

ASF Study Materials for



Because of Winn-Dixie The Musical

from the novel by Kate DiCamillo
book and lyrics by Nell Benjamin; music by Duncan Sheik
animal direction and training by William Berloni

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Characters

Preacher Buloni, *new in town*

Opal, *his daughter*

Winn-Dixie, *a stray she adopts*

local families:

Millie and Carl Wilkinson

Amanda Wilkinson, *their daughter, a bookworm*

Jeanne Dewberry, *a divorcée*

Dunlap Dewberry, *her older son*

Stevie Dewberry, *his brother*

Callie and Jiggs Thomas, *he manages the Winn-Dixie*

Sweetie Pie Thomas, *their daughter*

other locals:

Otis, *pet store manager, who once served a jail term*

Franny Block, *the librarian*

Gloria Dump, *a partially blind recovering alcoholic, whom the kids call the "witch"*

Place: Naomi, Florida (a fictional town in central Florida)

Time: modern, pre-internet

About these Study Materials

Because the SchoolFest grade range for this show is 4-12, the materials offer general topics you can tailor for the discussion and writing needs of your grade level.

Topics treated include:

- Author/creator information
- Considering novel and play and the adaptation process
- Issues and ideas in the work
- Information about our Winn-Dixie
- **Activities and discussion points, in red**

Cover: Bowdie, who plays Winn-Dixie at ASF

Welcome to the Musical *Because of Winn-Dixie*

How could this much beloved young people's novel get any better? It could become a musical! Kate DeCamillo's first novel, *Because of Winn-Dixie*, has a heart as big as Winn-Dixie's, its scruffy canine protagonist. He is a stray, but that homeless feeling is shared by Opal, a child new to the small Florida town of Naomi. She learns her loneliness is widely shared and also malleable, for with some canine inspiration it can turn into friendship and community. Thanks to Winn-Dixie and Opal's love for him, one of the story's central images, of the turtle in its shell, aptly describes all the characters, who re-emerge into the world and re-engage with it.

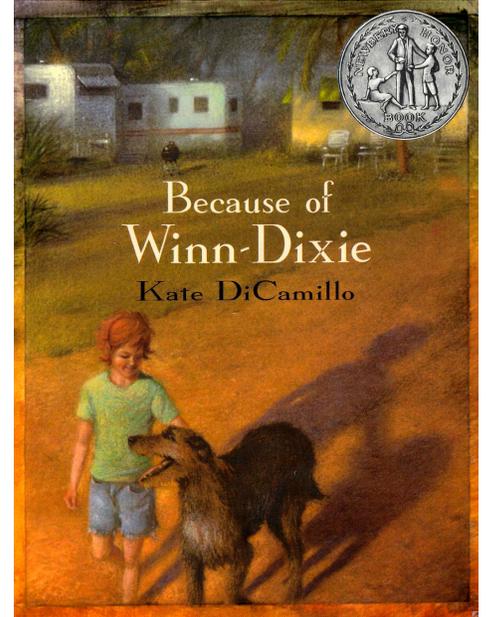
The story's multi-layered warmth first prompted Walden Media to film the novel in 2005 and now has attracted the musical's creative team. In the talented hands of Nell Benjamin (who recently worked on *Legally Blonde*) and Duncan Sheik (who recently won several Tony Awards for his music for *Spring Awakening*) and animal trainer William Berloni (who trained, among many others, the original Sandy for *Annie*), the yearnings of Naomi, Florida's inhabitants become ours, galvanized by that lovable mutt.

About the Musical Adaptation: A Children's Novel, Now Theatre for All

The musical has had pre-Broadway productions in 2013 and 2015 in Arkansas and Delaware. Because the play is drawn from a children's book, reviewers of both productions hastened to point out that this musical adaptation is not a typical children's play with music. The novel deals with real life problems of dogs, children, and adults alike, and the music engages those elements more fully.

In developing the musical, everyone on the creative team wanted to work straight from the novel; no one watched the film. Dorothy Berloni, who conceived the project, wanted to showcase the bond between humans and animals and to let the dog take the leading role, a challenge her husband, fabled animal trainer Bill Berloni, could fulfill.

The first production's director, John Tartaglia, loved the story's richness and found he "couldn't stop thinking about it. It dealt with very adult subjects and some of life's hard knocks in a way that was really intelligent and really profound."



Cover of Kate DiCamillo's first novel, *Because of Winn-Dixie* (2000); art by Chris Sheban

The story is "a hymn of praise to dogs, friendship, and the South."

—novelist Kate DeCamillo

Nell Benjamin (book and lyrics) agrees, "the thought of picking up some of the darker, cooler themes of this book through some kind of theatrical magic really appealed to me." For the music, Sheik wrote "a dynamic blend of southern rock, rockabilly, country and blues" along with some gospel sounds.

They wanted to avoid any sentimental treatment, so they sought some edge, some bite. (That became Nell Benjamin's favorite joke—"A dog show, with bite!") So it's a musical for all audiences— elementary students in Delaware sat on the edge of their seats; adults laughed and cried. Like the novel and Winn-Dixie himself, the musical finds its way to the heart.



Kate DiCamillo

Listen to DiCamillo's 2014 Newbery acceptance speech @ www.ala.org



Nell Benjamin

About Author Kate DiCamillo

Kate DiCamillo is now the author of 24 books, among them *Because of Winn-Dixie* (her first novel, published in 2000, which won the Josette Frank and Mark Twain Awards), *The Tiger Rising*, *The Tale of Desperaux*, and the *Mercy Watson* series. She has twice won the Newbery Award, in 2004 and 2014, one of only six authors to be so honored. The Library of Congress appointed her the U.S. National Ambassador for Young People's Literature for 2014-15.

As with all the best children's literature, DeCamillo believes that "a book for children has to offer hope. You have a moral responsibility to make things turn out well," but she also frames her first tale so that it speaks to adults, too, going, as she calls it, "dark and light," offering a real Littmus Lozenge of a tale.

The context of her first novel is the world she knew as a child. When she was 5, her family moved from Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, to Clermont, Florida, a small town where everybody knew everybody (or acted as if they did), a move prompted by her chronic pneumonia. Her father, an orthodontist, never joined the family in Florida.

Due to her health, DiCamillo read a lot, often in her backyard tree fort, and she credits

her reading for her becoming a writer. She also had a beloved dog, a black standard poodle, with which she played dress-up games.

The novel emerged when she found herself living in Minneapolis, MN and for the first time unable to have a dog. She became homesick for the South and for canine companionship, so she created both, and only later realized she had included a large chunk of herself in so doing.

DiCamillo on Writing

Writing is "about seeing the world. Paying attention," she believes. She learned that was true in her first community college writing class, where, nearing the deadline for her first assignment, she wrote about a woman she had seen sitting on top of a dog food sack in front of a Winn-Dixie store playing a tambourine and asking for loose change. The store in that experience gave its name to the canine hero of her first novel and this play.

Regarding the process of writing, she makes herself write at least two pages a day, though she agrees with Dorothy Parker that "I hate writing. I love having written," because it is hard work. Writing, she says, is a process of rewriting: "each time I rewrite, the pages get a little better." Her "better" is actually quite remarkable.

The Musical's Creative Team: Nell Benjamin & Duncan Sheik

NELL BENJAMIN—Book and Lyrics

In addition to her work on *Because of Winn-Dixie*, Nell Benjamin is best known for her score to the Broadway hit *Legally Blonde: The Musical* and for her playwriting debut with the 2015 hit play *Explorers' Club*. Other work includes the lyrics for *Pirates! (or Gilbert and Sullivan Plunder'd)* and *Sarah, Plain and Tall*.

Born in 1972, she holds degrees from Harvard and Trinity College, Dublin.

DUNCAN SHEIK—Composer

Duncan Sheik leapt to fame in 1996 with the first track of his first album, "Barely Breathing," which then stayed on the Hot 100 List for 55 straight weeks. He now has 8 solo albums.

More recently, in 2006 he wrote the music for the Broadway hit *Spring Awakening*, which garnered him several Tony awards (best original score, best orchestration, best musical) and a Grammy.

His first non-album work was providing music for Shakespeare in the Park's *Twelfth Night* in 2002. Subsequently, he did the music for *Alice by Heart*, an adaptation of *Alice's*

Adventures in Wonderland workshopped by the Royal National Theatre in London. Another London premiere was the musical adaptation of *American Psycho* at the Almedia Theatre in 2013; it premieres on Broadway this year. In 2013 he also wrote the music for *Because of Winn-Dixie*. In 2015 he premiered *Noir*.

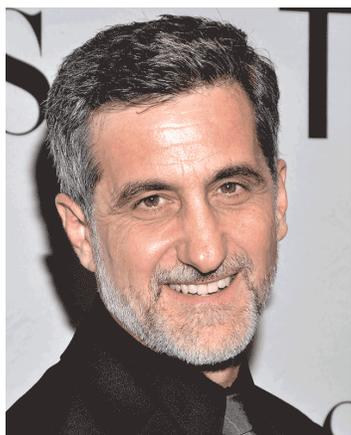
Born in 1969 in Montclair, New Jersey, he also grew up in South Carolina, and the sound of the Southern rock he heard there inspired much of the music in this show.



Duncan Sheik



Bowdie, who plays Winn-Dixie



William Berloni, who was awarded the 2011 Tony Honor for Excellence in Theatre and the 2014 Outer Critics Circle award for Special Achievement

"I feel like if I treat you like a dog, I'm treating you with the ultimate respect."

—William Berloni,
animal trainer

Sources: "Woof: Americans Talk about Their Dogs," *The Believer* (online), Pam Bonsper, "Broadway's Bill Berloni," *Coastal Canine* (online), and Berloni's website, www.theatricalanimals.com

Meet Bowdie: In the First Starring Role for a Dog in a Musical

Bowdie found Bill Berloni, or vice versa, in 2014 when his original family could not keep him—and now he is a star. For his first professional role he played Nana in the NBC live broadcast of *Peter Pan*, a role usually played by an actor in a dog suit. He then began training to play Winn-Dixie at the Delaware Theatre Company in 2015. Since then he has been in a music video and a Rachel Ray commercial as well as an episode of the new HBO series *High Maintenance* and is the new character Schnoodle in the current season of *Sesame Street*.

When not on stage or screen or in commercials, Bowdie returns to the Berlonis' Connecticut farm, where he lives a normal dog life along with other professional and retired Berloni animals: 3 cats,

4 chickens, 3 horses, 2 pigs, a donkey, a pony, a macaw, and 25 other dogs.

When asked about the training process, Bowdie allowed Mr. Berloni to speak for him: "animals don't act.... With animals, it is reality. ...What makes the animal performances so exciting is that you are watching them in real time [unlike films, which often splice takes]. You know they are happy and must really want to do it...."

When a performer such as Bowdie is cast, Berloni and another handler are at every performance, supervising the canine actor. And like Equity actors, animal performers have an understudy. Because these are working animals, like service animals, they do not engage with the public post-show or get petted by audiences.

William Berloni: Bowdie's Award-Winning Animal Trainer

It can happen in the arts—someone starts out acting but ends up a professional designer, a director—or an animal trainer. The latter, more unusual route to stage fame is the story of William Berloni, who at 19 after a year as an unpaid intern at Connecticut's Goodspeed Opera House in 1976 was unexpectedly offered his Equity card and a small role in the untried new musical *Annie*—if he found and trained the dog to play Sandy. The producer didn't tell him that had never been done before for stage.

His experience with Sandy changed his life—searching dog pounds, appalled by the hideous conditions in which the dogs were kept, and finally spying a scruffy, sandy-colored dog cowering at the back of a cage. The dog, abused and scheduled for euthanizing, finally came to him when he knelt and beckoned. Next day Berloni adopted the dog, saving his life, and the rest of the story is the stuff of theatre dreams—but only because Berloni, who had no formal training in animal behavior, had good sense and had grown up on a farm with a collie named Rexie.

Remembering their dogs' responses to hearing his mom open the drawer where the can opener was kept, he knew cues and repetitive behavior were important. He familiarized Sandy with the theatre and developed the animal-human bond with the actress playing Annie. As a result of the months of training and love, Sandy became a star, and Bill Berloni discovered his career in the arts.

Since then Berloni has trained and directed many animals for Broadway, including for all revivals of *Annie* and for *Legally Blonde*, *A Christmas Story the Musical*, *The Wiz*, and many others, and for hundreds of productions off-Broadway and in regional theatres, as well as for film, television (a Berloni dog also played Toto in NBC's *The Wiz Live*), commercials, and print work. His professional work with animals includes most breeds of cats and dogs, farm animals, small animals (including rats and mice), birds, reptiles, insects (spiders, butterflies, cockroaches), and exotic animals such as elephants, camels, and giraffes.

Berloni actively advocates for rescue animals and since 1989 has served as Director of Animal Behavior at the Humane Society of New York City. He is also author of *Broadway Tails: Heartfelt Stories of Rescued Dogs Who Become Showbiz Superstars*, *Doga*, and *Sandy: The Autobiography of a Star*.



A young Berloni's first trainee: a pound rescue dog who became Sandy on Broadway, performing 8 shows a week for 7 years, 2,330 shows in all.



Because of Winn-Dixie

Opal: Do you think everybody misses somebody?

Gloria: I believe, sometimes, that the whole world has an aching heart.

(dialogue from novel)



Bowdie's soulful, searching gaze, like Winn-Dixie's at first, hoping that maybe this time...

"Dear God, thank you for warm summer nights and candlelight and good food. But thank you most of all for friends. We appreciate the complicated and wonderful gifts you give us in each other. And we appreciate the task you put down before us, of loving each other the best we can, even as you love us."

(Preacher's prayer at party in novel)

About the Novel

DiCamillo's novel opens with one of children's literature's perfect first sentences: "My name is India Opal Buloni, and last summer my daddy, the preacher, sent me to the store for a box of macaroni-and-cheese, some white rice, and two tomatoes and I came back with a dog." It propels readers into both character and action. We sense a very small town, the particularities of a preacher's kid, a starch-heavy diet, personal need, and the unexpected all at one time.

That initial chapter is so full of fun, action, and child/dog bonding that it zips by and sets the pace for the novel. It also sets the idea—Opal goes to the store alone but comes home with a friend. We know Opal responds to need and can solve problems—after all, she has already invented a tale to save the dog. Then she convinces everyone that he is, indeed, "my dog." Winn-Dixie himself needed no convincing; his initial smile and tail-wag say it all.

Opal's narrative eye and voice are flawless. We meet her father, the preacher, at home and at work, and learn ten things about the missing wife/mother so we gain emotional conflicts of loss and grief. The list gives Opal and us a glimpse of the woman we will never meet and a hole that seems unfillable for those she left behind.

Then one by one Opal makes friends in her new home, as she and Winn-Dixie look beyond the labels and find potential everywhere. By the time we get to a description of Opal's daily routine, it is filled with friends and purpose—go to work and enjoy Otis's music, go hear a story from Franny at the library, and visit Gloria. Like Winn-Dixie, all the town's lost souls are, in life's storms, eventually calmed and, if lost, pursued and found.

The Littmus Lozenge that Winn-Dixie and Opal give their friends opens their inner sorrows and lets them be seen as full, deep individuals. Just as Winn-Dixie made the first church service memorable and positive ("let us pray for this mouse"), looking for Winn-Dixie in the storm fuses the group and lets friendship spread to all ("let's sing for the dog"). Every person, like every lozenge, has sorrow as part of it, but reaching out, sharing, and accepting enrich them all. It's a tale that touches their hearts and ours.

Literary Elements of the Novel

Form: Chapter book in 26 chapters

Narrative point-of-view: First person—Opal Buloni, reporting experiences of the previous summer when she was 10 years old, so a memory novel

Structure:

- 1) *friendships*—with Winn-Dixie, and with his help with Franny Block, with Otis, with Gloria Dump, and eventually with the other children—plus friendships among these
- 2) *dealing with loss*—Opal wants information about her absent mother and more forthrightness from her father; gets list of 10 things near top. Has talk about core issues with father (you give up; is she coming back) near end and realizes her heart is not empty any more (comparable arcs with other families)

Imagery: Naomi (Book of Ruth in Bible), turtle in shell, a Less Fortunate, Open Arms, power of music to calm/unite, seeing with the heart, being out of cages, candy: sweetness plus sorrow, learning each other's songs

Issues: animals' needs, family love amid crisis, growing up, friendship, dealing with loss (separation, death, mistakes), divisiveness of labels/stereotypes, cultural past/personal past

Artistic touches: portrayal of Winn-Dixie and Opal's anthropomorphic interpretations of his responses; names (Winn-Dixie, Buloni, Dump); humor



The church scene from the film of Because of Winn-Dixie (Walden Media, 2005), starring Lyco and Scott as Winn-Dixie and AnnaSophia Robb as Opal.



Activity: Where and What Would You Sing?

- Discuss any of the Disney cartoon musicals the students may know, or for older students add Broadway musicals and pop songs, specifically what gets turned into song, what moments, what emotions, and the range of songs—serious, longing, comic.
- Then look at the novel *Because of Winn-Dixie*. Which moments do the students think would be good for songs, which emotions would they, or Disney, or Broadway, or popular music turn into songs? What kind of music?
- If the students are so inclined, have them write a song for the novel—a song for Opal or Winn-Dixie, or for one of the other characters.



Turning the Novel into a Musical

Two adaptations transform the novel into the musical—one changes fiction into theatre, and the other changes prose and drama into a form that has characters burst into song. There is singing in the novel, but what is sung is never specified—the church congregation sings, Otis sings to the animals, and then he plays every song anyone wants to sing at the party at the end, but we never know which particular songs are sung.

In a musical, the peaks of emotion and many of the crucial storytelling points become songs, and that fact can intrinsically change the story. Sometimes the songs add or change detail and imagery, develop character or emotion in ways not portrayed in the novel, even treat moments not narrated in the novel. A musical is its own kind of artistic creation, akin to but sometimes independent of the work it adapts.

New Elements in the Musical's Songs/Text

- Opal needing a way to voice her feelings
- life dreams don't come true in Naomi
- explicit details about Gloria's life
- Amanda's anger at God about her brother's death
- Otis's "searching" song
- different details and focus to the list about Opal's mother

Loki is a young poodle/lab mix in California who needs a home and hopes Petfinders.com can help him find one. Bowdie wishes all poodle mixes good homes!

Other Story Changes in the Musical

- Opal is 13, not 10
- Opal's mother left Christmas before last, not 7 years ago when Opal was 3, so she was a greater presence and stronger force in the child's life, and the loss is more recent and raw
- initial meeting of Opal and dog markedly different, and she cleans him up before taking him home
- first storm and dog's reaction is not at home but from library to Gloria's
- father makes her quit job at pet store
- role of children foregrounded early in musical, whereas those are the last relationships Opal develops in the novel
- Amanda's reading material and other books change; some books are added
- add Gloria's past but lose "let me see you with my heart" and learning "the most important thing"
- there is no party at Gloria's in the musical

Literary Elements of this Musical

Form: Musical theatre

Narrative point-of-view: objective live action. Songs offer point-of-view moments.

Structure:

- 1) *feeling "stray" and homeless leads to friendships*—Opal's lonely sentiments expose the feelings of many about the town but her exploration opens new insights for all into neighbors' potential
- 2) *the past and loss*—Opal wants to know about her mother; everyone is carrying a burden of loss, has a way of coping, and can re-connect in the present

Imagery: dreams not coming true; turtle in shell; charity; sweetness/sorrow (lozenges); can't run; searching

Issues: family love amid crisis, growing up, friendship, dealing with loss (separation, death, mistakes), divisiveness of labels/stereotypes, cultural past/personal past

Artistic touches: music/song; one-liners and repartee



| Singer |
|---------------------------------------|
| Opal, then all |
| Opal |
| Preacher and all Preacher, chorus |
| Opal, adults, father |
| Gloria |
| Otis |
| Franny |
| Franny Amanda |
| Jeanne, Preacher Opal, Amanda, all |
| Otis |
| Preacher + Opal |
| Otis and all |



Film's toy
Winn-Dixie

Considering the Songs

| Song List | Song Lyrics to Consider |
|------------------------------|---|
| 1) Strays | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> We are strays. / I wanna go home tonight. Dang stray ... Can't have strays. |
| 2) Awooo | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> I loved it. The only home I knew. Awooo. Awooo. Hey, why / am I the person things just happen to? |
| 3) Who will raise his voice? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Who will raise his voice in praise? / I will. (with dog howls) |
| 4) O Lord of pilgrims | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Please make a place / That's calm and still We strays and strangers / Are ever searching/ We... Can't see the way Someone left him alone: / That's a feeling I've known. He can be so good / When he wants to. Well, he's good for me. There's never enough time in a summer to spend / With a friend. You think you've been bad, child? / You ain't been as bad as me. And each and every sin / I wrote down and put it in / A bottle for my tree. |
| 5) Summer | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> He can be so good / When he wants to. Well, he's good for me. There's never enough time in a summer to spend / With a friend. You think you've been bad, child? / You ain't been as bad as me. And each and every sin / I wrote down and put it in / A bottle for my tree. |
| 6) Bottle Tree Blues | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> You just bring with you everything— / Ev'rything you done. When I hear my Mama say: / Where you goin', son? The South's old gallant ways Sugar ... / Underneath the sweetness lies the sorrow The question is not / What you did, / But what you'll do tomorrow Not any cause or creed / Was worth the way he'd made so many bleed. |
| 7) You Can't Run | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Whatever pain you got is what / A Littmus Lozenge's for! |
| 8) Sweet Life | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> If there were / Someone watching / Why'd He stand by and let my brother die? I'm this angry girl they don't recognize ... / I'm slipping away If ... / we sought some solace...? / ... How else does lonely get solved? If I could I'd leave this place Why tell me I can wish / ... It's not true at all. When you go searchin' for your baby, / Who knows what you're gonna find? But I've been lost and I've been blind She didn't leave one thing behind. / Not one thing. <i>Opal</i>: she also left you me; / I'm one thing. But I'm learning to be grateful for what I got I always can make do / With what I got when what I got is you. |
| 9) Littmus Lozenge Jingle | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Whatever pain you got is what / A Littmus Lozenge's for! |
| 10) No One Watching | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> If there were / Someone watching / Why'd He stand by and let my brother die? I'm this angry girl they don't recognize ... / I'm slipping away If ... / we sought some solace...? / ... How else does lonely get solved? If I could I'd leave this place Why tell me I can wish / ... It's not true at all. When you go searchin' for your baby, / Who knows what you're gonna find? But I've been lost and I've been blind She didn't leave one thing behind. / Not one thing. <i>Opal</i>: she also left you me; / I'm one thing. But I'm learning to be grateful for what I got I always can make do / With what I got when what I got is you. |
| 11) I Know Lonely | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> I'm this angry girl they don't recognize ... / I'm slipping away If ... / we sought some solace...? / ... How else does lonely get solved? If I could I'd leave this place Why tell me I can wish / ... It's not true at all. When you go searchin' for your baby, / Who knows what you're gonna find? But I've been lost and I've been blind She didn't leave one thing behind. / Not one thing. <i>Opal</i>: she also left you me; / I'm one thing. But I'm learning to be grateful for what I got I always can make do / With what I got when what I got is you. |
| 12)) Not True at All | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> If ... / we sought some solace...? / ... How else does lonely get solved? If I could I'd leave this place Why tell me I can wish / ... It's not true at all. When you go searchin' for your baby, / Who knows what you're gonna find? But I've been lost and I've been blind She didn't leave one thing behind. / Not one thing. <i>Opal</i>: she also left you me; / I'm one thing. But I'm learning to be grateful for what I got I always can make do / With what I got when what I got is you. |
| 13) Searchin' | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> When you go searchin' for your baby, / Who knows what you're gonna find? But I've been lost and I've been blind She didn't leave one thing behind. / Not one thing. <i>Opal</i>: she also left you me; / I'm one thing. But I'm learning to be grateful for what I got I always can make do / With what I got when what I got is you. |
| 14) Thirteen Things | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> But I've been lost and I've been blind She didn't leave one thing behind. / Not one thing. <i>Opal</i>: she also left you me; / I'm one thing. But I'm learning to be grateful for what I got I always can make do / With what I got when what I got is you. |
| 15) What I Got Is You | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> But I'm learning to be grateful for what I got I always can make do / With what I got when what I got is you. |

The Songs' Storytelling and Interactions

The first song links the dog to Opal and the townspeople, all of whom are "strays."

Opal's next song, her only solo song, "Awooo," is about her sense of loss and feeling she has no "voice" in her world, so she howls.

As if in response, the next song is "Who will raise his voice?" so the music is already addressing the issue, and in this song everyone is together and everyone, including Winn-Dixie, joins in song.

"Summer" is a mood song that establishes atmosphere and need.

• There follows a series of solos that share individual perspectives and insights from Gloria, Otis, Franny, and Amanda. We

learn their pasts and pain and some of what they've learned. Jeanne and the Preacher confess their loneliness.

- Franny's "Littmus Lozenge Jingle," like the preacher's earlier prayer, "O Lord of pilgrims," both seek ways of addressing life's problems for all in Naomi.
- "Searchin'" expresses the literal action of the end of the play when Winn-Dixie is lost, but it also expresses the larger quest of every character. That quest finds some resolution—first Opal's quest for answers when she and her father sing "Thirteen Things" and find what peace they can about their lost wife and mother, which in its lyric "she left you me" sets up the show's final number, "What I Got is You," which everyone sings.



Because of Winn-Dixie

"So you're looking for a home?"

—The preacher's question on meeting Winn-Dixie in the play, the essential question

Issues and Ideas in the Novel and Musical

Biblical allusions

- Opal's father is a Baptist preacher and several scenes are set in the church. The play, however, is not spiritually sectarian.
- *Naomi*—The Florida town is Naomi. The woman Naomi figures in *The Book of Ruth*, where she and her Judean husband and sons move to Moab during a famine. There her husband dies and her two sons marry Moabite women, Orpah and Ruth. When her sons also die, grieving Naomi decides to return home now that the famine has ended. Orpah stays in Moab, but Ruth goes back to Bethlehem with Naomi, saying "Where you go, I will go.... Your people shall be my people, and your God my God." As a result, Ruth marries Boaz, an heir to Naomi's husband's land, and has a son who becomes the grandfather of David.

The Naomi allusion highlights the themes of loss, grief, change of home, and new life and new relationships. Naomi is filled with grief and sees no future, as is true of many in the town, but Ruth's fidelity gives Naomi a new family, as Opal and Winn-Dixie's do.

- *Isaiah 56:8*—The dialogue of the play opens with the preacher quoting Isaiah 56:8 as part of his upcoming first sermon in Naomi [not in the novel]—"The Lord God which gathereth the outcasts of Israel saith, Yet will I gather others to him. Even them will I make joyful in my house of prayer." And that is exactly what occurs in the large arc of the story by way of Opal and Winn-Dixie's initial bond and their expanding friendships—the outcasts are gathered.

- *charity to the Less Fortunate: 1 Corinthians 13:2*—"If I have the gift of prophecy and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and have all faith so I could move mountains, but have not charity, I am nothing."

Opal uses this idea to ask the Preacher to let the dog stay and quotes it again to the Dewberry boys when they taunt her with picking up strays (which, of course, she does). Later in the play Stevie Dewberry quotes the passage verbatim when the adults seem reluctant to go search for Winn-Dixie in the storm. Charity/love ricochets throughout the play.

Also note that the idea of seeing another as "Less Fortunate" may not be a condescension here but automatically serves as a reminder of one's own blessings when things seem empty.

Labels/ Loneliness/ Loss

- *Open Arms Baptist Church*. The shift of occupant from the Pick-It-Quick store to the Open Arms church parallels the action of the play. The town's identification of its problematic citizenry (one drunk and one ex-con, and the "drunk" is also called a "witch") and other superficial assumptions limit and cut off any real knowledge of people and any sense of community. They use the "pick-it-quick" or "label and forget it" approach to life. For instance, even the children have heard that Otis has been in jail which, they are told, means he could "snap" at any time, so he's isolated and shunned.

But the play slowly opens the town's hearts and their arms to each other, finding the individual beneath every label and every stereotype and the possibilities and gifts each has. It is not the church itself that does this, but putting a few basic beliefs into practice rather than leaving them in the book after church.

In the novel, the Friendly Corners Trailer Park with all its adults-only restrictions makes a comparable point.



This dog now has a home and an owner who posted his picture, but his look implies he may remember when he didn't, like Winn-Dixie and the dogs on Petfinders.com



Colby is a poodle mix, like Winn-Dixie. He lives in Mississippi and needs a new home, so he is listed on Petfinders.com, a website that helps pets and people adopt each other.

"I don't have a mama. I mean I have one, I just don't know where she is. We don't talk about that.... I kind of wish someone would talk about that."

—Opal

Dealing with Loss

- Loss is difficult for everyone, but especially for children. All but one child in this play are missing a family member—a parent or a sibling. What do they need? What can anyone offer them? What can they offer the others who share loss?

Issues and Ideas in the Novel and Musical/ 2

Labels/ Loneliness/ Loss (continued)

- moving/ new in town/ *Tale of Two Cities*:

Opal's isolation results from the loss of the only home she's known and the loss of her friends; a new, unknown place seems empty. She is lonely and full of loss, not just due to the move but also due to her mother's leaving. All the loss descends on her now, just as Winn-Dixie appears.

In the first church scene, when we see Amanda reading *A Tale of Two Cities*, we know that is exactly what Opal is experiencing and we get the sense that many residents may not be in good times in Naomi, but we also know Opal has already found a turn to better times. Best/worst links to the sweetness/sorrow pattern later.

As Opal explores Naomi, she meets many individuals who have been labeled and excluded, who are lonely, and who have experienced losses. Acknowledging their state and not leaving them alone, as they do not leave her alone, opens more arms. The play also notices that from the outside a person's inner state may not be visible. Amanda is one example here; Opal sees Amanda as being snooty and having a pinched up face, but she changes her perspective when she learns more of Amanda's story. Labels or first impressions may need re-examination.

Parents/ Children/ Communication (Family Love amid Crisis)

- The preacher and Opal both experience the loss of her mother, but their losses are so different—wife vs. mother—they cannot yet discuss it. She perceives him as pulling into his shell (but if she looked many people are in shells in Naomi). He is filled with ongoing love and with rejection and emptiness while Opal holds him responsible for the loss and needs to talk, which they finally do.

The musical shifts a major father/daughter exchange in the novel. In the mother's list section of Chapter Four, the last detail is "She loved you very much," to which Opal's father adds, "She packed her bags and left us, and she didn't leave one thing behind." At the end of the novel, however, after he has to tell Opal he doesn't think her mother is ever coming back, he says,

"I forgot one thing, one very important thing, that she left behind.... You. Thank God your mama left me you."

The musical includes the bones of this exchange but in a quite different way. The mother's list moment is now at the end of the play, and in his song "Thirteen Things" he ends, "When she left and didn't leave / One thing behind." Opal sings in response, "She left her memory ... / And one more thing: she also left you me." The difference in that recognition seems important to the balance of the relationship, and the musical may make the choice it does because the mother's absence is more recent and also to give Opal a role in the song, to bring its arc into the present and let the Preacher look ahead for Opal.

- The Wilkinson family has lost a family member, too, a child, and everyone feels individually responsible [the song "No One Watching"]. Amanda retreats into books, but needs to talk to her parents, while her mother feels she has no answers, and her own grief and her former church's unhelpful sympathy isolate her. Articulating these problems near the end of the play is an opening to the future.
- The Dewberry family has experienced yet a different kind of family loss, a nasty divorce; the father ran off with another woman, leaving his former wife with the two boys. All are scarred individually and because it was the talk of the town, and the boys try to get Opal's attention by acting tough and knowledgeable, when, as Gloria tells Opal in the novel, they're just trying to be friends in a roundabout way.
- In the play the Thomas couple reach out for advice to the Wilkinsons; they want something better for their child than what they have and don't know how to get it. Each couple articulates a need for clarity, and the very expression of need seems to open them to each other and to their children, especially the Wilkinsons.



"You just pick up the strays, don't you, Preacher's kid?"

—Dunlap



William Berloni with Taran, an Irish wolfhound who played Winn-Dixie in the 2013 Arkansas premiere of the musical

Issues and Ideas in the Novel and Musical/ 3

Labels/ Mistakes/ Choices and Loss

- Accidents and divorce happen; as Opal says early in the play, they are things that can seem "to happen to" one. For Otis and Gloria, the issue seems to be mistakes or choices of the moment that proved climactic or destructive and that have now respectively labeled them in the community, at least to the children, as "retarded" and "a witch." The novel leaves their respective backgrounds imprecise; we meet the individuals as Opal does and respond to them accordingly.
- A comparable or perhaps even more intense specification occurs with Gloria's character. In the novel when she finally shows Opal the bottle tree, which is well

The play, however, also invents and explains their backgrounds in detail in their songs. It heeds the Dewberry taunt and makes Otis a victim of lead poisoning (the start of the first stanza of "You Can't Run"—"I can still smell the lead: / First day of school. / Slow in the head") and then the lyrics expand that characterization: "Not quick at pickin' up the rules/ I guess that makes me dumb" and "I act a fool nearly ev'ry day." Whether that detail invites understanding or labeling compared to the novel's approach deserves consideration.

into their friendship, she says the bottles are there "to keep the ghosts away ... of all the things I done wrong." It acknowledges her alcoholism and lets Opal relate because her mother also drank, but that is the extent of the discussion.

In the play, though, Gloria sings "Bottle Tree Blues," which lists a litany of problems, including a child, house fire, and thefts all invented in the music.

Compare the way these two characters are presented in novel and musical. Does the invented detail in the songs in any way alter our view of Otis and Gloria? Do we understand them better?

Cultural Past/ Personal Past

- Franny Block, now an elderly lady, still works in her library, a childhood birthday present from her wealthy father. As she does, both Opal and Amanda rely on books as companions before they develop any other kind. In the novel, Opal calls Franny her first friend in Naomi.
- Franny's family perspective goes back farther than the other families', back to her great-grandfather Littmus W. Block, who—in the musical— had lived on a sugar plantation (a detail apparently generated by his later desire for something sweet) and who fought in the Civil War.
- As it does with Otis and Gloria, the musical adds detail to Littmus's story, details of slavery and specific Civil War battles—neither of which the novel mentions—until he decides it's not worth the bleeding and death, ending with the lyric, "The question is not / What you did, / But what you'll do tomorrow."
- By making candy, Franny says in the musical, Littmus "got rich again, without slavery and misery." And in the musical, the factory brought riches to the town for a time. Now there is no factory and, it seems, no fortune left. And Franny seems still to expect Gloria to use the back door.

Again we need to assess the effect of the detail in the song on the moment and the characterizations. What does the cultural perspective add to the story?

The novel makes a subtler point when Opal decides to read *Gone With the Wind* to Gloria and asks if she knows about the Civil War. Gloria simply replies, "I have heard it mentioned a time or two," as she sucks a Littmus Lozenge of sweetness and sorrow.



Because of Winn-Dixie



Is Franny just hysterical when she believes Winn-Dixie is a bear as he stands up to see Opal through the library window? Well, some dogs stand tall. Imagine the dog above as a shadowy figure at your window. Frank Brendan, the owner here shown, is 6'1" tall, and his Irish wolfhound is several inches taller. (This dog is not photoshopped to be large; it is a large dog, the tallest breed.)

Issues and Ideas in the Novel and Musical/ 4

Growing Up

- The children, especially Opal and Amanda who comment early in the musical that fairy tales are not true, find a lack of fun and future in Naomi, and all but Opal spend their days repeating the labels they've learned from others and encouraging each other to follow the rules and the "rules"—don't go there, don't talk to him/her, that's a bad word. But they are as hungry for companionship as everyone else in town, as eager for communication about their life questions, as zealously yearning for an opportunity.

Winn-Dixie and Opal are our bellwethers in the action; their openness and acceptance

based on experience carve a path others can and do follow. Opal is not disobedient; in fact, she heeds her father's words about charity and the Less Fortunate and extends them to animals as well as to those around her whom others have excluded. Otis, too, is sensitive to the plight of animals in a pet store.

The grownups have both wistful and bitter views of adulthood; they feel caught in a dead end emotionally and socially—until the one-two punch of Opal and Winn-Dixie hits Naomi.

- *Is growing up an absolute—one day, presto, you're grown up—or is it a process and an ongoing activity? Are there stages—not old enough to / old enough to? If so, what stages describe the characters in the play?*

The Littmus Lozenge Image: Sweetness and Sorrow

Several names are commented on in the course of the novel—for instance, Opal says that because her last name is Buloni she used to be called "Lunch Meat" in her old home town. When she mentions her own last name, Gloria Dump usually says of hers, "Ain't that a terrible last name?" Names are funny sometimes, especially to kids, as DiCamillo recognizes.

But Franny's great-grandfather's first name is also of interest, because Littmus suggests the litmus test. Litmus is actually a dye made from lichens which in alkalines turns blue and in acids turns red, so it is used as a pH indicator. The idea that it has both potentials and depends on the solution it contacts makes it relevant to DiCamillo's use of the idea in the story.

We get Littmus's story at length in the novel and in song in the musical. He grew up fast during the Civil War, learning that "glory" can be agony, losing both his family and home by the conflict's end. All his life and that of many others now seems to be sorrow, and in order to put a little sweetness back into life, he decides to make candy—with a secret ingredient. Given the circumstances, we might expect that life = sorrow but candy = sweet, but not Littmus's candy. His secret ingredient is like a litmus test, a little bit of sorrow that people can taste.

It works like a truth serum in the novel and in the play. Franny keeps drawers of the no-longer-made lozenges; Opal takes a pocketful and shares them with her friends, thus revealing as nothing else could what bothers Amanda. In the musical we see the effect of each lozenge offered, and the result is usually a song. The lozenges open up deep feelings, and in a musical deep feelings become lyrics and melody.

DiCamillo's novel fully admits that life is both sweet and sorrowful. The life situations she presents—an absent spouse and mother, divorce, a dead child, alcoholism, incarceration—are actually surprisingly close to the ingredients of Grimms' fairy tales, with children getting devoured or youths caught in brambles or poisoned by an apple, stepsisters having their eyes pecked out, a man enchanted into a beast, or a stepmother dancing to death in red-hot iron shoes. Despite the glossy idea of fairy tales in the musical's "Not True at All," the real folk/fairy tales can be grim and honest in their imagery: you learn or you lose. DiCamillo is more charitable in her story; you lose *and* you learn. In different amounts life is sorrow *and* sweetness, and given some friends, anywhere can become a special place in which to live and grow.



Activities about, with, and for Dogs and Other Animals

Our Animal Companions

- Find out how long dogs and cats have been domesticated and part of human life. What do they offer us and what do we offer them? How have they affected us and how have we affected them? What is the value of domesticated animals in our lives?
- If you have a pet or know a pet, imagine a day in that animal's life and narrate it. Find out what makes a dog or cat or fish or gerbil "tick" and apply your knowledge to the diary of this particular pet.
- What is your favorite dog or cat in literature or film/cartoon? What is your favorite dog or cat story? Why? Justify your claim in discussion or writing. What makes a good dog or cat story? Is *Because of Winn-Dixie* such a story?
- Tell your own animal story—any animal, any plot, any setting. Can your animal think like a real animal or does it think like a human, like you? Can you think of an example of a story in which the animals do each?
- Have a debate on dogs vs. cats as pets. For decades there were more dogs owners than cat owners in America, but recently the statistics have flipped. Why might that be?

Rescue Animals and Humane Shelters

- In the Montgomery area, there are three humane shelters for animals, all of which actively seek volunteers to walk dogs and help the shelter as well as supplies to care for the animals.

If you are seeing the show or reading the book, make it a class or school project to contact the shelter nearest you and find out about their animals and their needs. Collect supplies for a shelter, and perhaps even volunteer with your family. There's a Winn-Dixie or two there who needs your care.

—Montgomery Humane Society
1150 John Overton Drive
Montgomery, AL 409-0622

—Autauga County Humane Society
1009 Reuben Rd
Prattville, AL 358-2882

—Humane Society of Elmore County
255 Central Plank Road
Wetumpka, AL 567-3377

- Older students may want to research the developments in animal care since Berloni's first pound experience in 1976, looking at the no-kill movement in animal sheltering and rescue and the many organizations that help abused animals or animals at pet mills. Are there such organizations near by? Have such incidents occurred in your area? Check newspaper files online or interview someone and write an article for the school newspaper.
- If you know a rescue animal or have adopted one, discuss the before and after of the animal's and your own experience. How do animals make a difference in our lives? How can we make a difference in an animal's life?
- Research the role and use of service animals in society; how do they help and who do they help?



Bowdie, star of Because of Winn-Dixie, as the dog who makes the difference in everyone's life

- Illustrate a moment from *Because of Winn-Dixie* (novel or musical) that best expresses what a dog is and how a dog behaves.
- Write your own dog howl song—like Opal's "Awoo, awoo." Why would you howl and what would you say with a howl? How many kinds of moods and tones do dog howls have?



Opal: "I never had a friend who wrote music."

Otis: "I never had a friend."



Harley is a poodle/golden retriever mix who is listed on Petfinders.com as needing a new home. Poodle intelligence and retriever spirit are a great mix; let's hope he finds that welcoming home.

Activities for Students Who Read or Know the Novel

Thinking about the Novel and the Story

- The basics: where are we? what kind of place is it? what are its values?
Who are the characters? What is their situation? What are their relationships? What are their values? What do they want (possible, not possible)? How do they go about getting it? Do they find anything they don't expect?

What is the conflict in the story? Is there more than one conflict?

How does the author tell the story? What is the narrative point-of-view? What is the time span of the story? How do these influence or affect our sense of the story?

What imagery does the author use? What actions or situations take on the power of images?

What issues does the author engage or address through the action?

- Opal and her father are the core family, and Opal the core human character, in the story. At the start, they have had a double change in their lives—a recent move to a new environment and a longer, deeper loss, her absent mother, yet their first action is to take on a new family member, Winn-Dixie. What do we learn from that? What kind of people are they?
Is that first action the core action of the work? Does it repeat? Is Winn-Dixie the cause or the catalyst of the change? What difference does Winn-Dixie make? In the novel, Opal says that she's still lonely even after she has Winn-Dixie. What does she want or need? Does she get or find it?

- How important an element is change for all the characters in this story? How likely is change at the opening? Why does it occur now? Are all the circumstances of isolation and change the same? Consider each character—do DiCamillo and Benjamin offer us clones or individuals?

- Imagery: What specifics seem to offer larger suggestive value in the story? Otis's music? Storm? Bottles? How might these elements feed into larger issues and values? What other elements might do the same?

Page to Stage

- Consider/compare the way fiction and drama work.

In fiction, a story works with scenes and narration, and the narrator can know everything (omniscient/third person) or just give one person's perspective (first person), and the narrator can be trustworthy (reliable) or not, with variations beyond those basics. The scenes stop and follow specific action in detail, while the narration can move faster, shifting elements, time, and place, giving background, setting up scenes, or commenting on action.

In drama there are always scenes. What scenes do you most want to see? How easy are those to put on stage?

On stage, there is not always, in fact, not usually a narrator. The musical here does not have a narrator, whereas the novel does—Opal is a first-person narrator. What difference does that make in the way we get the story on stage?

- Character: Kate DiCamillo creates rich characters. Explore them:
 - 1) Divide the class into groups and have each group describe what we know about a specific character from what Opal learns, what others say about the person, and what the person says. Make a list of ten things!
 - 2) Discuss what this character's role is in the novel—given the major issues, how does this character fit in?
 - 3) Then discuss/ discover what aspects the characters share with one or more of the others and how that shapes the novel.
 - 4) Watch how the characters are portrayed on stage. How many aspects from the novel are present? Are there any new or different elements? If so, what effect do they have?
 - 5) Are the songs an important part of who the characters are and how we see them in the play? Why do they sing when they sing? What do they sing about? How do we respond?



"No! Listen. Because of Winn-Dixie, I've got a job, and I've got friends, and I'm even invited to a party! The theme is pink!"

—Opal

Your Own "13 Things" List

- Write a song or poem or paragraph including the list of 10 or 13 (or whatever number matches your age) things about yourself—that number of things others know about you, or that number of things you know about yourself, or a mixture.



Activities for Students Who Read or Know the Novel/ 2

Pre-Show/ Thinking Theatrically

In drama a set, lighting, sound, costumes, and characters are all visible on stage; we see and hear the detail, and the director and designers choose particular details, such as how realistic or suggestive to make that stage environment. What choices would you make about putting Naomi and the characters on stage for an audience? How many places do we need to see? How much of each? How do we do that on stage? What do the characters wear? How old are they?

- Draw the settings for one or more scenes as if you were the set designer. Do you need a photographic sense of place or a minimalist sense with only one or two key elements? What is the effect of each choice? (Try one of each for one scene!)

Make a list of times of day and interior/ exterior scenes for the lighting designer—remembering that the audience needs to be able to see the action on stage.

Make a list of the sounds the action or place needs (such as the storm) for the sound designer. When does the storm start?

What do we hear? How does it change? How long does it go on? Do we still need to hear the characters' dialogue on stage?

What do the characters wear in each scene? How do you use costume to create or reveal character? Draw or collage some costumes. If you did the group character analysis described above, costume your character.

Cosmo, another poodle mix, needed a new home, and Petfinders.com says he has now been adopted—just like Winn-Dixie! Way to go, Cosmo; you'll make some family very happy. (Note: all the local humane societies now use Petfinders.com to list their available animals.)

Responding to the Play

- What does the world of Naomi, Florida, look like and feel like when you read the novel? How does the play embody that world? What details worked to establish place? Do you recognize Naomi? Did you see enough on stage to get the sense of "place"?
- How well does Kate DiCamillo convey Winn-Dixie's character in the novel? Opal always narrates what she thinks the dog is thinking, but what difference does it make when we see an actual dog on stage without Opal's narration?
- What difference does it make to see the action without Opal's voice narrating it? Is the effect the same in the play as in the novel? If so, how? If not, how do they differ? Is that just the medium (page vs. stage)?
- Write a review of the musical. That means you decide and state what the play was about, describe the way it chose to tell the story, and assess how well it did it with characterization, design, music, and action/pace. (A review is somewhere between a report card and a consumer report.)

Naomi, Florida, Moving, and Your Home Town

- How big does Naomi, Florida seem to be in the novel? Why? How much of it do we actually see and move in? Do we cover the entire town? How much of your town do you cover in an average week? Can different people live in different "towns" all in the same town? Describe your particular view of your home town.



Protagonist

- In the novel Opal is 10 years old and her mother has been gone for 7 years. In the musical Opal is 13 and her mother has been gone for a year and a half. What effect, if any, do those changes make for the musical?
- Older Students: Assess the psychological and social difference between having a 10-year-old protagonist and a 13-year-old protagonist in this play. Are the issues and mindset the same?

Imagery

- To one famous Southern protagonist, life is just a box of chocolates. Here life is a Littmus Lozenge. Compare/contrast these images and what they suggest about life. How does the Lozenge work with the story?



Bowdie rehearsing with Bill Berloni

- Consider the following images:
 - Open Arms Baptist Church
 - music [effect of music on pets in the pet store/on people/why & what they sing]
 - book titles
 - bottles
 - storm/reaction to storm
 - lost and found (being lost/being found)

Universal Activities (knowledge of novel not necessary)

Identifying the Givens of the Play

- Identify and consider the basic elements or "givens" of the play:
 - the major action and its arc beginning to end
 - the major characters and their arcs (what do they want; do they change?); what are the relationships between the characters?
 - the setting(s): what is this particular world? what are its values? how does it affect the characters? how do they affect it?
 - what are the conflicts in the action? if they are resolved, how? why?
 - what is the imagery in the play? what elements have suggestive import for the whole piece?
 - compare the opening to the ending

Issues/Ideas

- What issues do the action and characters address, experience, or embody?
 - what is Opal's situation? what issues are associated with that situation?
 - what is her father's situation? what issues are associated with that situation? what issues does he share with Opal?
 - what are the situations of the town's inhabitants? what issues do they share? what issues are individual? are they isolated or unified?

The Music

- What does the music add to the story? To what extent is the music the story?
- What styles of music are used? Are the styles appropriate to character and setting? How and why?
- Which song do you think best expresses character? Why and how? Which song do you think best expresses mood? Do the songs move the action, or are they moments/islands of character and emotion amid the action?

Fairy Tales/Expectations

- Opal and Amanda sing "Not True at All," registering the difference between the fairy tales (and perhaps Disney films) they experienced as younger children and their current reality and apparent expectations. What is the view of actual fairy tales? What is the Disney view? Are they the same? What are Opal and Amanda reacting to? Do they think life makes us promises that then get broken? Is that true? Does it end up being true for them in the play? Is this part of growing up? The adults join them in this song and response to life. Is this view true for working adults with families and/or senior citizens? Do the adult characters end with this view?

Animals/ Animal Companions/ Pets

- Winn-Dixie is the animal protagonist of the musical. He even gets to participate in a song. What is the role of Winn-Dixie in the play?
- Does Opal "own" Winn-Dixie? Discussions of human relationships with domestic animals distinguishes between "pets" and "animal companions" on the basis of the idea of ownership. Is that significant? Does the musical engage the issue of ownership at all?

Naomi, Florida, Moving, and Your Home Town

- Compare Naomi to your home town or school. Does a place have to be small for people to feel alone when new, isolated or labeled? Does that happen anywhere? Does it happen to children *and* to adults? Does a big place mean you automatically fit in?
- Because Opal and her father have just moved to Naomi, everything is new to her. Have you ever moved to a new place? What is the difference between moving during the school year or during summer vacation as Opal does? How easy is it to make new friends? How do you deal with missing your old friends? How easy is it to keep those friendships going when you're not there?



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