the moon. There's a lot of stuff in the sky you just can't have. Even if it's really pretty. And even if you really want it.

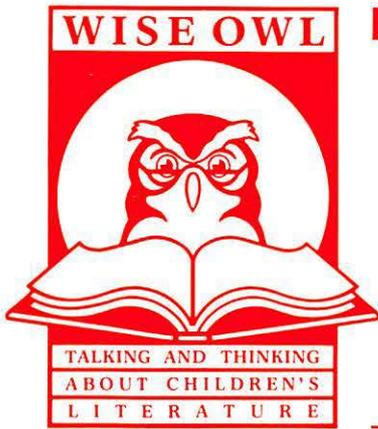
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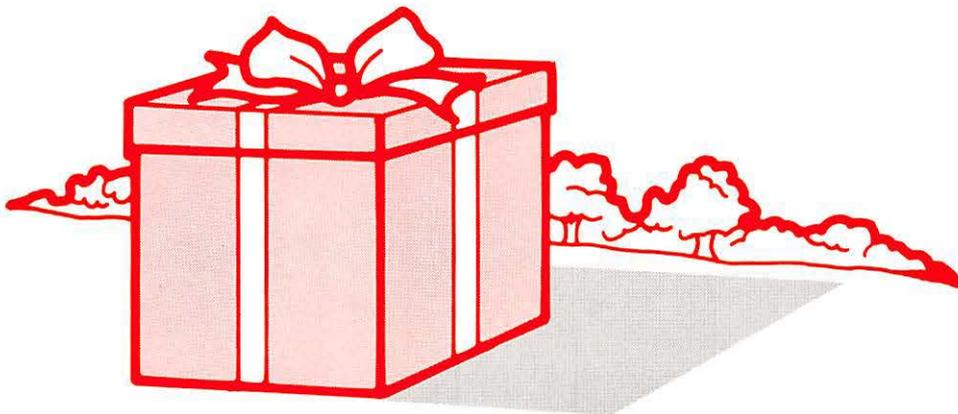
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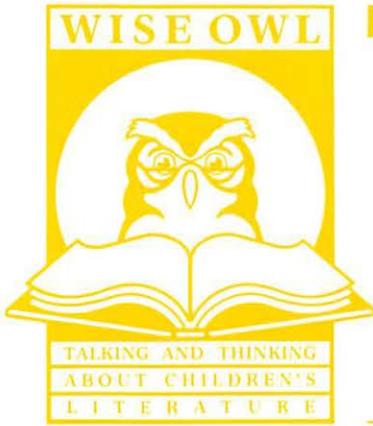


Many Moons

Wise Owl Questions

1. When the King gets worried about the health of the Princess Lenore, he says to her, "I will get you anything your heart desires."
 - A. We give people presents on their birthdays. At what other times do we give people presents?
 - B. Why does your mother or your father give you a present? Why do you give presents? Think of as many reasons for giving presents as you can.
 - C. Sometimes we bring flowers to people who are sick in bed. Sometimes we give them candy or toys. What special reasons do we have for giving presents to people who are sick in bed?

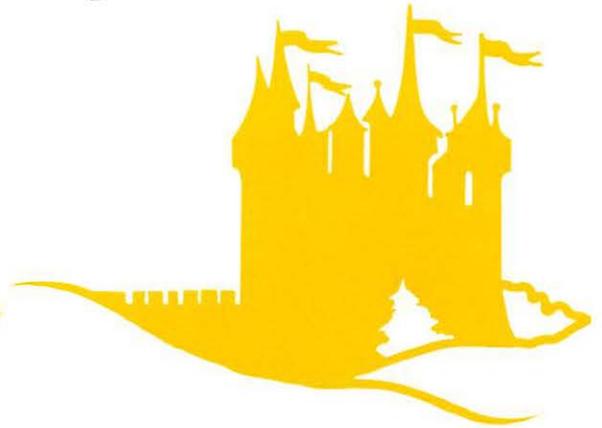


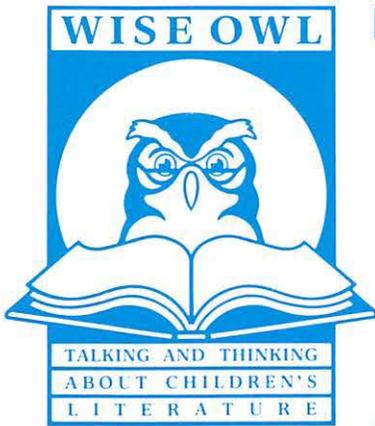


Many Moons

Wise Owl Questions

2. The Princess Lenore asks for a present. She says she wants the moon.
 - A. Some people collect buttons — buttons of different sizes and shapes and colors. A very unusual button might make a nice present for a person with a button collection. Think of some strange things people might like to receive for presents.
 - B. Sometimes it is especially nice to give someone something that is very hard to get. For example, you might give someone a little rock you got from the top of a very high mountain. Why is it sometimes nice to give a present like that?
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 - D. Think of something it wouldn't make sense to ask your mother or father for. Why wouldn't it make any sense to ask for it?

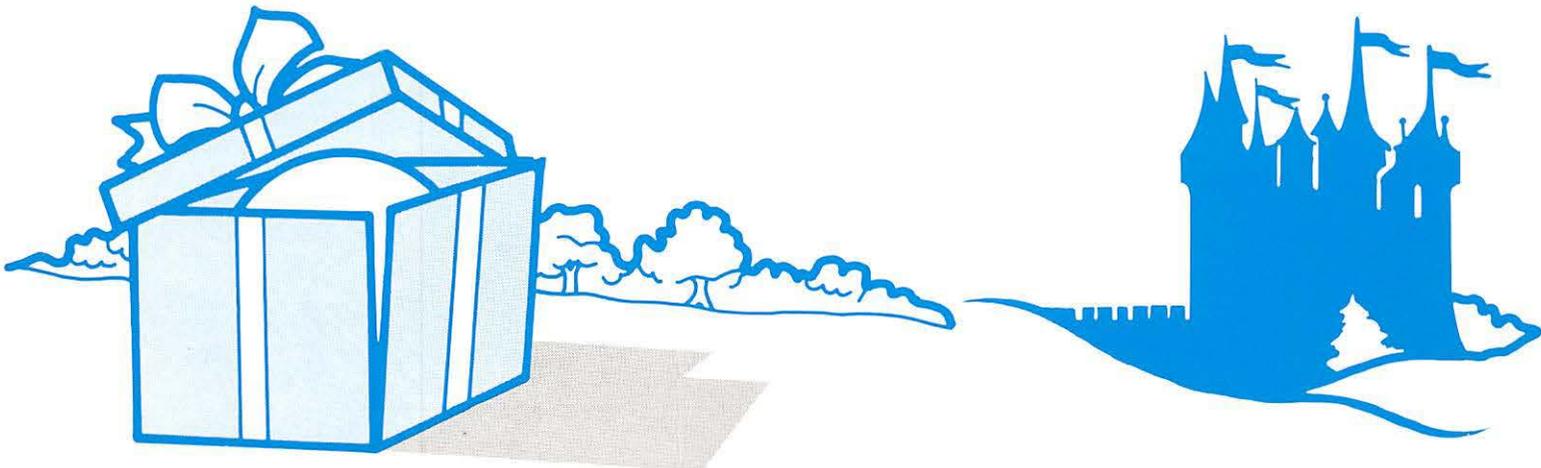


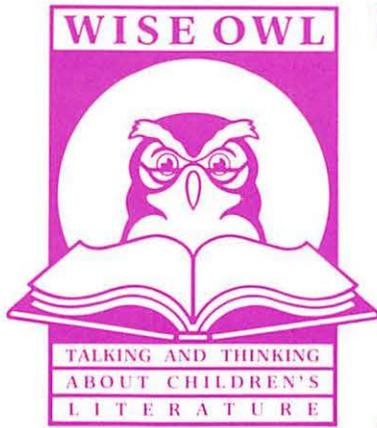


Many Moons

Wise Owl Questions

3. The King tells the Princess he will get her the moon. But he doesn't know how to get the moon for her.
 - A. Did you ever promise someone something you couldn't get? What?
 - B. Why might you promise something to someone, even though you have no idea how you are going to get it?

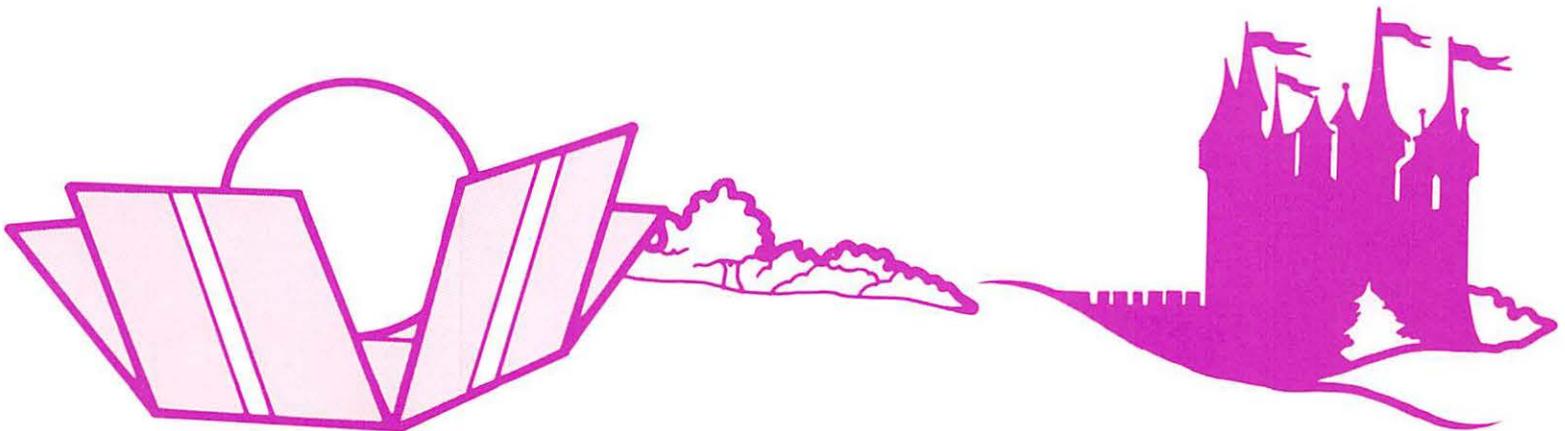


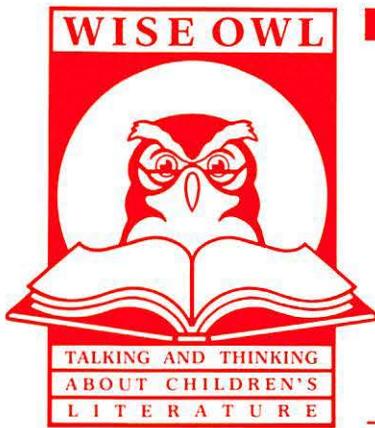


Many Moons

Wise Owl Questions

4. The Royal Wizard is supposed to be someone whose job it is to work magic for the King.
 - A. People can learn how to do magic *tricks*. That is, they can learn how to do something to make it look as if something magical has happened. Could somebody learn how to do *real* magic?
 - B. A magician makes it look as if a coin has disappeared (when it really goes up the magician's sleeve), or makes it look as if a rabbit has come out of an empty hat (when the rabbit was already there in a hidden compartment). How do we find out that what the magician does is only a trick?
 - C. Often we can't figure out how the magician does the trick. Is there any way we could find out that what a magician does is real magic? How?

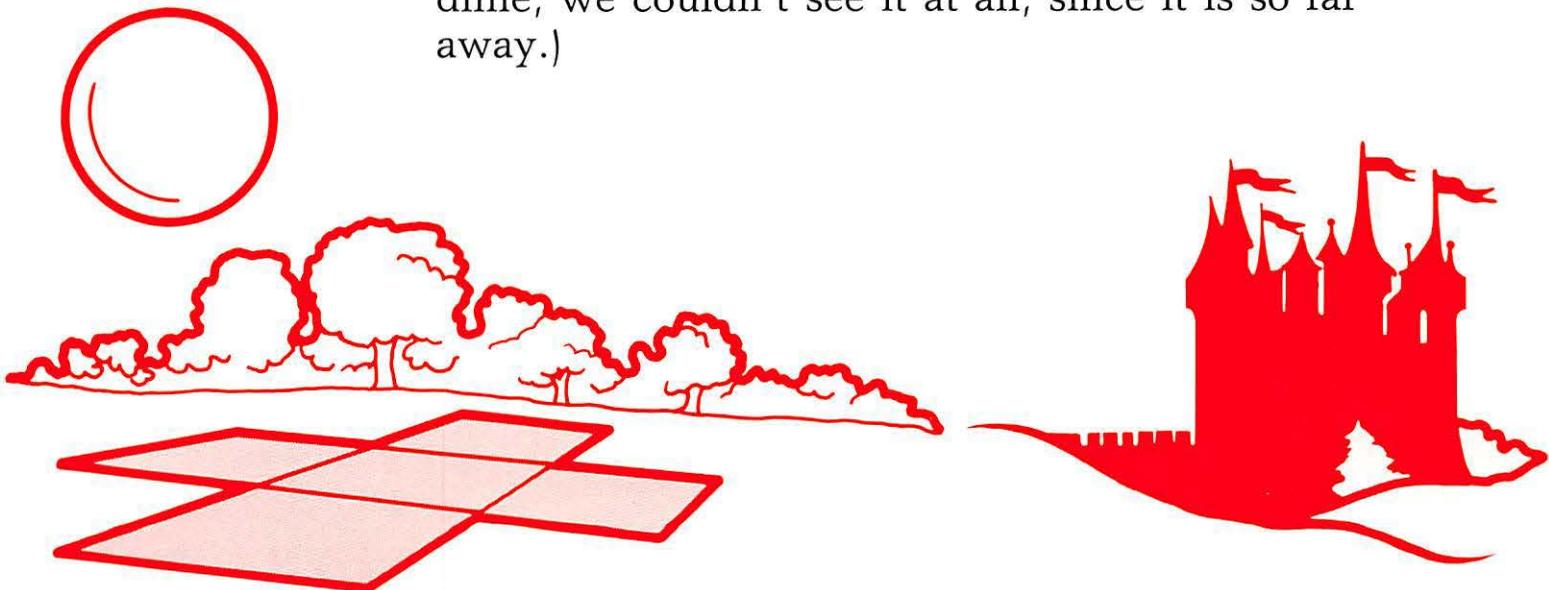


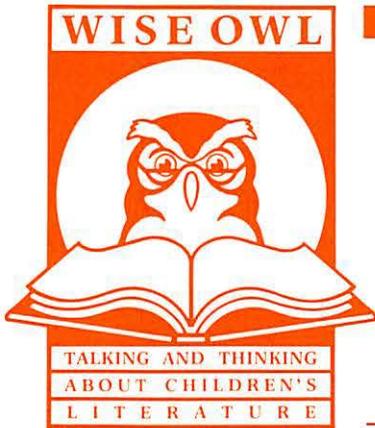


Many Moons

Wise Owl Questions

5. The Lord High Chamberlain says the moon is 35,000 miles away; the Royal Wizard says it is 150,000, and the Royal Mathematician says it is 300,000 miles away.
- A. Can you tell how far away something is by checking to see how big it seems to be? Can you tell whether the sun is farther away by seeing whether it seems to be smaller than the moon?
- B. Can you tell how big someone is by looking at a picture of that person?
- C. Some people say the moon is as big as a dime; others say it is as big as a quarter. Which is it? What can it mean to say the moon is as big as a dime? (If the moon were really only as big as a dime, we couldn't see it at all, since it is so far away.)

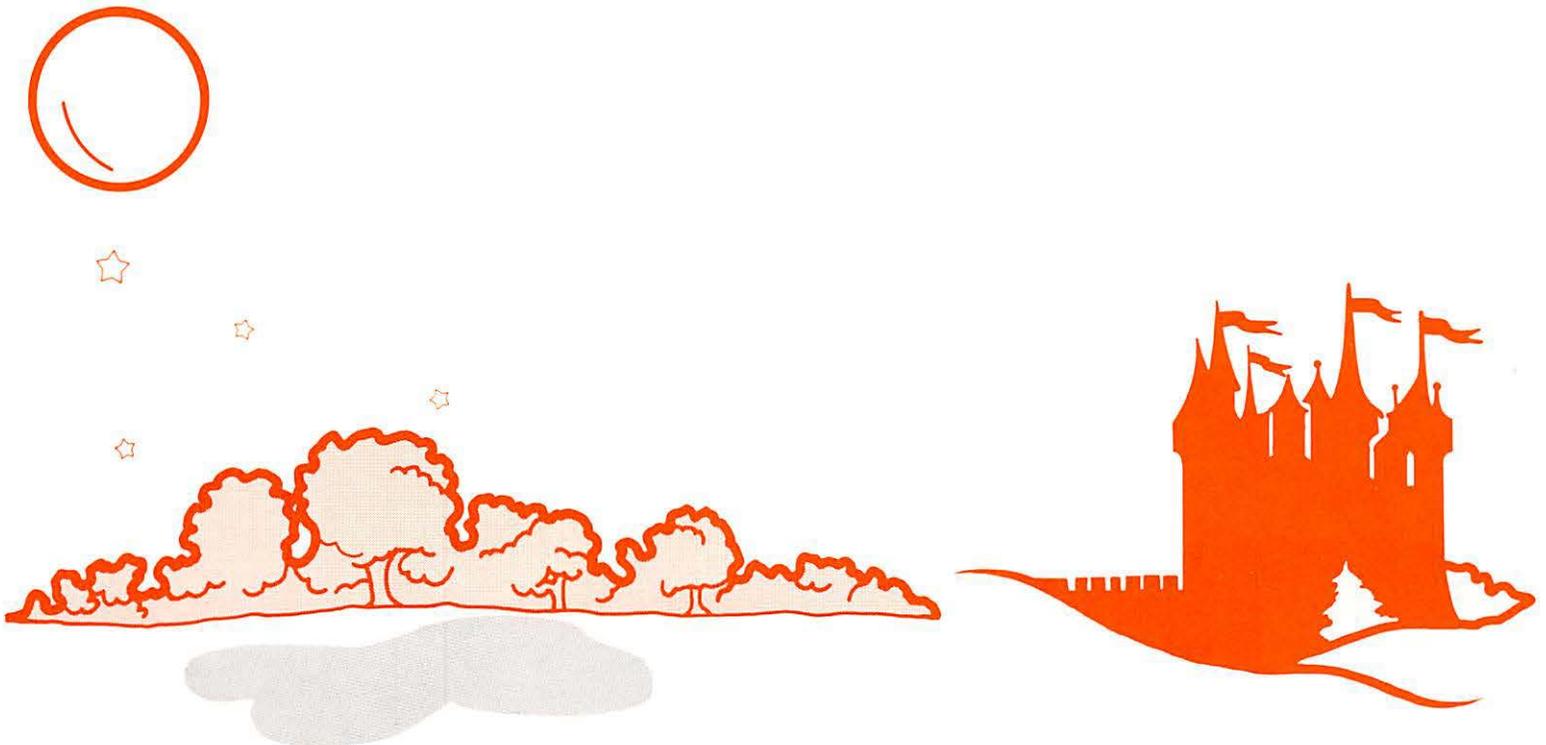


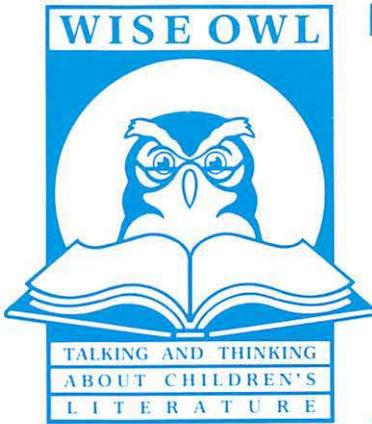


Many Moons

Wise Owl Questions

6. The Princess Lenore seems to think that a different moon comes up each night.
- A. Think of the very best reason you can for supposing that a different moon comes up each night.
 - B. Think of the best reason you can for saying that each time you see the sun, it's the same sun you see; whereas each time you see a rainbow, you see a new rainbow.
 - C. We talk about "cloudy skies" and "sunny skies" and "rainy skies." How many skies are there? What is the sky?



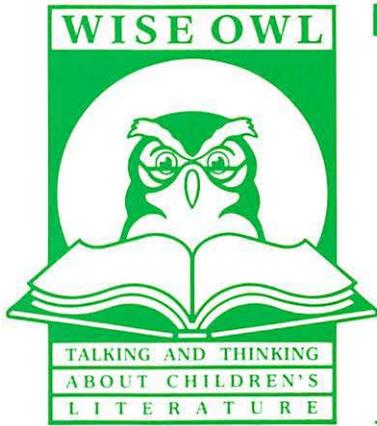


Many Moons

Wise Owl Questions

7. It seems to the Court Jester that the moon winks at him.
 - A. What is "the man in the moon"? Is he just a face? Or is he someone hidden in the moon? Or what?
 - B. Could we know whether there was really a man in the moon before the astronauts visited the moon?
 - C. What does it mean to wink at someone? Why do people sometimes wink rather than actually say something?

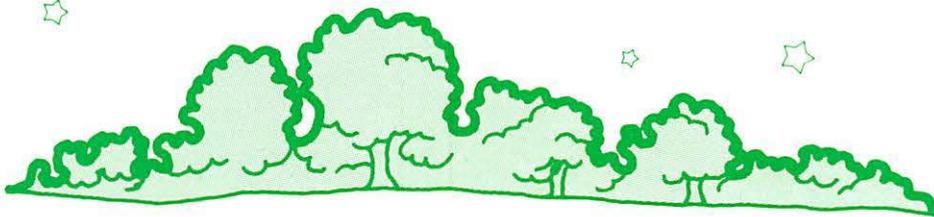


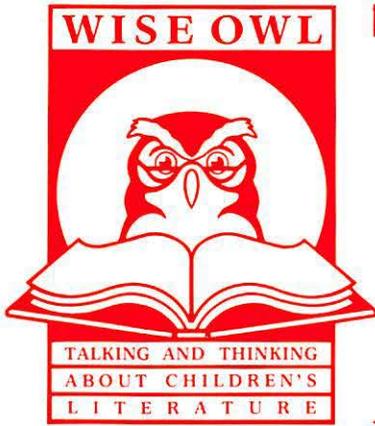


Many Moons

Wise Owl Questions

8. *Many Moons* is about whether things are always the way they seem to be.
- A. Here is an interesting experiment. Fill a glass half full of water. Stick a pencil in the glass. Then try looking at the pencil from different angles until it looks as if it has been cut in two and glued back together so that the joint is right at the surface of the water.
- B. Make up a story in which Ben thinks the pencil half submerged in water has been broken and glued together and Linda explains to him how we can know that the pencil is straight and undamaged.





Many Moons

Wise Owl Questions

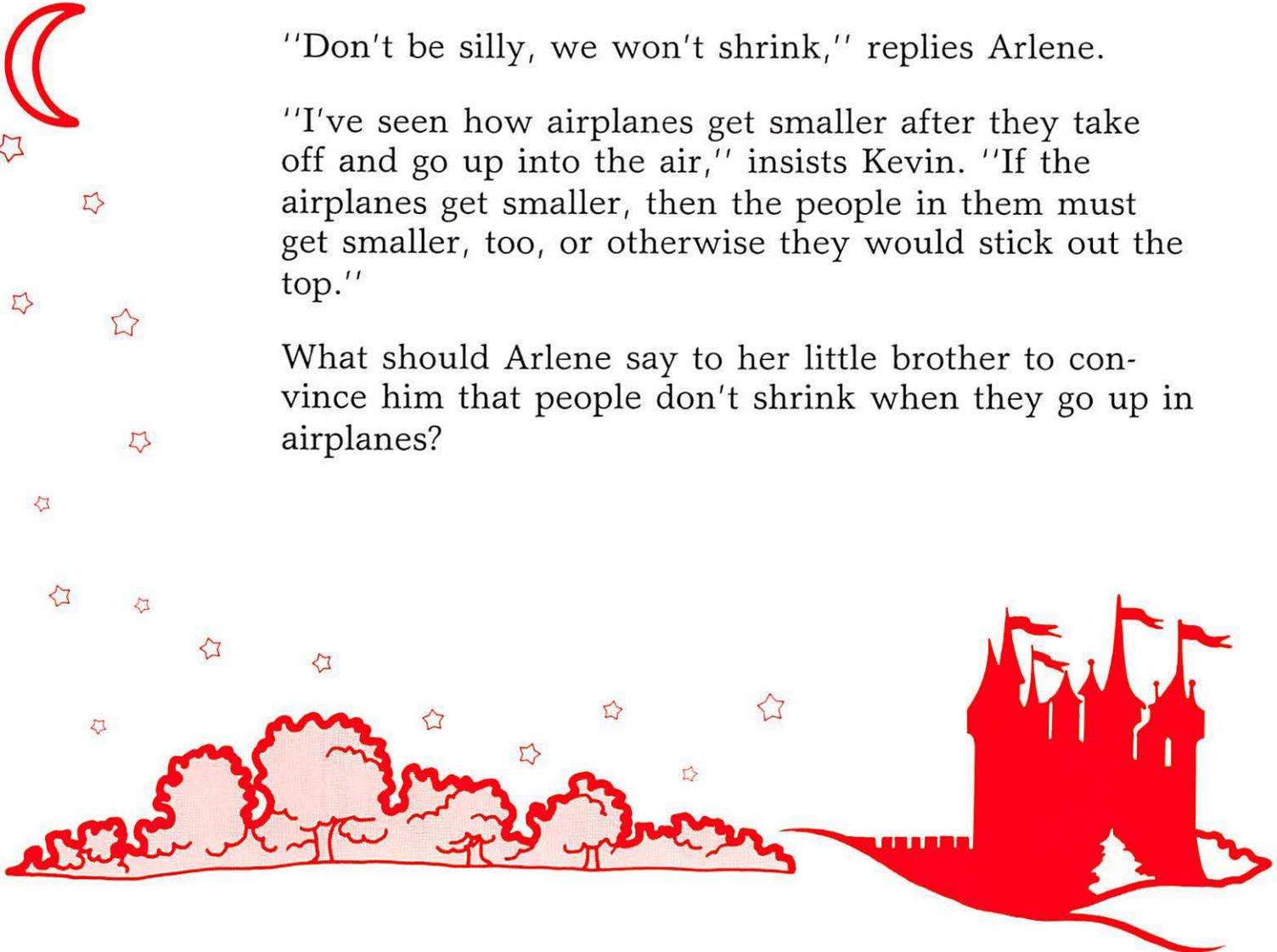
9. Arlene tells Kevin, her little brother, that their whole family is going to fly in an airplane to visit Grandma and Grandpa.

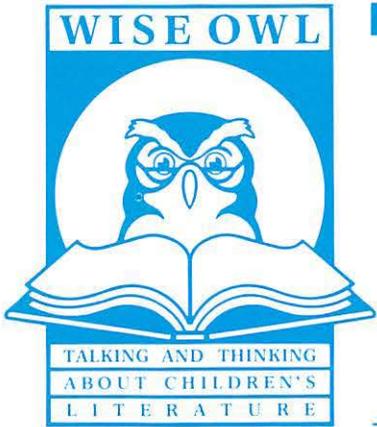
"If we go up in an airplane, we'll shrink," says Kevin.

"Don't be silly, we won't shrink," replies Arlene.

"I've seen how airplanes get smaller after they take off and go up into the air," insists Kevin. "If the airplanes get smaller, then the people in them must get smaller, too, or otherwise they would stick out the top."

What should Arlene say to her little brother to convince him that people don't shrink when they go up in airplanes?





Many Moons

Wise Owl Questions

10. MAKE UP A STORY — EXTENSION ACTIVITY



Many Moons is also about how things may seem very different to someone else than they do to you.

Make up a story about Judy, who has to stay in bed for nine months. When she finally gets up, she does something she has wanted to do for a very long time while she had to stay in bed. Larry, her brother, is surprised she wants to do that. Since he gets to do it whenever he wants, it doesn't seem important to him.

