

The Indian in the Cupboard
by Lynne Reid Banks

A Teacher's Guide for Socratic Discussion
by Michaela Peine & Missy Andrews



TABLE OF CONTENTS



| | |
|--|----|
| Introduction | 3 |
| Quick Card | 5 |
| Questions about Structure: Setting | 7 |
| Questions about Structure: Characters | 10 |
| Questions about Structure: Conflict and Plot | 13 |
| Questions about Structure: Theme | 17 |
| Questions about Style | 20 |
| Questions about Context | 23 |
| Suggestions for Writing Assignments | 24 |
| Story Charts | 25 |

INTRODUCTION



CenterForLit’s teacher guide series is intended to assist teachers and parents in conducting meaningful discussions of literature in the classroom or home school. It is important to note that they are **not** intended to be workbooks for the student, but rather models and guides for discussion leaders. Questions and answers follow the pattern presented in *Teaching the Classics*, CenterForLit’s flagship literature seminar. Though the concepts underlying this approach to literary analysis are explained in detail in that seminar, the following brief summary presents the basic principles upon which this guide is based.

The *Teaching the Classics* approach to literary analysis and interpretation is built around **three unique ideas** which, when combined, produce a powerful instrument for understanding and teaching literature:

First: All works of fiction share the same basic elements — **Context, Structure, and Style**. A literature lesson that helps the student identify these elements in a story prepares them for meaningful discussion of the story’s themes.

Context encompasses all of the details of time and place surrounding the writing of a story, including the personal life of the author as well as historical events that shaped the author’s world.

Structure includes the essential building blocks that make up a story, and that all stories have in common: Conflict, Plot (which includes *exposition, rising action, climax, denouement, and conclusion*), Setting, Characters, and Theme.

Style refers to the literary devices used by authors to create the mood and atmosphere of their stories. Recognition of some basic literary devices (alliteration, simile, personification, metaphor, etc.) enables a reader not only to understand the author’s themes more readily, but also to appreciate his craftsmanship more fully.

Second: Because it is approachable and engaging, *children’s literature* is the best genre to employ in teaching the foundational principles of literary analysis. Children’s books present these building blocks in clear, memorable language, and are thus treasure mines of opportunities for the astute teacher—allowing him to present Context, Structure, and Style with ease to children and adults alike. Having learned to recognize these basic elements in the simple text of a classic children’s story, a student is well prepared to analyze complex works suitable for his own age and level of intellectual development.

Third: The best classroom technique for teaching literary analysis and interpretation is the *Socratic Method*. Named after the ancient gadfly who first popularized this style of teaching, the Socratic method employs the art of questioning, rather than lecturing, to accomplish education. Based upon the conviction that the process of discovery constitutes the better part of learning, our program uses well-placed questions to teach students how to think, rather than dictating to them what to think.

The *Teaching the Classics* seminar syllabus supplies a thorough list of Socratic questions for teachers to use in class discussion. The questions are general enough to be used with any book, but focused enough to lead the

student into meaningful contemplation of the themes of even the most difficult stories. Questions on the list are arranged in order of difficulty: from grammar-level questions which ask for the mere fact of a story, to rhetoric-level questions which require discussion of ideologies and transcendent themes. Properly employed, this list can help teachers engage their classes in important discussions of ideas, and can also provide a rich resource for essays and other writing assignments! Used in conjunction with a good writing program, *Teaching the Classics* produces **deep thinkers** at any age.

The questions used in this guide have been taken directly from the Socratic list, and will therefore be familiar to the seminar alumnus.

More information about *Teaching the Classics* may be found at www.centerforlit.com/teaching-the-classics.

Happy reading!

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Adam Andrews", with a long, sweeping underline.

Adam Andrews, Director
The Center for Literary Education
3350 Beck Road
Rice, WA 99167
(509) 738-6837
adam@centerforlit.com

QUICK CARD



| | |
|--------------------------|--|
| <p>Reference</p> | <p><i>The Indian in the Cupboard</i>. Lynne Reid Banks. (1980) ISBN: 978-0375847530</p> |
| <p>Plot</p> | <p>Omri, a young boy, receives a gift on his ninth birthday, a magic cabinet that brings plastic figures to life: Little Bear (a tiny Iroquois Indian), Booney (a cowboy from the Wild West), an old Indian chief, and Bright Stars (a wife for Little Bear). With each subsequent addition to his live collection, the demands upon Omri grow, and with these, Omri's understanding of the nature and consequence of authority and responsibility.</p> |
| <p>Setting</p> | <p>The story takes place over the course of a few school days during the ninth year of the English boy Omri's childhood. It ranges from the family's home to the local school and dime store.</p> |
| <p>Characters</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Omri: a nine-year-old British boy, who is curious, adventure-seeking, and sensitive • Little Bear: a formerly plastic Iroquois Indian whom Omri surprisingly brings to life with his magic cupboard • Patrick: Omri's good friend from school, who is somewhat careless and jealous, but ultimately loyal (foil to Omri) • Boone: a plastic cowboy whom Omri also brought to life; he becomes close friends with Little Bear. • Omri's family: his mother, and Gillon and Adiel—his brothers; although Omri occasionally squabbles with his family, they are very close • Tommy Atkins: a plastic WWI, English medic Omri brings to life to tend to the injured Little Bear. • The old Indian chief who dies of a heart attack when Omri brings him to life • Bright Stars: a plastic Indian maiden Omri brings to life to be a wife for Little Bear • School Principal and Teachers • Mr. Yapp from the local dime store |
| <p>Conflict</p> | <p>Man vs. Man: Omri must protect Little Bear and Boone from the dangers of human beings and from one another; Omri must provide for and control his new charges.</p> <p>Man vs. Nature: Omri must protect the living figures from dangers in their environment (cold, hunger, animals).</p> <p>Man vs. Self: Omri wants to use the cupboard's magic and the living figures to entertain himself, but he finds that caring for living beings is not a game. Omri must learn selflessly to choose Little Bear's good above his own desires.</p> |

| | |
|-------------------------|---|
| Theme | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Humanity vs. Objectification• Friendship as self-sacrifice• The inseparable nature of authority and responsibility• Coming of Age: Maturity as concern for the other, the ability to see beyond the self |
| Literary Devices | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Imagery• Hyperbole• Symbolism• Character Foil• Allusion• Foreshadowing |

QUESTIONS ABOUT STRUCTURE: SETTING



The following questions are drawn from the “Setting” section of the Socratic List, found in Appendix A, pages 80-81 of the Teaching the Classics syllabus.

Where does the story take place? In what country or region does the story happen? (1a)

Although Omri lives in a regular house in England, much of the tension of the story arises from his struggle to reconcile his experience with the experience of Little Bear. Omri’s world is all he really knows, but he gradually comes to realize that his culture differs from other cultures. As he learns about Little Bear’s native country, he gradually comes to recognize the differences between his assumptions and lifestyle and those of his new charge. Furthermore, he realizes that his assumptions about American Indians are fictionalized as well. Lynne Reid Banks writes that “it occurred to Omri for the first time that his idea of Indians, taken entirely from Western films, had been somehow false. After all, those had been actors playing Indians, and afterward wiping their war paint off and going home for their dinners, not in tepees but in houses like his” (29). This is an important distinction in *The Indian in the Cupboard*. As Omri matures, he must learn to respect the lives and experiences of others. He discovers that Little Bear is not merely a toy that he can play with as he chooses, but rather an individual—albeit a physically small one—with his own history, feelings, and personality.

Ask students: Why are these issues of size, culture, and personhood important? Authors develop their characters through physical description, through their actions, through what others say about them, and through what they say about others. How do the human characters in the story treat Little Bear, Boone, and the rest of the small people? How do various characters’ treatment of these little people affect your respect for them?

Is the setting a real or imaginary place? If it is imaginary, is it subject to the same physical laws as our world? (1g)

Omri’s world seems very similar to our own, which produces the excitement and wonder readers feel when the magic of the cupboard and the key are introduced. Omri himself is deeply shocked by this discovery. He recognizes the incredible situation in which he finds himself and hesitates to tell others, “maybe [because] he was afraid that if he took his eyes off the Indian for even a moment, he would vanish, or become plastic again, and then when the others came running they would all laugh and accuse Omri of making things up. And who could blame anyone for not believing this unless they saw it with their own eyes?” (7). He recognizes that “it was certainly the most marvelous thing that had ever happened to Omri in his life” (7). The wonder of the Indian’s transformation infuses the story with the magic of a fairytale.

Interestingly, Little Bear seems less surprised by the magic of the cupboard, since his cultural worldview includes supernaturalism. Omri reflects that “the Indian hadn’t seemed very surprised about being in a giant house in England. He had shown that he was very superstitious, believing in magic

and in good and evil spirits. Perhaps he thought of Omri as—well, some kind of genie, or whatever Indians believed in instead” (30). This distinguishes the worldview of the Indian from the materialistic assumptions of the average modern man, presenting another opportunity to speak with students about presuppositions—the unexamined assumptions or beliefs an individual holds that inform their understanding of reality. Although Little Bear may occasionally seem foolish or backwards to students, what assumptions do they have that might seem outlandish to a person who did not grow up as they did?

Incidentally, within the context of the story, Little Bear’s supernatural assumptions prove to be more correct than Omri’s material assumptions, whose experience with the magic of the cupboard changes his perception of reality. He lives in a dualistic world of matter and magic. As long as the key exists, these planes might intersect. (This key connection also provides the author with the opportunity for story sequels.)

Does the story happen in a particular year, era, or age of the world? What historical events may have just preceded the period of the story? Do these events help explain the actions of the characters or the action of the story? (2d)

The magic of the cupboard has the capacity to animate figures from diverse historical periods. While Little Bear is an Iroquois warrior (presumably from 17th century America), the cowboy Boone is a Texan from the 19th century. Omri occasionally brings other figures to life to aid him—for example, he takes a large axe from a knight, thinking that “he had looked most unpleasant, just as knights must have looked when they were murdering the poor Saracens in Palestine” (49). At several points in the story, Omri calls upon the services of Tommy, an English “First World War soldier with the red armband of a medical orderly” (42). Each small figurine reacts differently to being animated by the cupboard, and it becomes clear to Omri that each has been plucked out of his own distinct historical time. While this form of time-travel is not fully explained, it provides a very interesting thought experiment for students; ask students how they think characters from different historical periods might react to being brought to life in the present time. Conversely, if the students were to find themselves awakening in the magical cupboard, how might they react to a strange world in a different time period?

NOTES:

QUESTIONS ABOUT STRUCTURE: CHARACTERS



The following questions are drawn from the “Characters” section of the Socratic List, found in Appendix A, pages 82-83 of the Teaching the Classics syllabus.

Who is the story about? (3)

Omri is the story’s protagonist. He is nine years old, and occasionally prone to explosions of emotion. He is uniquely sensitive, and feels very strongly about his duty to protect Little Bear and Boone. Omri describes himself as a “former crybaby,” which becomes evident when he is deeply upset. For example, when Omri believes that Little Bear has been turned back to plastic for good, “there was a painful thickness in the back of his throat. The pain of sadness, disappointment, and a strange sort of guilt burned inside him...he let the tears come, and just knelt there and cried for about ten minutes” (16). While some less sympathetic readers might be frustrated by Omri’s sensitivity, it is important to discuss the ways that this same sensitivity makes Omri better able to care for Little Bear and Boone.

In addition to his emotionalism, Omri is a prototypical nine-year-old boy, whose greatest concern is having fun. He’s self-absorbed and lacks any real gravity of mind. For this reason, Omri’s first thoughts upon discovering the magic Indian in the cupboard concern the fun he could have with the living miniature. Maybe he’d turn other plastic figures into animated beings and see how they’d react to each other. Even so, he has immediate misgivings about this plan as he considers what they might do to one another. This element of Omri’s control over others, or rather his lack of control over others, produces the necessary conflict to force Omri to examine his childish self-interest and to recognize the real lives and interests of others.

Of what nationality is the character? Does he live in his native land or somewhere else? (3g)

Omri and Patrick are English. Little Bear, in contrast, is an Iroquois warrior. Even so, Little Bear seems unsurprised when he finds himself in Omri’s room. His supernatural worldview appears to have prepared him for this experience.

Boone is a Texan cowboy, also a foreigner to Omri’s world.

Though Tommy is a British soldier, his own historical time period, that of World War I, differs dramatically from that of Omri. The past is a foreign country, after all.

Each of the characters that the magic cupboard animates represents a foreign culture—each represents someone “other” to Omri.

Is there a single character that opposes the protagonist in the story? In other words, is there an antagonist? (4a)

In truth, Little Bear and Boone serve as antagonists to Omri's egocentric desire to have authority without responsibility, to have fun without regard for others. When Omri realizes that the figurines he's placed in the cupboard have become real people with real needs, his game becomes a matter of life and death.

Of course, Little Bear and Boone don't intentionally antagonize Omri; rather, their human needs and dependency interrupt Omri's fun. Similar to the spirit of Shelley's *Frankenstein*, creators have a responsibility to those they animate. Omri has played God with the cupboard, and so the little figures rightly look to him for provision and protection. Though Omri didn't literally create Little Bear and Boone, he becomes responsible for them when he uses the magic of the cupboard to bring them to life.

When Little Bear realizes the truth—that his fate depends upon a child—he becomes unmanageable, proud, and angry. Suddenly, Omri's primary struggle becomes controlling the little men. Alongside the natural difficulty of protecting them from a world too big for their comfort, Omri also exerts considerable effort to protect them from one another, from the inadvertent and heedless actions of his best friend, Patrick, and from discovery by the adults in the story.

While Patrick is no evil villain, he does frequently endanger the little people. Patrick is a foil to Omri's immaturity, being even more egocentric and ignorant to others than Omri himself. Omri is infuriated when Patrick demands possession of Little Bear and Boone, as Patrick "quite obviously, was not a fit person to have charge of them...Nice as he was, as a friend, he just wasn't fit. It must be because he didn't take them seriously yet. He simply didn't seem to realize they were people" (119). The boys' different responses to the magic cupboard drive a wedge between them. Omri recognizes this after Patrick has told Mr. Johnson about Little Bear and Boone. Banks writes, "obviously [Patrick] was as upset as Omri, if not more so. Once again Omri felt their friendship trembling on the edge of destruction" (128). Banks makes it clear that there is a real disagreement between the two boys, and Patrick is not as careful as he ought to be with Little Bear and Boone. During these scenes, Patrick acts as an antagonist. He endangers Omri's secret as well as the safety of the two little men.

Why does he oppose the protagonist? Does he merely belong to a different social group? Does he see the world in slightly different ways? (4f)

On one hand, it can be easy for young readers to villainize Patrick for his hot-headed, selfish habits. Talk with students about why Patrick behaves this way. For example, it is easy to be upset at Patrick's selfishness when he brings Boone to life, but Banks writes, "no boy who knew the secret [of the cupboard] could possibly rest until he had a little live person of his own" (75). Ask students if they would behave any differently; would they resist the temptation of the magic cupboard?

Furthermore, Omri isn't fully blameless in the relationship. He too has succumbed to the temptation to use the magic cupboard for his own gratification. In addition, Banks' description of the two boys' relationship amplifies the self-centeredness that governs them both. When he gives Little Bear and Boone to Patrick at school, Banks writes, "Omri grated out between teeth clenched in anger. 'If you let anything happen to Little Bear, I will bash you so hard your teeth will fall out.' (This, of course, is what happens even to the nicest people when they are in a trap.)" (116). Banks offers her readers a window into the relationship between Omri and Patrick. Although both are good boys and good

QUESTIONS ABOUT STRUCTURE: CONFLICT AND PLOT



The following questions are drawn from the “Conflict” and “Plot” sections of the Socratic List, found in Appendix A, pages 84-86 of the Teaching the Classics syllabus.

What does the protagonist want? (5)

In the initial pages of the story, Omri’s greatest desire is for better birthday toys. He is disappointed in the plastic toy soldier his friend Patrick gifts him; he has plenty of them already, filling the tins in his room. He’s surprisingly excited about the cupboard his brother Gillon gives him, but he’s disappointed it lacks the necessary key to make it a truly secret cupboard. When his mother offers him a key from her own stash of discards, he finds one that fits the lock. All of this suggests that Omri’s greatest concern at this point is having fun. (Man vs. Man; Man vs. Self)

This desire is underscored when he discovers the cupboard’s magic—turning toy figurines into living, breathing (albeit miniature) men! This was better fun than he could ever have anticipated: toys that walk and talk back. Except that Omri never imagined what those talking toys would say and do, and he never thought about what they might need: food, shelter, clothing, companionship. These things are above Omri’s paygrade. He still looks to his own parents for such things; how can he provide them for these little men? Suddenly, Omri’s desire for fun is replaced by a constant and growing level of anxiety. How can he control, protect, and provide for these living beings? (Man vs. Man; Man vs. Nature; Man vs. Self)

Fill in the blank: This story is about the protagonist trying to _____. (5a)

The primary conflict of this story regards Omri’s maturation. This is accomplished as he pursues his childish desires and experiences their consequences. (Man vs. Self; Man vs. Nature; Man vs. Man) The story’s plot develops as Omri’s desire of self-gratification is thwarted by his struggle to sustain and to protect Little Bear and Boone. (Man vs. Self/Man vs. Man) Part of this challenge is hiding them from the discovery of other people. (Man vs. Man) Omri believes that any adult who comes to know about the magic cupboard will confiscate Little Bear. He also believes (rightly) that any other child who learns of Little Bear will demand that his or her own figure be brought to life, which presents the further complication of protecting more small people. (Man vs. Man/ Man vs. Himself) A lost key (Man vs. Self) and a rat beneath the floorboards (Man vs. Nature) intensify the drama. Because Omri is sensitive to the wellbeing of Little Bear and Boone, his primary concern becomes their safety. His own dependency on adults complicates this issue as he finds himself incapable of doing all that is necessary to keep his charges. (Man vs. Self)

Of course, this difficulty only exposes a deeper issue in the story, a philosophical issue most young readers will miss. The fundamental problem that gives rise to Omri’s struggle concerns the nature of authority and the responsibility that necessarily accompanies it. With every use of the cupboard, Omri assumes the power of life and death. He discovers that with such power necessarily comes the

responsibility to provide for and to sustain that life. The difficulties associated with this relationship exacerbate the obvious: Omri is just a boy. The power of life and death don't belong in his hands. The supernaturalism of Little Bear, who looks to Omri initially as a god, underscores Omri's real limitations. Relative size has nothing to do with maturity. Omri is no god, but a child. When Omri gives the key to the cupboard back into his mother's care, he admits that, at the very least, such authority belongs to adults. Omri learns that, in order to protect his friends, he must be willing to deny himself and send them back to their own times. In fact, it is clear that Omri has learned to think of others as "better than himself" when he gives up his cupboard and its magic and sends his friends home.

The magic of the cupboard provokes several questions: What is a human being? What does it mean to hold the power of life and death? Are human beings (let alone children) capable of wielding such power? Omri's adventures with the cupboard make him think carefully about what it truly means for Little Bear and Boone to be safe, and force him to examine the consequences of his decisions. Little Bear's supernatural assumptions, and in truth, the element of magic that charges the story, challenge naturalistic assumptions of reality and beg the ultimate question of divine authority and responsibility for human life.

Do his objectives or goals change throughout the story? How? Why? (5f)

Maybe a better way to pose this question to the student is to ask how Omri's understanding of the ways he ought to take care of Little Bear changes over the course of the story. At first, Omri acts very thoughtlessly. The first day he has Little Bear, Omri realizes at school that "if the Indian were real...then he would need food and other things. And Omri had left him shut up in the dark all day with nothing" (15). Omri must first learn the responsibility of caring for Little Bear's material needs. Then, as the story progresses, Omri further recognizes the need to hide Little Bear from discovery; he tries to protect the two small men from Patrick's immaturity.

In the midst of this tension, the reader witnesses the effect Omri's new responsibilities work on the relationship between the two boys. Omri becomes torn between protecting his friendship with Patrick and protecting the Indian from his friend's curiosity. At one point, we see this conflict playing out in Omri's mind. He "somehow felt that if he didn't share his secret with Patrick, their friendship would be over. He didn't want that" (64). Tensions escalate between the two boys when they bring Little Bear and Boone to school. Omri confronts Patrick harshly, telling him the little men are "not safe with you. You use them. They're people. You can't use people" (129). At this point, it seems that the boys' friendship will dissolve; however, Banks paints friendship as made of stronger stuff. When Omri gets in trouble at Yapp's drugstore for alleged shoplifting, it is Patrick who personally vouches for Omri's character, underscoring the importance of loyalty to friends even in the midst of disagreements. From this point on, the boys are allied in their determination to protect the little men from the outside world.

Do characters' actions provoke further conflict or unrest in the story? (7b)

While we've already discussed the complex relationship between Patrick and Omri, it's also important to touch on the relationship between Little Bear and Boone. The two begin as "cultural enemies," two individuals whose independent experiences make it almost impossible for them to get along. They verge on hatred for each other, and struggle to understand one another. In the words of Little Bear, "he try to shoot Little Bear. White enemy. Try take Indians' land. Why not kill? Better dead"

(93). Or, as Boone says, “Them Injuns ain’t jest ornery and savage. Them’s dirty” (99). Boone and Little Bear are deeply prejudiced against one another and initially refuse to even share a meal. Their antagonism makes more trouble for Omri, intensifying the story conflict.

However, Little Bear and Boone begin to bond over the shared experience of being transported by the magic cupboard. When the two men accompany Omri to school, they begin to communicate, and instead of fighting, “[Omri] was pleased to see them, sitting in the bottom of [his pocket], face to face, apparently having a conversation” (115). Little Bear and Boone’s relationship is further encouraged when they undergo Patrick’s foolish revelation of their existence to the school headmaster. Omri discovers that “Little Bear and Boone were sitting there, absolutely terrified. They were actually clinging on to each other” (128). Their shared experiences in a dangerous world begin to bring the two men together as the action of the story continues. The small men’s feelings heighten the gravity of Omri’s decisions regarding their future.

How do the interactions of the characters heighten the tension of the conflict that exists? (8c)

Sadly, the camaraderie of Little Bear and Boone dissipates when, watching a western on television, the two are drawn into the movie’s conflict. Seeing his countrymen slaughtered by cowboys, Little Bear loses his temper and shoots Boone with an arrow. This is deeply problematic, since the key to the cupboard has gone missing, thwarting Omri from bringing Tommy, the medic, to life to help Boone. Little Bear comes to understand the severity of his actions, as well as the dangers of his hot temper. Omri sees that “Little Bear knelt now with his hands loose on his thighs, his head down. His shoulders rose and fell once. Was he sobbing?” (152). Later, Little Bear expresses shame over his own actions: “[R]eaching up, he snatched off his chief’s headdress and threw it violently onto the ground. Before Omri could stop him, he began jumping on it, and in a second or two all the beautiful tail turkey feathers were bent and broken” (153). Little Bear comes to see his sin and recognizes that he has not behaved as a chief ought. He takes steps to mend his error, however, bravely volunteering to search for the key beneath the floorboards even though a threatening rat is loose. In this way, Little Bear and Boone—like Patrick—have the opportunity to uphold friendship and loyalty even in the midst of conflict.

How is the main problem solved? (9)

The main conflict in the story is resolved when Omri, with Little Bear’s valiant help, recovers the key and determines to send the little men back to the world of the cupboard:

For all Little Bear’s unpredictable moods, his demands, his occasional cruelties, Omri liked him. He wanted to keep him. But he knew, now, that that was impossible. Whichever way he thought about it, the end was the same—disaster of some kind. Whatever magic had brought this strange adventure about must be put to use again, to send the little people back to their own place and time. (170).

Even Patrick agrees: “‘It’s the only way really,’ Patrick said” (173). Placing the small figures inside the cupboard, he says his goodbyes and turns the key, finding them restored to their toy plastic condition when he reopens the door. Omri punctuates this decision by ceding control of the key to his mother, who indicates that she has had special experience with the key in her own time. This action affirms Omri’s growth; he has reached a state of maturity, considering the well-being of Little Bear and Boone more significant than his own desire for fun and power. Though no one could argue that

QUESTIONS ABOUT STRUCTURE: THEME



The following questions are drawn from the “Theme” section of the Socratic List, found in Appendix A, page 87 of the Teaching the Classics syllabus.

What does the protagonist learn? (11)

Omri learns to distinguish people from objects. He comes to recognize that because he has a certain amount of power over the small people, he must be careful to treat them with respect. For example, when Omri is away from the little people, he is burdened with anxiety: “Whenever he’d been away...for even a few minutes, he felt his heart beating in panic as he opened the door for fear of what he might find (or not find). The burden of constant worry was beginning to wear him out” (72). Omri learns that with agency and strength come responsibility.

Complications in the plot increase Omri’s anxiety as he is taxed to provide food, shelter, medical care, and community for his charges, and simultaneously to mitigate strained racial relations between the tiny men. Omri’s panic intensifies every time his friend, Patrick, who is even less mature than Omri, demands that he use the magic to transform a new figurine into a real human being. He struggles to make his friend understand what he has come to realize:

...if you put all those men in there, when they came to life they’d be real men with real lives of their own, from their own times and countries, talking their own languages. You couldn’t just—set them up and make them do what you wanted them to. They’d do what they wanted to, or they might get terrified and run away or—well, one I tried it with, an old Indian, actually died of—of fright when he saw me. (70)

Omri comes to see the desires inherent in other human hearts and the associated difficulties of controlling another person. Little Bear, too, pressures Omri to create a wife for him with the cupboard: “Another live little person to worry about...Omri had heard about people going gray-haired almost overnight if they had too much worry. He felt it might easily happen to him. He thought back to the time, only a few days ago, when this had all started, and he had fondly imagined it was all going to be the greatest fun anybody had ever had. Now he realized that it was more like a nightmare” (129). As the responsibility associated with the creation and sustenance of human life dawns on Omri, he discovers the magic of the cupboard is no game.

Banks even implies that Omri feels an existential burden to explain himself when the old chief figurine he magically brings to life drops dead of sheer fright at the sight of his large countenance:

When he opened the cupboard, the chief was still sitting on the shelf, looking about him in bewilderment, blinking as the light struck his eyes. Omri saw at once that he was a very old man, covered in wrinkles...The old man gazed up at him, blankly at first, and then with dawning terror. But he didn’t get up and he didn’t speak, though Omri saw his lips moving and noticed he had hardly

any teeth... The old Indian lifted a trembling hand and then suddenly slumped onto his side. (58)

When Little Bear declares the chief dead, Omri is shocked. Moreover, Little Bear's commanding tone demands the child's obedience, underscoring the difference in maturity between the two, which is in no way diminished by their contradictory sizes. This places Omri in the dangerous position of taking orders from the imperious little Indian. When Little Bear demands the old chief's weapons, Omri realizes with dread the responsibility he would bear if the little Indian should harm someone. This foreshadowing finds its mark in the shooting of Boone in chapter fourteen.

Through phenomenal circumstances, Omri matures; he learns to place others' needs above his own desires. Omri demonstrates this maturity with his decision to give the magic key back to his mother, but the heart change that precipitates this action occurs when he realizes his desire for Little Bear's happiness exceeds his own appetite for fun: "It wasn't the fun, the novelty, the magic that mattered anymore. What mattered was that Little Bear should be happy. For that, he would take on almost anything" (146). Omri's love for Little Bear provokes him to give up the key.

Does he begin to act differently? In what way? (11b)

Omri has some false starts as he learns to treat Little Bear with respect—just as Patrick does. When Omri first meets Little Bear, he is overcome by his desire to treat him like a toy, and he picks Little Bear up against his will. Banks writes, "yet when he saw how the Indian, who was altogether in his power, faced him boldly and hid his fear, he lost all desire to handle him—he felt it was cruel, and insulting to the Indian, who was no longer a plaything but a person who had to be respected" (22). Ask the student to point out other times Omri modifies his behavior in order to reflect the new and growing respect he has for Little Bear as a person rather than a thing.

It is interesting to note that Omri adopts the manner, voice quality, and phrases of his parents and teachers as he wrestles with the responsibility of caring for Little Bear and Boone. In one scene, Omri exasperatedly describes Little Bear's imperious claim of the old chief's title and headdress after his sudden death: "'Little Bear took it. He says he's a chief now. It's made him even more bossy and—and difficult than before,' said Omri, using a word his mother often used when he was insisting on having his own way" (70). In addition, it is notable that, when the key to the cupboard is lost, Omri is willing to sacrifice himself in exchange for Little Bear's happiness. This suggests that a change has taken place in Omri's heart. He has matured in his ability to see beyond himself.

Are other people in the story ennobled, changed, saved, improved or otherwise affected by the story's events? (12a)

One of the best parts of *The Indian in the Cupboard* is the final celebration that Omri, Patrick, Boone, Little Bear, and Bright Stars all share. During this feast, Boone and Little Bear make a blood oath to be brothers. Everyone celebrates Boone's healing and the marriage between Bright Stars and Little Bear. An image of peace and fraternity emerges, as Banks writes: "Bright Stars was now crouched by the fire, tending it, singing softly. One of the horses whinnied. Boone seemed to have dropped off to sleep, leaning on Little Bear's shoulder" (177). Talk to the students about the ways that this very diverse group of individuals has become fast friends—even brothers—through the action of the story. Indeed, before he goes back to his own time, Little Bear performs the brotherhood blood-oath once more with Omri, sealing the closeness of their relationship. What changes had to take place in each individual in order to make such friendship possible?

NOTES:

Lined area for notes, consisting of approximately 30 horizontal lines.

QUESTIONS ABOUT STYLE: LITERARY DEVICES



The following questions are drawn from the “Literary Devices” section of the Socratic List, found in Appendix A, pages 88-90 of the Teaching the Classics syllabus.

Does the author use descriptions and comparisons to create pictures in the reader’s mind? (16)

Imagery:

Lynne Reid Banks provides incredible descriptions of the tiny people and their objects. These characterizations draw the reader into the wonder that Omri feels when he spends time with the miniature people. Reid creates excitement and uncertainty about the ways that Boone and Little Bear will make a living in a world too big for them. For example, Banks’ description of Little Bear’s work on the longhouse includes great detail: “the twigs, which had been taken from the birch tree on the lawn, [and]... been stripped of their bark, leaving them shining and white...” (54-55).

Banks describes the artistic decorations with which Little Bear embellishes his new home: “Some beautiful, minute designs, showing turtles, herons, and beavers, mainly in red and yellow, had appeared on the side of the teepee Omri had made” (82).

So, too, Banks augments an ordinary fascination with Boone’s artistic ability by emphasizing his miniature stature: “From the microscopic point of Boone’s pencil there developed a most amazing scene. It was a prairie landscape, with hills and cacti and a few tufts of sagebrush...the drawing was minute, perfect in its detailing but smaller than any human hand could possibly have made it” (131). Animating figurines to act like miniature men, Banks imports the enchantment of fairyland into Omri’s ordinary world; suddenly, mundane human activities appear spellbinding.

Little Bear and Boone constantly struggle with the relative size of the world in which they find themselves, providing the reader a new perspective of familiar things. For example: “More and more, [Omri] found, he was able to see things from the Indian’s point of view. The little stones on the path became huge boulders that had to be dodged, weeds became trees, the lawn’s edge an escarpment twice the height of a man” (29). This emphasis on literal perspective emphasizes the figurative perspective Omri gains from his interactions with the little people.

Simile:

“Patrick’s face lit up like a bulb” (140).

“You must have fingers like a fairy to tie those witchy little knots” (67).

Foreshadowing:

When Omri contemplates all of the fun he could have with the cupboard, he considers turning more figurines into living little people; yet even the thought of this seems dangerous to him: “Just when his mind was seething with ideas, such as putting in plastic bows and arrows, and horses, and maybe even other little people—well, no, probably that was too risky. Who knew what sort you might land up with? They might start fighting each other!” (31). This is, of course, exactly what happens when Patrick sneakily uses the magic to create a living, miniature cowboy—Boone. Banks foreshadows plot development in Omri’s early thoughts.

Again, the author uses foreshadowing to intensify the story conflict when Omri discovers his brothers in his room one day, retrieving a pet rat: “...Gillon’s tame white rat was on his shoulder... Would you mind leaving now? And take the rat. You’re not to let him in here!” (67). Readers see the potential threat the rat poses to Little Bear even if Omri does not.

Omri likewise does not anticipate the implications of letting it drop within earshot of Patrick that the cupboard’s magic is responsible for Little Bear’s life, nor does he contemplate the probable effects of leaving Patrick alone with the cupboard. When his mother calls him to dinner, Omri leaves without a backward glance: “‘...I’ll go and get a bit of whatever we’re having,’ and he rushed downstairs without stopping to think” (77). Omri’s lack of foresight underscores his youth and immaturity, which feed the conflict in the story.

Allusion:

Patrick compares Little Bear’s bravery with David and Goliath: “Isn’t he fantastically brave, though! Much more than David with Goliath!” (77).

Omri considers the vital needs of Little Bear by comparing his lifelikeness with Pinnochio: “If the Indian were real, and not just—well, moving plastic, as Pinocchio had been moving wood, then he would need food and other things” (15).

Dialect:

Omri’s figurines speak with accents appropriate to their time and place in history. Little Bear speaks with the stereotypical halting English of the American natives: “You no Great Spirit! Only stupid boy! Fight, spoil good meal! You feel shame!” And later, “No good sorry! Little Bear hungry, work all day, cook meat—now what eat?” (76). This phrasing effectively identifies the small man as a Native American Indian.

Likewise, when Omri brings Tommy, the English medic, to life, he speaks with a British accent: “Well I’ll be jiggered!’ he breathed. ‘A bloomin’ Indian! This is a rum dream, and no mistake!” (45).

Again, the cowboy, Boone, speaks with a Texas accent: “Take that filthy stuff outa here!’ he suddenly shouted in his strong Texas accent. ‘Ah ain’t aimin’ to drink no more o’ that as lawng as Ah live!’” (87). He continues:

You shet yer mouth!...Ah won’t take no lip from no gol-darned hallucy-nation, no sir! Mebbe Ah do drink too much, mebbe Ah cain’t hold m’likker like some o’ them real tough guys do. But

if'n Ah'm gittin' the dee-lirium tremens, and startin' in to see things, why couldn't Ah see pink elly-fants and dancin' rats and all them purty things other fellas see when they gits far gone? It ain't fair fer me to see giants and blue deserts and git put in boxes the size of the Grand Canyon with no one but m'little hoss fer comp'ny! (87)

Each accent serves to punctuate the lessons about individuality and personhood that Omri learns through his experience with the magic cupboard.

Symbolism:

The figurine, Tommy, symbolizes the traditional British value of duty over self-interest. When once Tommy has finished tending to Little Bear's wounds, the medic reflects on his need to return to the war—to “wake up” from the strange dream he imagines himself to be having: “Not that there's much to look forward to except mud and rats and German shells coming over... Still, got to win the war, haven't we? Can't desert, even into a dream, not for long, that is—duty calls and all that, eh?” (46). This use of symbolism allows Banks to emphasize again two qualities that distinguish an adult from a child—in particular, the character qualities of duty and self-sacrifice that Omri himself will learn through his adventure with the little people and the magic cupboard.

NOTES:

QUESTIONS ABOUT CONTEXT



The following questions are drawn from the “Context” section of the Socratic List, found in Appendix A, pages 91-92 of the Teaching the Classics syllabus.

Who is the author? (18)

Lynne Reid Banks was born in London in 1929, the only child of James and Muriel Reid Banks. During World War II, she was evacuated to Canada. She returned to England and her family five years later after the war was over. Initially, Banks had no desire to write; instead, her aspiration was to be an actress. This attempt was met with difficulty and failure; instead, Banks turned to television journalism, becoming one of the first women in the field. Unfortunately, her presence in the industry was ill-received. She was rejected from this field and reassigned, becoming, in her own words, a “backroom person writing nasty ephemeral scripts.” Dissatisfied with the lack of creativity in her work, Banks wrote her first novel on a company typewriter while she was supposed to be working. This book, *The L-Shaped Room*, was a great success, and was even adapted into an acclaimed film.

In 1962, Banks emigrated to Israel, where she worked in a kibbutz teaching English to children. Banks loved this work, and it was while she was doing this that she met Chaim Stephenson, a sculptor and the love of her life. The two married and had three sons: Adeil, Gillon, and Omri—recognizable as the names of the three sons in *The Indian in the Cupboard*. While in Israel, Banks wrote plays for the children, short stories, and one novel.

When she and her family moved back to London in 1971, Banks began to write in earnest. She tried her hand at many different genres for both children and adults. Finally, in 1980, Banks wrote *The Indian in the Cupboard*. She describes the publication of this story as “the turning of the tide” in her career as a children’s story author. Banks wrote multiple sequels to the story, including *The Return of the Indian* (1985), *The Secret of the Indian* (1989), *The Mystery of the Cupboard* (1993), and *The Key to the Indian* (1998). The original story was adapted into a film in 1995.

Banks cites a personal anecdote as her inspiration for *The Indian in the Cupboard*, which grew in her imagination as a result of her own son Omri’s antipathy for a bathroom cupboard in their house. Although this story would become the author’s most famous publication, she would write more than forty books, including *I, Houdini* and *Alice-by-Accident*. In 2013, Banks won the prestigious J. M. Barrie award for her contribution to children’s arts. As of the publication of this teacher guide in 2023, Lynne Reid Banks still lives in Shepperton, England, where she continues to write.

NOTES:

ESSAY QUESTIONS FOR WRITING ASSIGNMENTS



Hints for effective writing assignments can be found on pages 73-74 of the Teaching the Classics syllabus and Chapter 6 of Reading Roadmaps.

1. *The Indian in the Cupboard* is a coming of age story. What character qualities and attributes does the author associate with adulthood?
2. Describe the role of duty in the story. How does Omri's growing sense of duty define his journey to adulthood?
3. Explain the role of magic in the story. How does the use of magic facilitate the author's meditations on growing up?
4. How does the story's climactic scene force Omri into maturity?
5. What role does Patrick, Omri's foil, play in Omri's journey to maturity?
6. According to the story, what is a good friend?
7. How does the story treat the issue of creating life? What does this characterization suggest about human nature? About human value? About meaning in life?

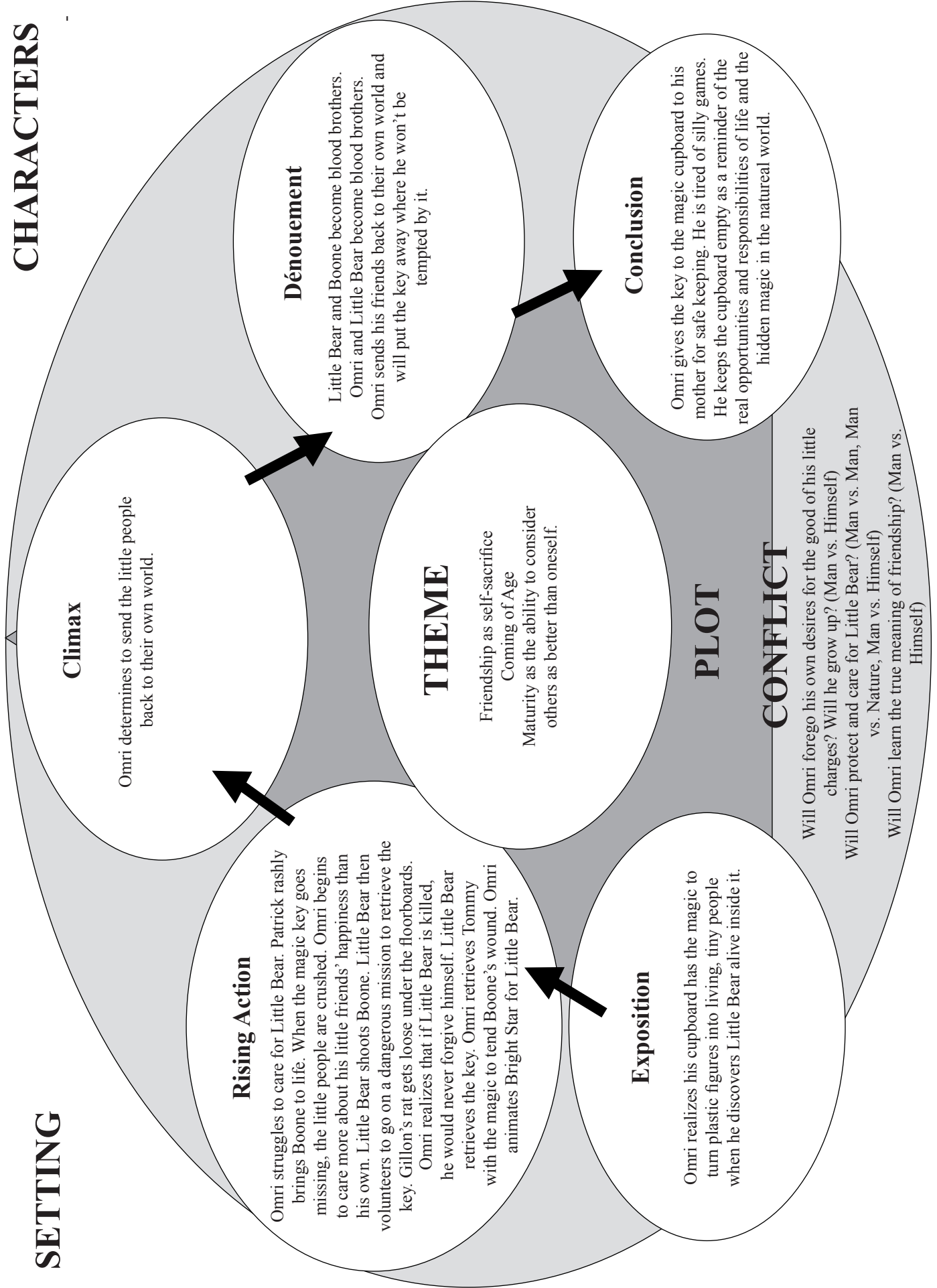
STORY CHARTS



The following pages contain story charts of the type presented in the live seminar *Teaching the Classics*. As is made clear in that seminar, a separate story chart may be constructed for each of the conflicts present in a work of fiction. In particular, the reader's decision as to the *climax* and central *themes* of the plot structure will depend upon his understanding of the story's central conflict. As a result, though the details of setting, characters, exposition, and conclusion may be identical from analysis to analysis, significant variation may be found in those components which appear down the center of the story chart: Conflict, Climax, and Theme. This of course results from the fact that literary interpretation is the work of active minds, and differences of opinion are to be expected—even encouraged!

For the teacher's information, one story chart has been filled in on the next page. In addition, a blank chart is included to allow the teacher to examine different conflicts in the same format.

Story Chart: *The Indian in the Cupboard*



Story Chart: *The Indian in the Cupboard*

SETTING

CHARACTERS

