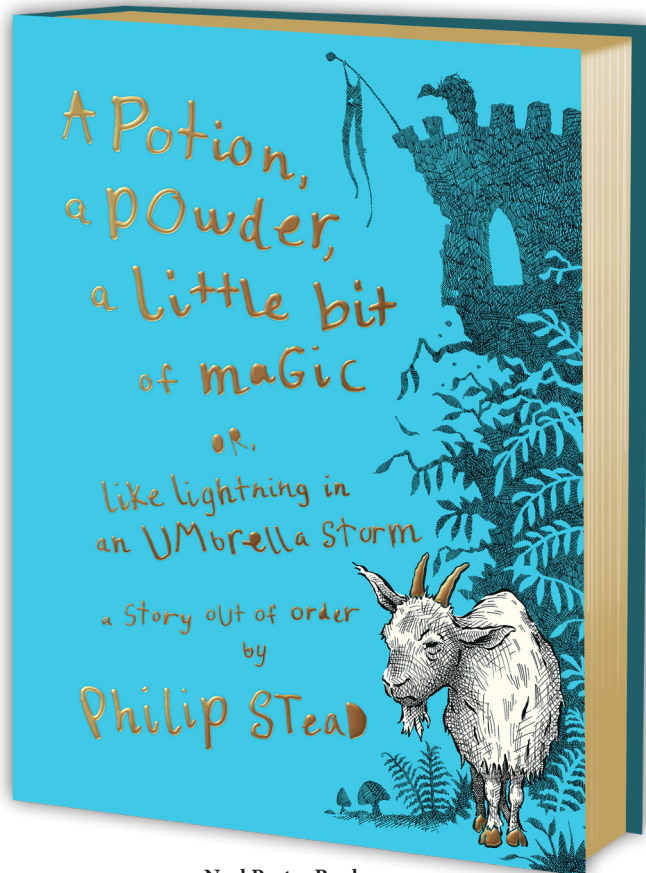


HOLIDAY HOUSE BOOK CLUB GUIDE



Neal Porter Books

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A Potion, a Powder, a Little Bit of Magic *Or, Like Lightning in an Umbrella Storm* by **Philip Stead**

An Instant *New York Times* Bestseller!

SIX STARRED REVIEWS!

- ★ “Exuberant.”—*Kirkus Reviews* (starred review)
- ★ “Playful.”—*Publishers Weekly* (starred review)
- ★ “Whimsical.”—*Booklist* (starred review)
- ★ “A charmingly labyrinthine fantasy.”
—*School Library Journal* (starred review)
- ★ “Brimming with clever wordplay, entertaining absurdity, and tremendous creativity.”
—*Shelf Awareness* (starred review)
- ★ “This will be a landmark fairytale.”
—*BookPage* (starred review)

ABOUT THE BOOK

A plucky young goatkeeper sets out on a misadventurous rescue mission in this uproarious debut novel with premium hardcover features, perfect for fans of Kate DiCamillo and Lemony Snicket.

In a kingdom ruled by a capricious king, the castle rests on the backs of twenty-four goats, and the welfare of those goats rests on the back of a girl called Bernadette. So when one goat escapes, it's up to her—with the help of a very forgetful wizard and a Boat That Does Not Grant Wishes—to bring it back safely.

Her task may be straightforward, but this book is anything but. Like a swirling herd of restless goats, the chapters are all out of order. The ending may prove to have been the beginning all along. All the while, the author of Bernadette's saga—a character himself—hurries to write her a resolution, with very mixed results. And if you're feeling lost, don't worry; the story has twenty-four morals, of varying advisability, to edify you along the way.

Award-winning picture book author and illustrator Philip Stead makes a confident debut as a novelist in this laugh-out-loud, one-of-a-kind illustrated tale, chock-full of running gags, broken fourth walls, and underdog triumph.



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Study the images introducing the book. Where does the map suggest the story will begin? Why is the tollbooth so important to the overall story? What does X mean on the map? What is the effect of beginning the book with portraits of the characters?
- Discuss the format of the book. The first chapter is titled “In Medias Res,” which means “in the middle of things.” What is the purpose of telling the story out of order? In what way is Chapter 1, “A Moment of Pure Generosity,” a satisfying ending?
- The point of view of the novel is third person omniscient. What does this point of view reveal about the thoughts and feelings of all the characters? What does it leave out? What is the importance of the character of the author? Do you think he knows he is in this book?
- The conflict of a novel is the problem to be solved. Identify the conflict of this novel. At what point is it revealed? Discuss the quest that follows.
- An antagonist is a character who opposes the protagonist, the main character of the book. Who is the protagonist—or is there more than one? Who are the antagonists? Do these roles change by the end of the novel? Do the protagonists and antagonists change depending upon whose point of view you read from?
- Describe the relationship between Bernadette and her turtle. How did they become friends? What is the function of Perseverance as a necessary character to the story? Explain the meaning of the turtle’s name. What traits are required to rescue Perseverance? Bravery, luck, foolhardiness, friendship—or something else? Which aspect is most important?
- Why is Bernadette so determined to find the Tree? Does the Tree uphold Bernadette’s expectations, or disappoint them? Discuss the relationship between the Tree and the Boat. Describe Bernadette and the Boat’s journey down the River of Uncertainty. What dangers do they encounter? How do they get past these dangers?
- What is the difference between an optimist and a pessimist? Which is Bernadette, and does that change over the course of the story? Name the optimists and the pessimists in the story, and notice if these definitions change as the story continues, or as you read from different characters’ points of view.
- Each moral in the story appears between two images of goats. Discuss the significance of the twenty-four morals. Is each moral important to the book overall, the chapter in which it appears, or life in general?
- Bernadette knows the names of each of her goats. Why does she call Steve the sweetest goat and Lancelot the irritable one?
- Bernadette has been alone for most of her life. How does she deal with being alone? Explain the following: “. . . aloneness . . . can be its own kind of company” (p. 122). What is the difference between being alone and being lonely? Which characters appear to be lonely?
- What are the elements of magic in the story? How does magic play a role in advancing the plot? What do you think is the “bit” of magic referred to in the title?
- The novel has two titles. Why does it have both? How does the meaning of each title add something that the other title doesn’t?

Guide created by Pat Scales, retired school librarian and independent consultant, Greenville, South Carolina.

ABOUT THE CREATOR



Philip Stead is the author of the Caldecott Medal-winning book *A Sick Day for Amos McGee*, also named a *New York Times* Best Illustrated Book and a *Publishers Weekly* Best Children’s Book, illustrated by his wife and frequent collaborator, Erin Stead. He is the author and illustrator of *The North Wind and the Sun*, a Bank Street Best Children’s Book of the Year. He lives with Erin, their daughter, and their dog in a hundred-year-old barn in Ann Arbor, Michigan.

