

	Support Material: Interview with Author Eva Ibbotson and Discussion Questions
	Title: The Star of Kazan
	Source: Penguin Books for Young Readers
	Description: Author Eva Ibbotson talks about the inspiration for some of the characters and themes in her books.

ABOUT EVA IBBOTSON

Eva Ibbotson was born in Vienna, Austria, in the years before World War II. Her mother was a playwright and her father a scientist, but the marriage was unhappy, and they soon went their separate ways. Eva's early childhood was spent shuttling back and forth in trains across Europe, from one parent to the other. When Hitler rose to power, Eva's father went to Great Britain, and her mother, after remarriage to a Russian philosopher, soon followed him. Eva switched languages and spent the rest of her childhood in a progressive boarding school, striving to become British. After taking a degree in Physiology at London University, she went on to do research at the University of Cambridge, but she found the experiments she had to perform on living animals very distressing. The results of her experiments were "peculiar," she relates, so when a fellow student, Alan Ibbotson, suggested she could do less harm to science by leaving it and marrying him, she accepted without hesitation. The couple moved to Newcastle, in the north of England, where they raised four children and Eva began writing short stories. When the youngest son started school, she wrote her first full-length novel for children and continued to write for children and adults alternately, much to the delight of her many readers.

AN INTERVIEW WITH EVA IBBOTSON

Magical beings are central to many of your books. Have you always been interested in the supernatural?

No, curiously I was never particularly interested in the supernatural, quite the contrary. Ghost stories frightened me badly as a child, although I didn't really believe that ghosts existed. I think I began to write about ghosts and witches and magic generally to make children less afraid; to turn these beings into creatures much like us, but of course able to do more interesting things. My ghosts and witches are more like underdogs, people on the fringes who need sympathy and help. And the witches in *Which Witch?* are based on my relatives, the nice witches anyway!

Your main characters all seem to come up against people who are more interested in money and power than in feelings and compassion. Is this a theme you consciously set out to explore in every book?

I think of my books as entertainments, a kind of present I give the reader, and any serious themes that come up are a byproduct. But of course, when I am creating "baddies" for the purposes of the plot, I find myself choosing people with the characteristics I dislike most and there is nothing I despise more than financial greed and a lust for power.

Humor is an important element in most of your stories. What do you think is the role that humor plays in shaping our lives and our personalities?

I don't really know how to define humor or how to describe it; it is something you have to show. But I do know that both in my personal life and in my work I would be completely lost without humor...without the ability to turn things upside down, to extract something ridiculous out of the most solemn moment. Incidentally, when I'm writing I find humor jokes that aren't forced or silly by far the hardest thing to pull off.

In *Journey to the River Sea* you have written a more realistic story with a strong theme about the importance of nature to the human spirit. What was your inspiration for this story?

I wrote *Journey to the River Sea* not long after my husband died. He was a committed naturalist, someone who combined a deep knowledge of animals and plants with a spiritual outlook that had been strengthened by his war service in India and Burma. I think I felt at that time that I needed a rest from my usual fantasy stories though goodness knows the Amazon landscape is fantastical enough in its own right! I wanted to write a story that was simple and old-fashioned and direct. But I have to say that the reasons one gives for writing anything tend to be made up afterwards. At the time you just find yourself doing it!

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. The world of nature plays an important role in Eva Ibbotson's books. Often her characters' personalities are shown through their relationship to the natural world and the way they interact with creatures in the wild. Compare the different reactions to nature of these characters: Ben and Raymond; Oliver and Fulton; Minette, Fabio, and Lambert; The Aunts (Etta, Coral, and Myrtle) and Mr. Sprott; Maia and Gwendolyn/Beatrice; Mrs. Carter and Miss Minton; Mr. Carter and Bernard Taverner.
2. In each of these stories, children must find resources inside themselves to face difficult challenges and changes in their lives, many times without the help of adults. The author says of Maia at the beginning of *Journey to the River Sea*, "She was afraid...afraid in the way of someone who is alone in the world" (p.2). Which of these characters believes that he or she is alone, and how does that affect the way they face their challenges: Maia, Clovis, Finn, Minette, Fabio, Oliver, Ben, Odge Gribble, Arriman, Terence?
3. Help can often come from unexpected sources in Ibbotson's stories. Look carefully at each of the books to see which characters or creatures are most helpful to the protagonist. Was it obvious to you as the reader that important help would come in this way? How often were you surprised by the power of the helpers? Have you had this experience in your own life, that help came from unexpected sources?
4. Many of the evil characters in the books share certain personality traits. What do these characters have in common: Mrs. Trottle, Mr. Sprott, Fulton and Frieda Snodde-Brittle, Mr. and Mrs. Carter, Madame Olympia? What do these characters tell you about the personality traits that the author dislikes? Do you know people who exhibit these qualities?
5. Showing kindness toward others, and especially those who appear to be "different" and "strange," is a quality that is shared by many of the main characters. Discuss the ways in which Maia, Miss Minton, Ben, Belladonna, Oliver, and the Aunts demonstrate this important character trait. What is the author telling us, through these characters, about exhibiting this quality in our own lives? How can we

translate this theme from exotic and fantastic settings into our everyday world?

6. At the end of *Journey to the River Sea*, Miss Minton says to Mr. Murray, "Perhaps I'm mad and the professor, too but I think children must lead big lives...if it is in them to do so" (p. 283). What does she mean by this statement, and how do you interpret the phrase "big lives"? Which characters in the other books are capable of leading "big lives," and which of them are not? Discuss the personality traits that make it possible for children and adults to "lead big lives."
7. Ibbotson says of the Carters, "...they were far too selfish to want anybody, but they needed her [Maia]" (p. 37). What is the difference between wanting and needing somebody or something? Discuss this difference between wanting and needing, as you see it, in the actions and feelings of Arriman, Belladonna, the Wilkinson family, Oliver, Mrs. Trottle, Ben, Nanny Brown, the Aunts, Minette and Fabio, Maia, Miss Minton, Finn, Clovis, the Carters, and other characters of your own choice. How does it affect your feelings about a character when you make this distinction?
8. When Maia first reads about the Amazon, she encounters these words: "For whether a place is a hell or a heaven rests in yourself, and those who go with courage and an open mind may find themselves in Paradise" (p. 6). Discuss this idea with relation to the setting of each of the books. How does each character's perception of a place affect the way he or she reacts to that place? How does perception of place affect you in your own life?