

Discussion Guide

Chapter-by-Chapter Discussion Guide, Vocabulary, Activities, Further Reading, Author Q&A



Spirit's Key by Edith Cohn

By now, twelve-year-old Spirit Holden should have inherited the family gift: the ability to see the future. But when she holds a house key in her hand like her dad does to read its owner's destiny, she can't predict anything. Maybe it's because she can't see past the loss of her beloved dog, Sky, who died mysteriously and washed ashore on a sand dune. Sky was Spirit's loyal companion, one of the wild dogs that the local islanders believe possess dangerous spirits. When more dogs start dying and people become sick, too, everyone blames the dogs—except for Spirit. Then Sky's ghost appears. His help may be the key to unlocking Spirit's new power and finding the cause of the strange illness before it's too late.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Chapter One

- 🔑 What do you think happened to Spirit's dog, Sky?
- 🔑 What changes or differences is Spirit noticing in her life?
- 🔑 What do we know about the setting of the story?

Chapter Two

- 🔑 Why did Spirit's family come to Bald Island?
- 🔑 Would you want to have Spirit's dad predict your future? Why or why not?
- 🔑 Why does Spirit's dad want her to throw away Sky's things?

Chapter Three

- 🔑 Why is delivery day so important to Bald Island?
- 🔑 What are some of the differences between dingbatters and those who were born on the island?
- 🔑 Why do you think all of the birds disappear when Spirit falls off her bike?

Chapter Four

- 🔑 What do you think happened to Sky? Has your thinking changed since the beginning of the story?
- 🔑 How would you describe Spirit's relationship with Nector?
- 🔑 What do you think Spirit is seeing at the end of the chapter? Do you think the bobbing pheasant is really Sky?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS CONT.

Chapter Five

- 🔑 Why does Spirit believe she saw Sky?
- 🔑 Does Spirit's dad believe she saw Sky? Do you? Why or why not?
- 🔑 How do the colors of the rooms in Spirit's house reflect the emotions of the characters?

Chapter Six

- 🔑 What do you think Mrs. Borse means when she says "a dream and a miracle are sisters—practically twins?"
- 🔑 What special talent does Mrs. Borse identify in Spirit?
- 🔑 How does Spirit view Bald Islands' animals differently than those who have lived there a long time?

Chapter Seven

- 🔑 What do we learn about Nector in this chapter?
- 🔑 Why do you think Spirit's father is stockpiling supplies?
- 🔑 How is Spirit similar to her teacher, Mrs. Dialfield?

Chapter Eight

- 🔑 Why do you think that Spirit's father predicts some things and not others?
- 🔑 Do you think a baldie made Mr. Selnick sick? Why or why not?
- 🔑 How is the Hatterasks' house different from Spirit's? Why do you think their homes are so different?

Chapter Nine

- 🔑 What do you think is wrong with Spirit's dad? Why does he feel so sick?
- 🔑 While holding Mr. Selnick's key, Spirit wonders "How can I know the answer if I don't know the question?"
Have you ever felt this way? When?
- 🔑 What does Spirit discover when she touches Sky's dog tag?

Chapter Ten

- 🔑 What do you think Spirit's dad means when he says, "We must help others face what lies ahead, but first we must face ourselves?"
- 🔑 Do you believe the baldie legend Mrs. Borse tells Spirit? Why or why not?
- 🔑 Who do you think wrote the note that Mrs. Borse gives Spirit?

Chapter Eleven

- 🔑 What do you think is meant by the phrase in Spirit's note, "Great sacrifices require great time?"
- 🔑 Why do you think Sky can't come inside the house? Why can't he eat the kibble Spirit gives him?
- 🔑 In what ways is Sky different than he was before? In what ways is he the same?

Chapter Twelve

- 🔑 Why do you think the residents of Bald Island do not keep pets?
- 🔑 Spirit says she can smell the eagle's sorrow, "like a rotten holly bush." What does this mean to you? Do other emotions have smells? Tastes?
- 🔑 What do you think is happening to the baldies?

Chapter Thirteen

- 🔑 Spirit's dad says, "Being scared is the worst sickness." What do you think that means?
- 🔑 Do you think the Hatterasks are cursed? Why or why not?
- 🔑 In what ways does Spirit feel like an outsider on Bald Island?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS CONT.

Chapter Fourteen

- 🔑 How do Spirit's classmates treat her differently when they know she can see the future?
- 🔑 Spirit says she's "afraid of being the messenger." Have you ever had news that you didn't want to tell someone? What did that feel like?
- 🔑 What do you think happens to Spirit at the end of the chapter?

Chapter Fifteen

- 🔑 Spirit receives a gift from the Holden Spirits. What do you think it is for?
- 🔑 Do you think it was a good idea for Bald Island to quarantine people that are getting sick? Why or why not?
- 🔑 Why do you think Eder wants to send Spirit to a children's home? Why do you think Eder's mom continued to tuck him in at night even after he was grown up?

Chapter Sixteen

- 🔑 Do you think Spirit's dad knew that she would try to visit him at the whale station and that's why he ordered all of the survival supplies? Why or why not?
- 🔑 Why do you think Sky leads Spirit to the cave?
- 🔑 Why do you think Sky is trying to play with the other dogs at the end of the chapter?

Chapter Seventeen

- 🔑 Do you think Spirit can communicate with the eagle? Why or why not?
- 🔑 Why do you think Yasmine apologizes to Spirit as they're going to bed?
- 🔑 Do you think, like Nector does, that Spirit was called into the cave? Why or why not?

Chapter Eighteen

- 🔑 Do you agree with Spirit that she is her dad's "ticket out of quarantine?"
- 🔑 Do you think that Spirit will get sick from the bite she received? Why or why not?
- 🔑 Why do you think Spirit can still smell the fish market at the end of the chapter?

Chapter Nineteen

- 🔑 Do you think Spirit should be quarantined with her father? Why or why not?
- 🔑 Why do you think Dr. Wade is so concerned about Spirit falling ill?
- 🔑 Why does Spirit drop all of her questions at the end of the chapter?

Chapter Twenty

- 🔑 Mrs. Hatterask says that anger can "hide under the veil of sadness or confusion. It can hide behind our eyes or in our hearts." What do you think this means?
- 🔑 Do you think the eagle is protecting Mrs. Borse? From what?
- 🔑 How would you describe Spirit's relationship with Mrs. Borse?

Chapter Twenty-One

- 🔑 Why do you think Eder took Spirit's dad's supplies?
- 🔑 Unlike most of the people on Bald Island, Spirit does not believe in devil spirits. Have you ever held an unpopular belief? What was it like?
- 🔑 What do you think happens to Sky at the end of the chapter?

Chapter Twenty-Two

- 🔑 How would you describe the rules of Spirit's ability to see and communicate with Sky? What are its conditions? Its limits?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS CONT.

- 🔑 When Spirit is thinking about going back to the baldie cave, she thinks, “Maybe this is how legends are born.” What do you think? How does Spirit’s story fit into the legends of Bald Island?
- 🔑 What do you think about Spirit’s discovery at the end of the chapter? Do you think she’s right? Why or why not?

Chapter Twenty-Three

- 🔑 Why do you think Eder wanted to hurt the baldies?
- 🔑 What does Spirit learn about Nector in this chapter?
- 🔑 Do you think Spirit can “make things right,” like she says she will at the end of the chapter? Why or why not?

Chapter Twenty-Four

- 🔑 Why does Spirit break her soup bowl?
- 🔑 Why do you think Sky’s grave acts as a trapdoor connecting his world to Spirit’s?
- 🔑 At the end of the chapter, do you think Nector has changed his mind about baldies? Why or why not?

Chapter Twenty-Five

- 🔑 Why do you think Spirit can’t see anything when she holds her own key?
- 🔑 Describe Whales’ Cove. How is it different from Bald Island?
- 🔑 How do you think the story will end?

Chapter Twenty-Six

- 🔑 Spirit asks, “Why do people fear things they don’t understand?” What do you think? What would you tell her?
- 🔑 Why was Eder Dad’s best client? What are Eder’s reasons for wanting the island to be rid of the baldies? Do you think he and Dr. Wade have the island’s best interests at heart?
- 🔑 Why do you think Sky and his friends will have to go soon?

Chapter Twenty-Seven

- 🔑 Do you think Eder is telling the truth about why he took Spirit’s dad’s things? Why or why not?
- 🔑 Have you ever had to say goodbye to a pet or someone you loved? What was it like?
- 🔑 What do you think caused the smoke Spirit sees from the boat at the end of the chapter?

Chapter Twenty-Eight

- 🔑 Why does Spirit put herself in harm’s way to help Mrs. Borse?
- 🔑 What does Spirit discover about the meaning of her ancestors’ message, “Great talents require great sacrifice?”
- 🔑 How do you think Spirit’s talents will be affected if her house burns down and she has to get a new key?

Chapter Twenty-Nine

- 🔑 What has Spirit learned about her ability to connect with animals?
- 🔑 How does Bald Island’s fear of the baldies end up leading to the big fire?
- 🔑 Why does Spirit feel more at home than ever at the end of the chapter?

Chapter Thirty

- 🔑 How have things changed on Bald Island since the beginning of the story?
- 🔑 How would you describe “the Holden way?”
- 🔑 How has the word dingbatter changed for Spirit at the end of the story?

See next page for related standards.

DISCUSSION GUIDE RELATED STANDARDS

Reading Literature

- Key Ideas and Details (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.4.1, CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.4.2, CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.4.3, CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.5.1, CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.5.2, CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.5.3, CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.6.1, CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.6.2, CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.6.3, CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.7.1, CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.7.2, CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.7.3)
- Craft and Structure (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.4.4, CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.5.4, CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.5.5, CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.5.6, CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.6.4, CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.6.5, CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.6.6, CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.7.4, CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.7.6)
- Range of Reading and Level of Text Complexity (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.4.10, CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.5.10, CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.6.10, CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.7.10)

Speaking and Listening

- Comprehension and Collaboration (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.4.1, CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.5.1, CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.6.1, CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.7.1)

VOCABULARY

Chapter 1 skedaddle omen	Chapter 7 organism urge	Chapter 13 hokey impermanence	Chapter 19 vehemently hesitate	Chapter 25 ramshackle synchronization
Chapter 2 ominous optimistic	Chapter 8 pang distracted	Chapter 14 diagnosis plague	Chapter 20 gumption merciless	Chapter 26 belligerent rage
Chapter 3 oblivious reckless	Chapter 9 groggy delirious	Chapter 15 quarantined carcass	Chapter 21 rummage faze	Chapter 27 wonky mirage
Chapter 4 crumpled etched	Chapter 10 undertow severed	Chapter 16 regret ante	Chapter 22 constricting tentative	Chapter 28 understatement squander
Chapter 5 floundering bramble	Chapter 11 pace queasy	Chapter 17 trespass responsibility	Chapter 23 deterred mauling	Chapter 29 glimmer frenzy
Chapter 6 sacred ponder	Chapter 12 silhouette eerie	Chapter 18 sweltering frazzled	Chapter 24 debris fury	Chapter 30 immune contagious

3 IDEAS FOR STUDYING VOCABULARY

Divide the words among your students. Have students write their words on paper key templates, along with a definition. Ask students to share their definitions with the class, and create a bulletin board display with the keys.

Over the course of reading the novel, highlight one of the words every day. Challenge students to use the “word of the day” in a sentence.

Talk about the vocabulary unique to Bald Island, such as baldie and dingbatter. Are there any words that are unique to your area? If so, what are they?

VOCABULARY RELATED STANDARDS

Language: Vocabulary Acquisition and Use:

(CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.4.4, CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.4.6, CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.5.4, CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.5.6, CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.6.4, CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.6.6, CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.7.4, CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.7.6)



ACTIVITIES TO TRY

A Map of Bald Island

Before reading, invite students to look at the illustrated map of Bald Island at the beginning of the book. What do they notice? What predictions can they make about the story based on the map? Record students' ideas on chart paper. Periodically revisit the map as you read the story. Does the map reflect students' pictures in their heads? Do they have any new predictions or thoughts about the setting of Bald Island? After reading, distribute copies of the map and invite students to annotate it with additional notes and favorite moments from the story.

Extension: Invite students to brainstorm their own magical setting for a story and create a map for it using pencils and paper or an online mapmaking tool.

Related Standards: Reading Literature: Key Ideas and Details (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.4.3, CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.6.3, CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.7.3)

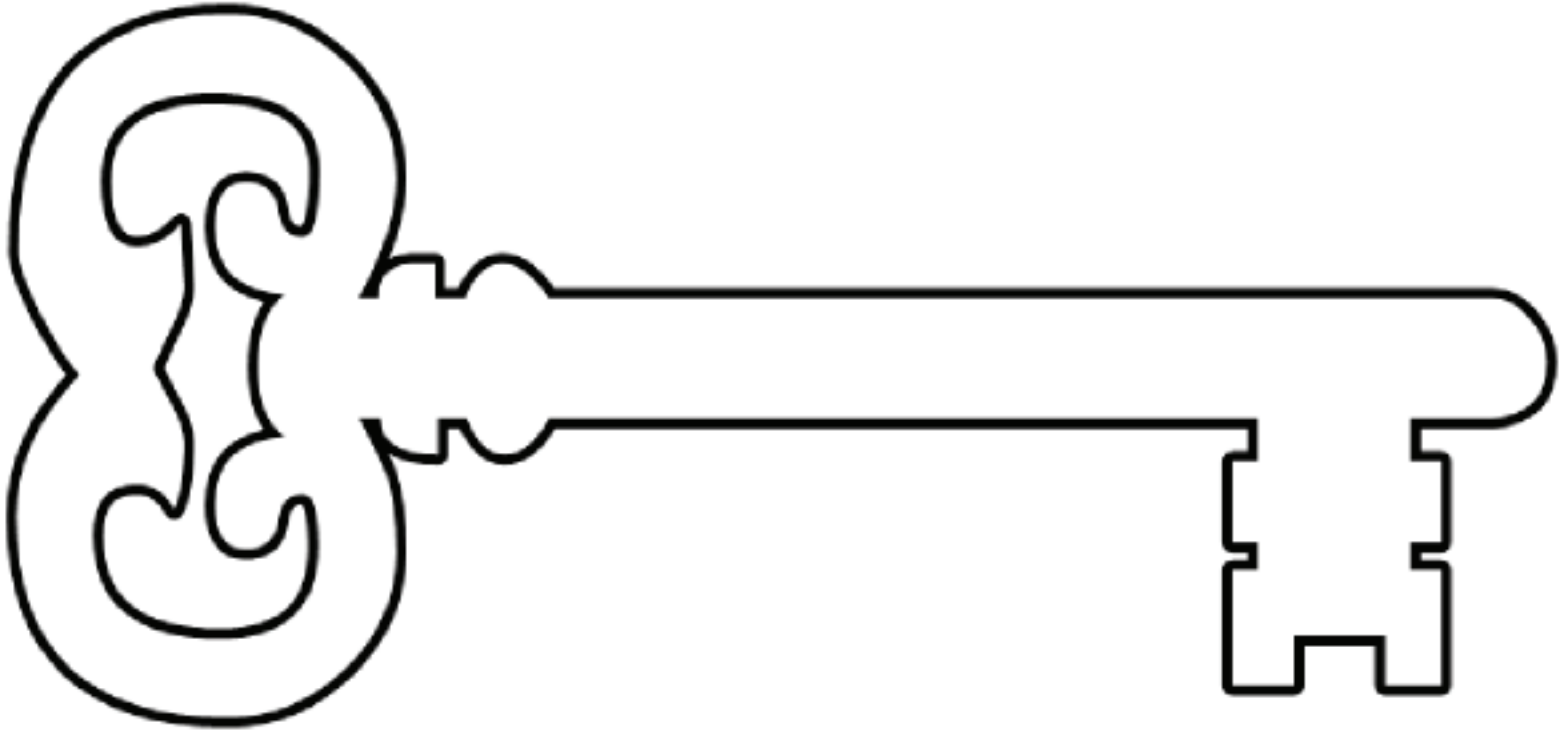
The Key to My Future

After reading, ask students to imagine that Spirit could hold one of their personal keys. What would she see? Distribute copies of The Key to My Future Reproducible on the next page. Have students illustrate what Spirit would see by holding their keys. Next, talk about the metaphorical meaning of “the key to the future.” What do students think is the figurative “key” to Spirit’s future? Maybe it’s courage, sacrifice, or finally fitting into Bald Island by being a member of her community. What about the “key” to students’ own futures? Invite students to finish the writing prompt on the reproducible.

Extension: Have students create a multimedia presentation using Glogster, Prezi, PowerPoint, or iMovie that shows the key to their futures.

Related Standards: Reading Literature: Craft and Structure (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.4.4, CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.5.4, CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.6.4, CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.7.4); Speaking and Listening: Presentation of Knowledge and Ideas (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.4.5, CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.5.5, CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.6.5, CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.7.5)

THE KEY TO MY FUTURE :



Writing Prompt: The “key” to my future is...

ACTIVITIES CONTINUED

PSA for the Baldies

After reading the final chapter of the book, invite students to pretend that they have been hired by the Protect the Baldies Fund established by Spirit and her friends in the community. Your students' job is to create a public service announcement explaining why the baldies deserve to be protected and honored. First, watch sample PSAs online at the Ad Council. Then have students create their own persuasive poster or video messages to share.

Extension: Share students' work online, challenging kids to create their own hashtags for the campaign, such as #SaveTheBaldies.

Related Standards: Writing: Text Types and Purposes (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.4.1, CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.5.1, CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.6.1, CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.7.1)

Gifts From the Greats

Spirit has a talent for communicating with animals. Ask students to share what "gifts," interests or talents they have. How can they improve their talents? How can they use them to benefit their community? Next, challenge students to interview a relative or guardian to see if there are shared family traits or interests they may not know about. Have students present the results of their interview in a Venn diagram with bubbles for themselves and their relatives.

Extension: Ask students to write an essay inspired by "the Holden way" that Spirit discovers in the story. Does their family have "a way?" What behaviors or qualities go into it?

Related Standards: Speaking and Listening: Presentation of Knowledge and Ideas (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.4.4, CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.5.4, CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.6.4, CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.7.4)

Spirit's Key: The Movie

After reading, ask students to imagine that Spirit's Key is being turned into a movie. What actors would students cast in the movie and why? Show samples of movie posters and talk about the taglines and how they reflect the theme of the movie. What would the tagline be for Spirit's Key? Challenge students to illustrate a movie poster for the book that incorporates their tagline and casting decisions.

Extension: Have students create a short video trailer for the movie version of Spirit's Key.

Related Standards: Reading Literature: Key Ideas and Details (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.4.2, CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.5.2, CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.6.2, CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.7.2)



Next up: More books to read if you liked Spirit's Key, Author Q&A, and Edith Cohn's bio!

Do your students love Spirit's Key?

More Books to Read and Enjoy:

Eight Keys

By Suzanne LaFleur

Questions to explore: How is the symbol of the key treated in both Spirit's Key and Eight Keys? What is similar about the two stories? What is different?

Lizzie Bright and the Buckminster Boy

By Gary Schmidt

Questions to explore: How is an island a special setting for a story? What makes islands unique? If you could live on an island, where would live and why?

Doll Bones

By Holly Black

Questions to explore: What elements make up a ghost story? How are ghost characters different from human ones?

Three Times Lucky

By Shelly Turnage

Questions to explore: What is the definition of family? Who is Moses's family in Three Times Lucky? Who is Spirit's family in Spirit's Key?

Ghost Dog Secrets

By Peg Kehret

Questions to explore: How do animals help each other in Ghost Dog Secrets and Spirit's Key? Do you think animals help each other in similar ways in real life?

Websites to Visit:

- www.edithcohn.com
The website for the author of Spirit's Key.
- www.wheelerstudio.com
The website for the cover illustrator of Spirit's Key
- www.wilddog.org
Read about two real-world canine species under threat, like the baldies in Spirit's Key.
- <http://beaufortinlet.blogspot.com/p/yaupon-tea.html>
Learn about Bald Island's most popular beverage.





Edith Cohn was born and raised in North Carolina where she grew up exploring the unique beaches of the Outer Banks. She currently lives in the coyote-filled hills of Los Angeles with her husband and her dog. All of these things provided inspiration for her debut novel, *Spirit's Key*.

Q&A with Edith Cohn

Keys that hold the future, yaupon tea, wild dogs, deadly storms—the world of Bald Island is so distinct and vividly drawn. How did it come to be?

A great deal of the inspiration for Bald Island comes from my love of the Outer Banks of North Carolina, which has a rich and interesting history. I grew up going to the Banks. But I also read a lot about their hurricanes, their whaling, their shipwrecks. I even read about an islander who was a hermit and wore furs, which inspired the character of Mrs. Borse. And it seems so unreal, but the islanders' belief that yaupon tea can cure anger actually comes from something I read. Of course, I definitely took fictional liberties. I decided my island would have wild dogs instead of wild horses like the real Outer Banks do. The idea that keys can tell the future is one of the only things that didn't come from something I read. That one came straight from the wilds of my imagination.

If you could have a magical gift like Spirit, what would it be and why?

Well, I'll leave seeing the future to Spirit, because that seems like an incredibly huge responsibility. I side more with Mrs. Hatterask, and I like not knowing what life is going to bring me. But having my dog come back as a ghost would be the greatest wish fulfillment I could ever ask for. I would love it if my little dog Leia could live forever.

Spirit's teacher Mrs. Dialfield is incredibly warm and generous in sharing her emotions and experiences. Was she inspired by any teachers from your past?

I've been really fortunate to have many wonderful teachers in my life. Mrs. Dialfield isn't based on any one in particular. But the fact that Bald Island's school doesn't have air conditioning is based on my parents' experience teaching school for twenty years in the South's incredible heat.

You in fact taught middle school for a short time. Did any of your experiences in the classroom make their way into the novel?

Well, none of my students were psychic that I know of, and I definitely never allowed any "readings." But in a small way that scene where Mrs. Dialfield allows Spirit to give a reading and the kids get so excited is reminiscent of my students' fascination with a court proceedings setup that I allowed in my classroom. Students were the jury and judge, and they got to lay down the verdict. I think kids like having their future decided by their peers.

What is your writing process like? Do you have any advice for young writers?

I'm a very slow first drafter. I spend a lot of time making plans that I later throw away. I make a lot of wrong turns. But I'm not afraid to work hard to get the story how I want it. So I guess my advice is don't be afraid to make mistakes. Don't be afraid to work hard. Don't be afraid to make a wrong turn, then to stop and ask for directions. If I get stuck, I usually share some pages with a friend who'll say something that helps me realize what I need to do to move forward.