

GUIDELINES FOR DISCUSSION

THE REAL THIEF

by William Steig

The Real Thief is an unusual story about crime and punishment. The author sensitively describes the thief's feelings and motives before and after he steals from the King's treasury. William Steig does not lead the reader to condone Derek's actions or even excuse him. However, readers are likely to envision themselves doing the crime and learning from its consequences.

Motivation (Question 1)

People often choose to do things in order to please one another. Sometimes actions are a natural expression of affection or respect. Occasionally behavior goes beyond what is considered good or appropriate. Adults and children benefit from examining their own motives from time to time, pondering how their feelings and actions may affect the behavior of others.

Trust and Suspicion (Questions 2 and 3)

Trust can be very fragile. A necessary part of healthy interpersonal relationships, trust is hard to rebuild after suspicion has damaged or destroyed it.

Children can be capable of real trust, and yet they should not become gullible. It is not easy to determine how much trust is appropriate. Think about the importance of trust, guiding students to understand the serious consequences that result when trust is lost in a relationship.

Injustice (Question 4)

In the story, Gawain is the victim of injustice. These questions deal with protecting the accused from suffering unjustly.

Students may recall being accused of, even punished for, something they did not do. They may have interesting, and perhaps helpful, suggestions for minimizing such injustice. Parents and teachers, who occupy positions of authority, benefit from thinking of fresh approaches to this issue.

Wealth (Questions 5 and 6)

In society, some people have more material wealth than others. In general, countries are wealthier than any of their citizens. Vast wealth may tempt the poor and may make the rich feel superior. Young children begin to recognize that they are wealthier than some people and poorer than others.

Coming to terms with the issue of personal wealth is part of growing up. The justice or injustice of the unequal distribution of wealth poses moral and philosophical questions. Students may begin to think about this issue using these questions.

It is less because an intentional decision to forgive someone may lead to forgiving behavior which, in turn, may lead to feelings of forgiveness. It is more because forgiveness that is unexpressed in words or actions may lead to a grudge or partial feelings.

Self-Deception

(Questions 7 and 8)

Understanding how it is possible for a person to deceive himself or herself is a difficult and intriguing philosophical project. In trying to deceive oneself, a person creates a plot that ultimately fails because he or she already knows the deception.

Yet people do succeed in fooling themselves, proving that self-deception is possible. The philosopher in everyone, whether adult or child, can be challenged to explain why this is true.

Forgiveness

(Question 9)

People may think of forgiveness as the natural consequence of being wronged by others. But forgiveness is both more and less than a simple act.

Confession

(Question 10)

These questions explore these moral issues: Are people obligated to choose actions based on whether they make themselves or other people happy? Or is behavior guided by principles that do not require consideration of everyone involved?

Some people may say that Derek should confess his crime because it is morally right, regardless of whether it makes people happier than keeping quiet. Other people who use behavior as a guide to maximize happiness may feel that, although confession is generally the best policy, it might be more prudent for Derek to keep quiet.

Conduct an open-ended discussion, accepting a variety of reasonable responses. Respect the importance of the issues and the unique insights of your students.

Sample Discussion

The following transcript is a discussion that occurred during the tryouts of Wise Owl questions. This dialogue shows the way young children think and models the guidance teachers may offer.

(Question 1 — A and B)

Gawain agrees to be Chief Guard at the Royal Treasury, even though the job bores him. He accepts the position because of his affection for King Basil.

- A. Have you ever done something that you really didn't want to do simply to please someone that you like? Give examples.
- B. Is there a limit to what you might do to please other people? Explain your answer.

Teacher: Let's think about Gawain. He took a job that he really didn't want just to please the King. Rebecca, have you ever done something that you really didn't want to do simply to please someone that you like?

Rebecca: You mean that I did it to please someone else, but that I didn't like it? Yeah . . . I think. In summer, my cousin Heather really likes the water. I don't really like the water. I went in all the time even if it was freezing because I like Heather and she liked to go in all the time.

Teacher: And you did it because you wanted to please Heather?

Rebecca: Well, yeah.

Lindsay: I would do something like that not because it pleases my cousin. I would do it because, well, it pleases me to play with her.

Teacher: Oh, I see what you're saying. Even though Lindsay may be doing something because it pleases another person, she ends up feeling pleased too. How about that? Is Gawain pleased in the same way?

Lindsay: Sure! He likes people to take his picture and he feels proud of his handsome uniform. So he likes his job in some ways.

Teacher: Is there anyone else who might do something to please someone else?

Chris: I do.

Teacher: Tell us about it.

Chris: I pretend that I like sweet and sour pork on my birthday because my grandmother — she's old and confused — started thinking that I like it. But really I hate it. Every year, she makes it and I don't want to hurt her feelings, so I pretend that I love it. Yuck!

Gabe: You're being a good sport and you're being polite.

Teacher: Chris, is there a limit to what you might do to please other people?

Chris: Can you say that again? I don't really understand that question.

Teacher: Okay, let's think about the situation with your grandmother. You're willing to eat sweet and sour pork because you want to please someone you like. Can you imagine being asked to do something that you are not willing to do?

Gabe: How about if your grandmother wants you to eat dirty sneakers on your birthday?

Chris: (laughter) But I know that would never please her.

Teacher: That would be hard to imagine. Think of a situation that goes beyond the limit of what you would do to please someone.

Andrew: Somebody might ask you to do something like steal a video. And you really like them and they're cool, so you want them to be your friend. They might ask you to do that — to do something bad.

Teacher: Would that be the limit for you?

Andrew: I wouldn't do that. I wouldn't steal.

Teacher: So stealing — would that be your limit?

Andrew: . . . or if you had to hurt yourself or someone else. Once this kid in my neighborhood wanted to shoot a BB gun at some cats, and my brother and I said no way! That would be my limit too.

Lexie: I would have that limit too. No

stealing, no lying, no hurting.

Gabe: Chris lies when he pretends to like fried pork.

Chris: It's sweet and sour pork, and I don't lie. It's not a real lie. If you pretend you like food, you can't really call that a lie.

Gabe: I can call it a lie if I think it's a lie. It's not a bad lie, but it's still a lie. It's a lie because it isn't the truth.

Teacher: Let's say, just for a minute, that it is a lie. Do you think this lie hurts anyone?

Gabe: It hurt Chris's stomach!

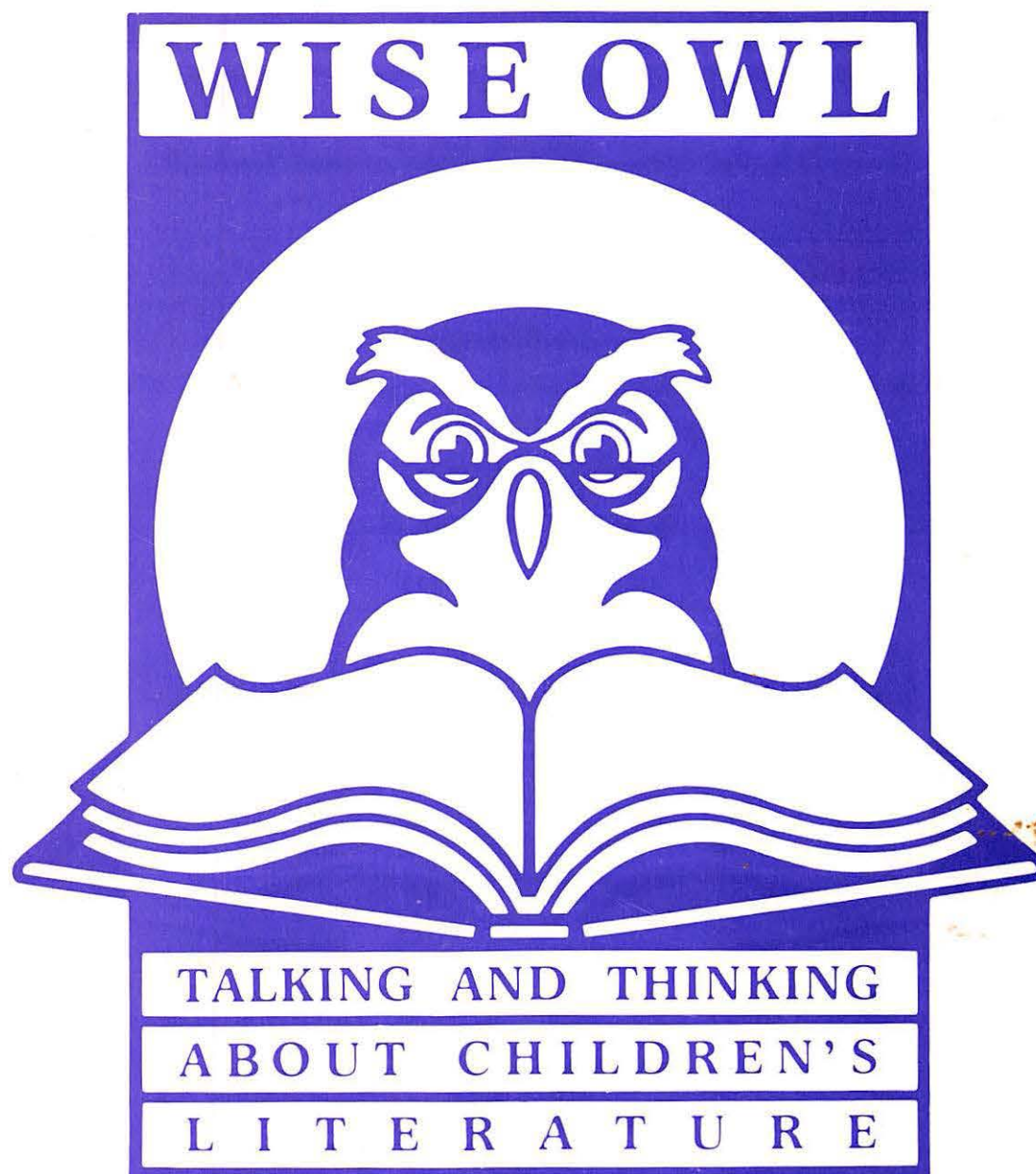
Lindsay: It's not a serious lie. Lies are not always bad. Hurting his grandmother's feelings might hurt Chris more.

Notes

Lenore Carlisle

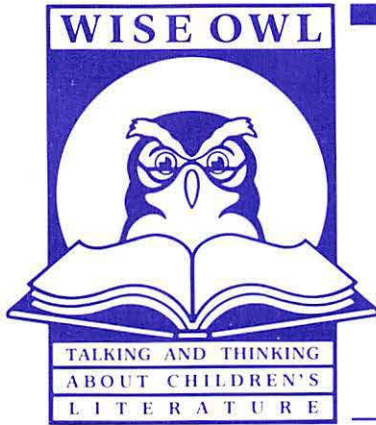
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by William Steig



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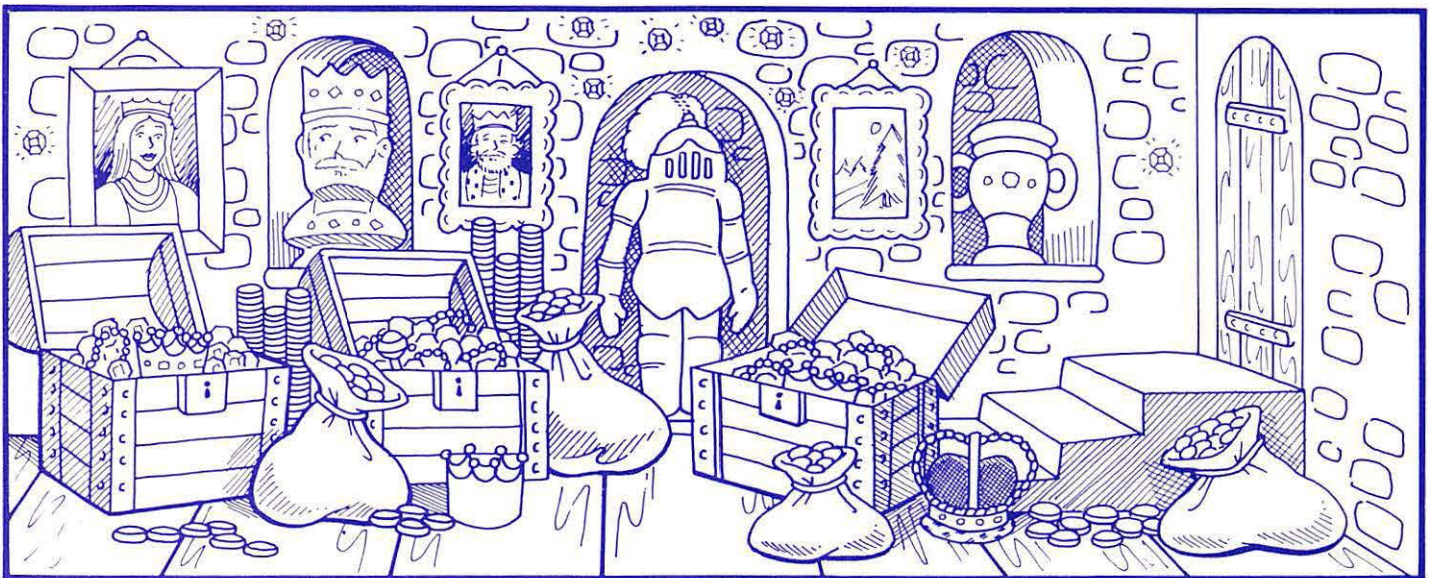
- **Teacher's Guide**
- **10 Question Cards**
- **Guidelines for Discussion**



The Real Thief

Wise Owl Questions

1. Gawain agrees to be Chief Guard at the Royal Treasury, even though the job bores him. He accepts the position because of his affection for King Basil.
 - A. Have you ever done something that you really didn't want to do simply to please someone that you like? Give examples.
 - B. Is there a limit to what you might do to please other people? Explain your answer.
 - C. Do you ask other people to do things that they might not want to do? If so, why?
 - D. Is there a limit to what you might ask others to do for you? Do you think there should be a limit?

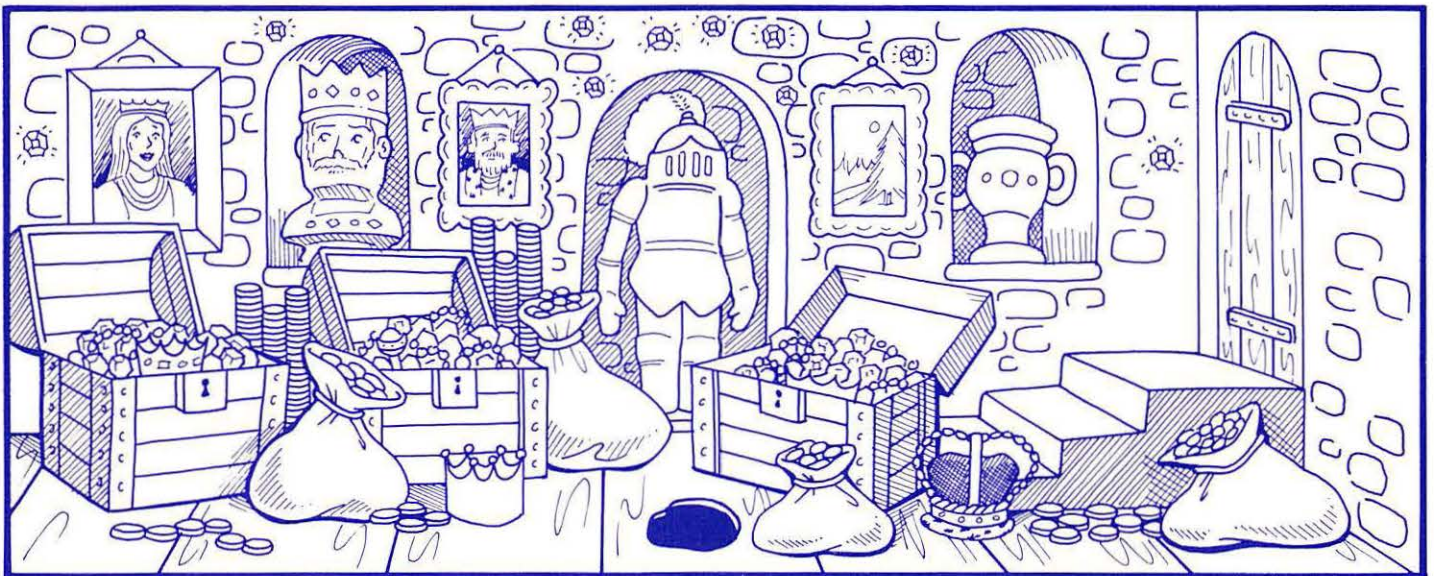




The Real Thief

Wise Owl Questions

2. After the Kalikak diamond is stolen, Gawain feels that the King suspects that he is the thief.
- A. Has someone that you like or admire ever accused you of doing something that you did not do? If so, how did you respond?
 - B. Have you ever suspected that someone did something wrong and later you found out the person was innocent? What happened?
 - C. If you don't know anything about a person, is it better to be trusting or suspicious of his or her actions? Explain your answer.
 - D. How do you know when to be trusting and when to be suspicious of others?



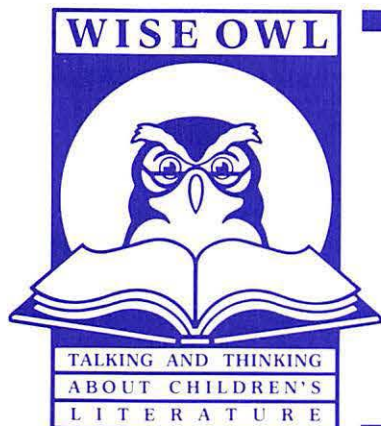


The Real Thief

Wise Owl Questions

3. King Basil tells his court that Gawain has deceived them and stolen royal treasures.
- A. What evidence shows that Gawain is a thief?
 - B. Has anyone ever accused you of doing something wrong? Was there any evidence?
 - C. Have you ever accused someone of doing something that they really did not do? Did you have any evidence?
 - D. What kind of evidence should the King see before accusing Gawain of stealing from the Royal Treasury?

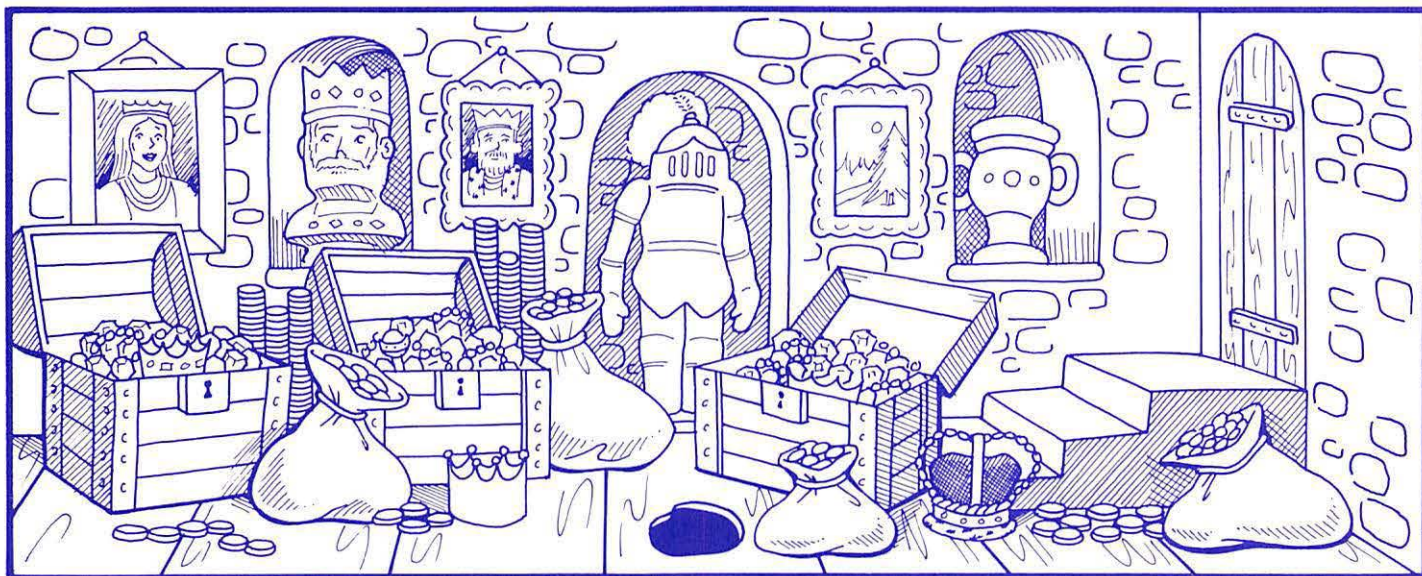


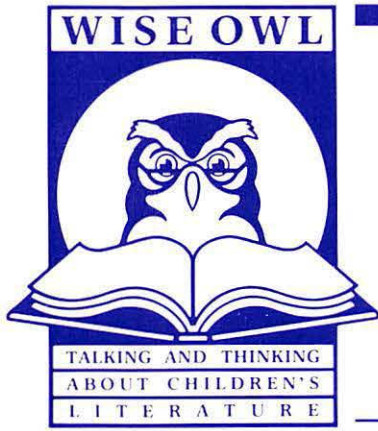


The Real Thief

Wise Owl Questions

4. When King Basil sentences Gawain to imprisonment, Gawain escapes by flying out of the courtroom.
- A. Have you ever been punished for something that you didn't do? If so, how did you react?
 - B. If you were Gawain's lawyer, how might you help him in court?
 - C. Why might someone think that Gawain should go to jail?
 - D. Someone who thinks Gawain is innocent might feel that he should escape. Do you agree or disagree? Explain your answer.

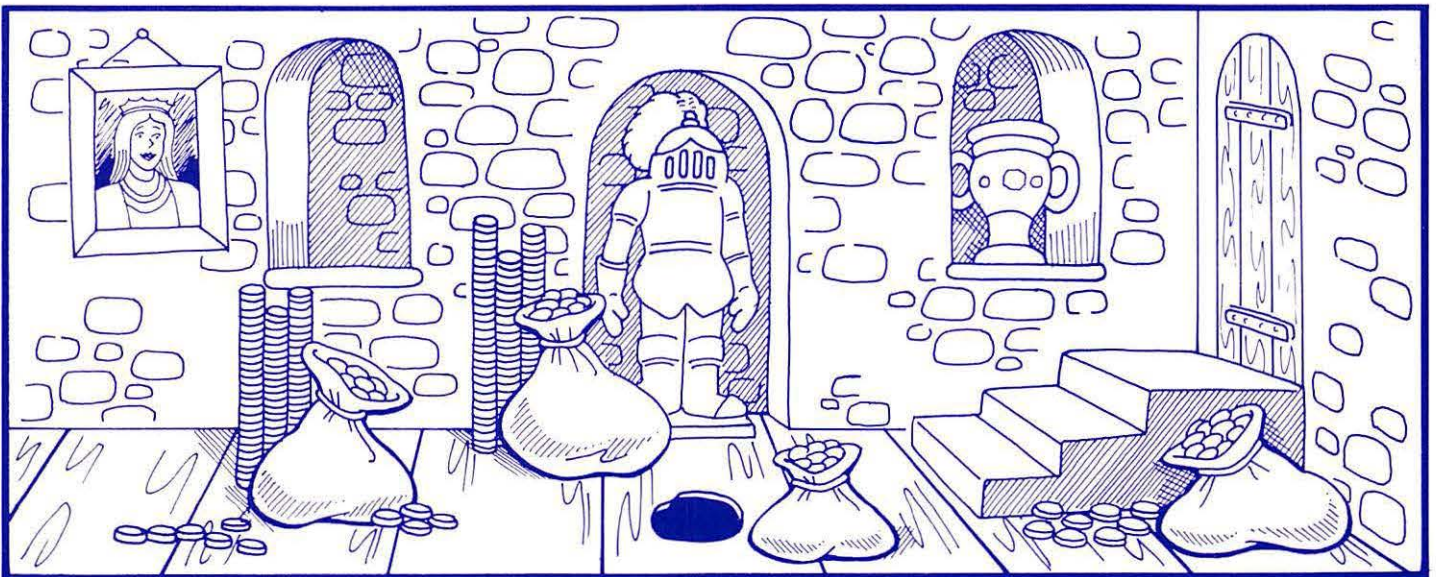


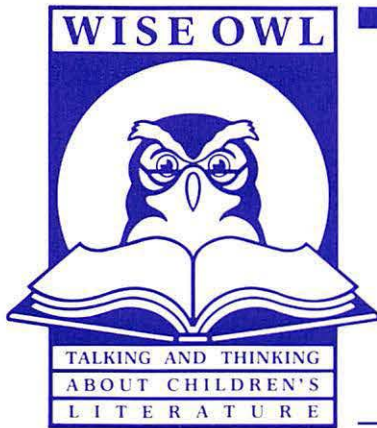


The Real Thief

Wise Owl Questions

5. Derek accidentally discovers a passage into the Royal Treasury.
- A. Do you think it is all right for a king to be wealthy? Explain your answer.
 - B. Why are rubies and diamonds valuable?
 - C. Might a king have a treasury filled with candy instead of jewels? Explain your answer.
 - D. Do countries really have great wealth inside their treasuries? Explain your answer.

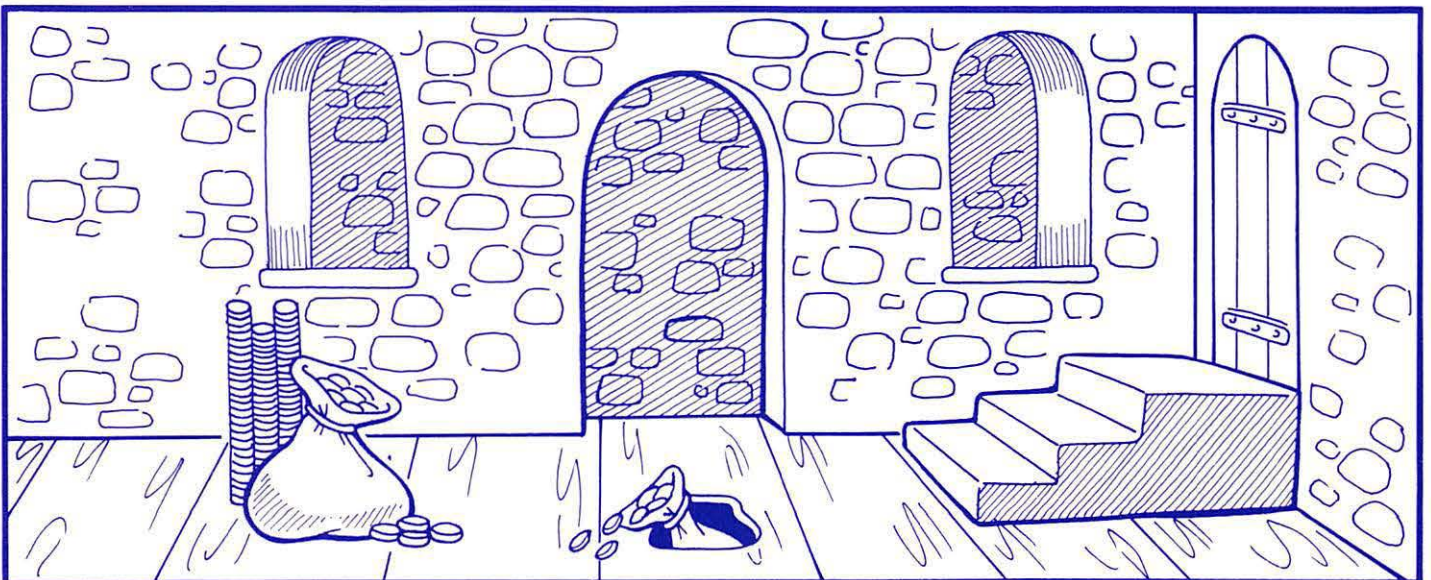


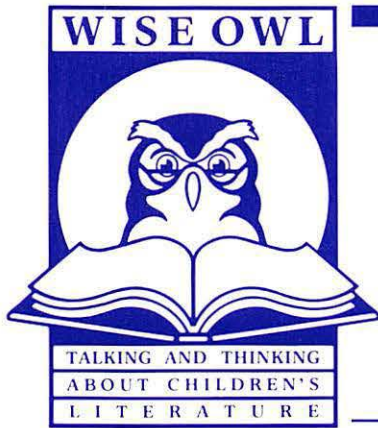


The Real Thief

Wise Owl Questions

6. Decorating his home with jewels makes Derek feel wealthy and important.
- A. What possessions make people feel rich and important?
 - B. What possessions make people feel poor and unimportant?
 - C. Do some people need to feel more important than others? If so, why?
 - D. What might you do to feel important? Are some actions more acceptable than others?

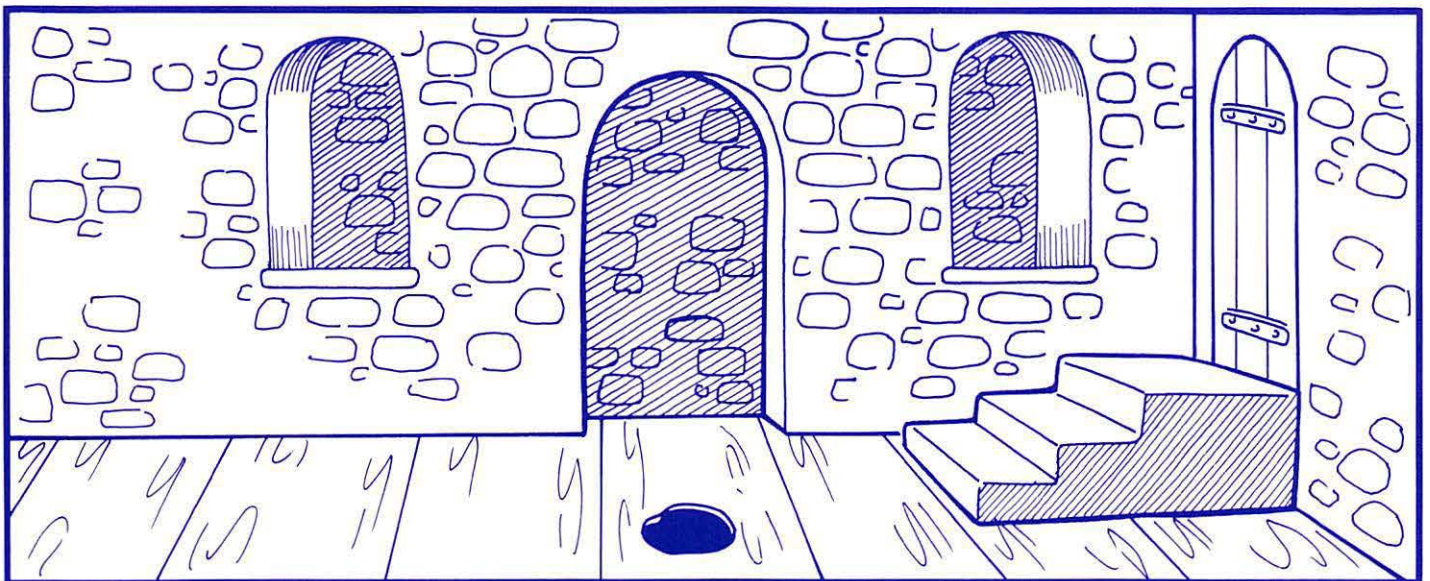


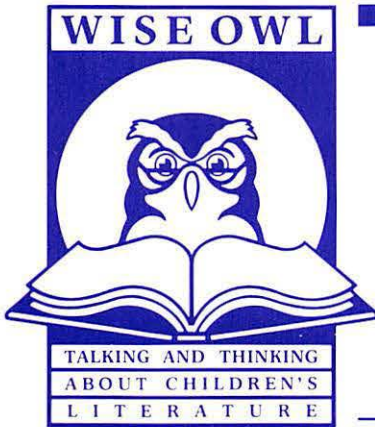


The Real Thief

Wise Owl Questions

7. Three days before Gawain's trial, Derek realizes that he is the real thief.
- A. Why doesn't Derek realize that he is a thief immediately after he has stolen the royal treasures?
 - B. Derek looks in a mirror and doesn't think he looks like a criminal. Do all criminals look alike?
 - C. Derek regrets stealing from the Royal Treasury. Do you think people should be given a second chance when they do something wrong? Think of reasons for and against second chances.
 - D. Derek doesn't understand why he stole the rubies. Is it possible to do something and later forget why you did it? Think of examples.

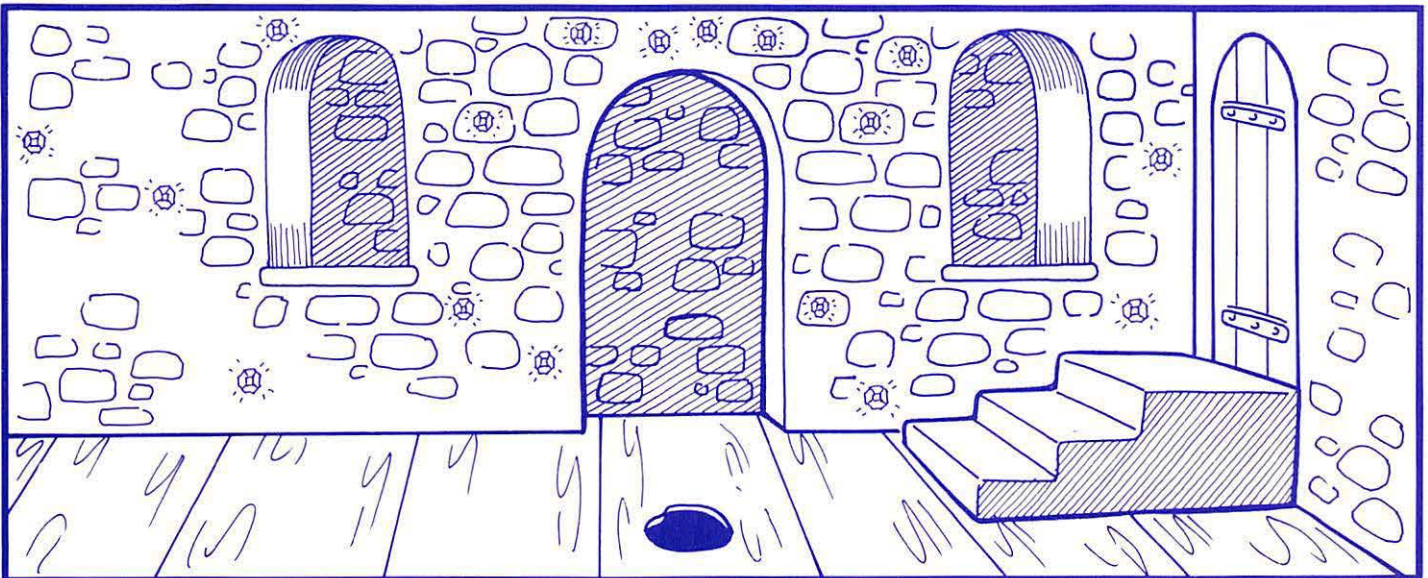


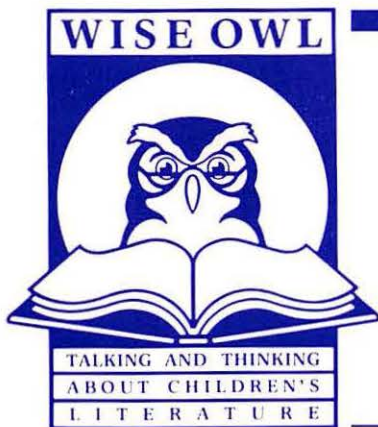


The Real Thief

Wise Owl Questions

8. After Gawain flies away, Derek steals more treasures so that everyone might realize that Gawain is not the real thief.
- A. Eventually Derek returns the stolen treasures. Why didn't he think of doing this earlier in the story?
 - B. What reasons does Derek give himself for stealing? Is he fooling himself into thinking stealing is all right?
 - C. Do you ever fool yourself into believing something that is not true? Explain your answer.
 - D. How can you fool yourself into believing something that you already know is not true? Since you know that you are fooling yourself, you might not be fooled.

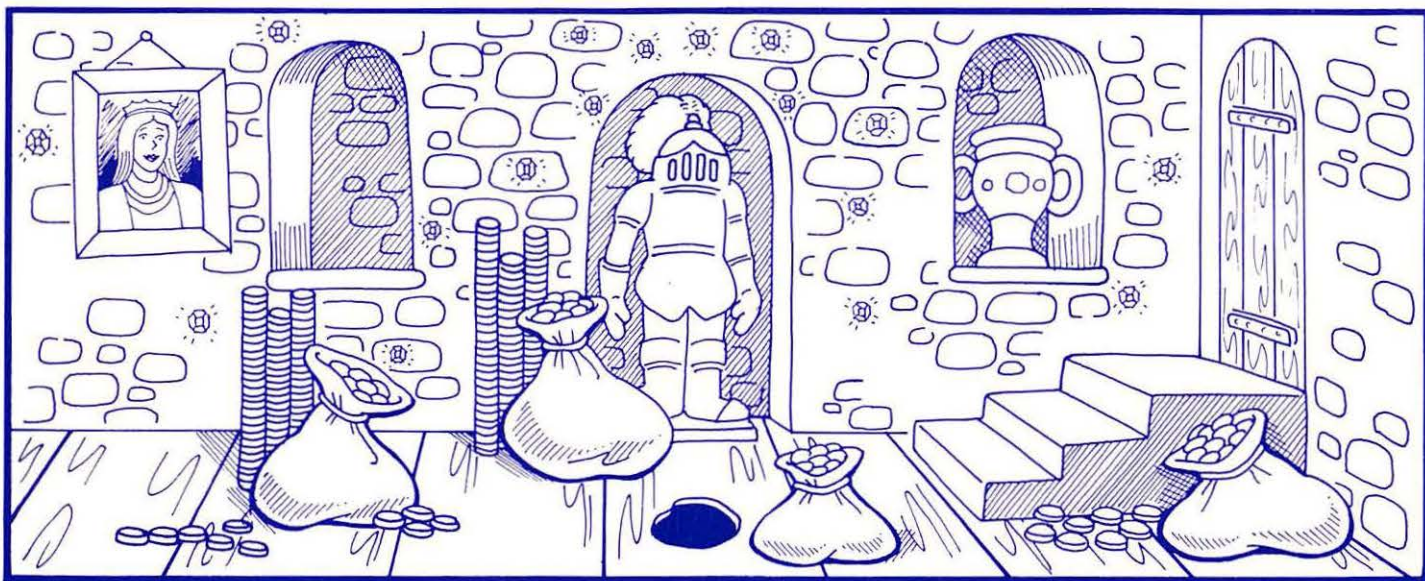


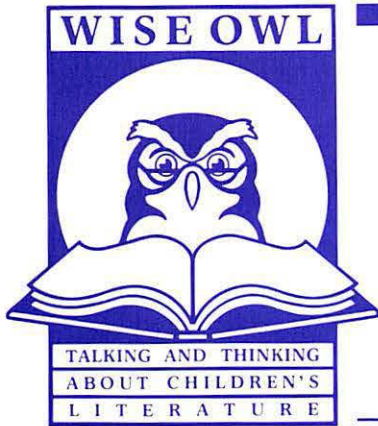


The Real Thief

Wise Owl Questions

9. Derek finds Gawain and asks for his forgiveness. Gawain says that he can gladly forgive Derek but not the other townspeople.
- A. When might you forgive someone?
 - B. What is forgiveness? Is it a feeling or an action?
 - C. Why might Gawain forgive Derek and not forgive the King and the townspeople?
 - D. Can you show forgiveness without saying the words "I forgive you"? Explain your answer.





The Real Thief

Wise Owl Questions

10. Gawain asks Derek whether he will confess his crimes to the King and all of the townspeople.
- A. Why is it important to admit a crime?
 - B. Why do you think Gawain should confess to the court, even though he isn't the real thief? Think of several reasons.
 - C. Why do you think Gawain should keep quiet in court? Think of several reasons.
 - D. If you were Gawain, what might you do in court? Explain your answer.

