

Talking about *The Princess and Curdie*

by George MacDonald · the free ebook lives at youngreaderguide.org/books/princess-and-curdie/

Warming up

Easy openers. Anyone at the table can answer these, including the youngest.

1. If you could feel what someone was really like just by shaking their hand, would you want to? Everyone answers, and nobody is allowed to say 'it depends' without saying on what.
2. Lina is hideous to look at and good all the way through. Name something in real life that looks worse than it is.
3. Curdie ends up with forty-nine impossible animals following him. Invent number fifty: what parts, and what is it good at?

The real conversation

Pick two or three, not all of them. Parents answer too, honestly.

1. Curdie shoots the pigeon because he is bored and he can, and the book says he had been 'doing wrong all day' without noticing — not big wrongs, just a slow slide. Is there such a thing as going bad by accident? What does a person's slow slide look like from the outside, before anybody names it?
2. The princess tells Curdie the fire will hurt terribly and asks if he is ready, without telling him what he will get for it. He walks in anyway. When is it right to say yes to something painful before you know what it's for — and when is that just letting someone push you around?
3. The first hand Curdie tries his gift on is his mother's, and he does not want to. She makes him. Why would she rather know? Would anyone at this table hold out a hand?
4. Half the people in Gwyntystorm are turning into animals inside and have no idea. Nobody in the city is a cackling villain; they are shopkeepers and servants and a doctor who all decided, one small choice at a time, that the truth was whatever suited them. Which is scarier to you — a monster, or a whole town of ordinary people who stopped noticing?
5. MacDonald spends the whole book saving the kingdom and then knocks it down in the last two hundred words: the good king and queen die, a greedy one is chosen, and the city falls. Was that a fair thing to do to a reader? What do you think he wanted you to be left holding?

The big *one*

Save it for last.

The old princess's rule is that nobody stands still — everyone in the book is becoming either more of a person or more of a beast, a little at a time, from ordinary choices nobody would call important. Ask it out loud: what has each person at this table been slowly becoming this year, and what is the small ordinary thing that has been doing it?

Do it *together*

Build number fifty. MacDonald gives up on describing the Uglies and says a boy he knew used to make animals out of heather roots — wherever he found four legs he was fairly sure to find a head and a tail. Do exactly that. Go outside and each bring back one twig, root, stone or seed pod that already looks like a creature, then finish it with tape, wire and whatever is in the drawer. Rules from the book: it must be genuinely odd-looking, it must be good-hearted, and it needs a one-word name and one thing it is better at than anybody. Line them up behind Lina when everyone is done.