



Victoria Piontek

WRITER. TEACHER. MENTOR.

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Victoria first fell in love with books when she discovered a battered set of C.S. Lewis's *Chronicles of Narnia* in the family barn. By the time she finished the series, she believed real magic was found behind the cover of a book.

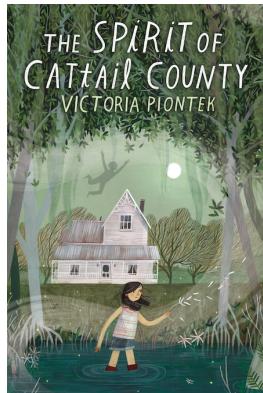
Her debut novel, *The Spirit of Cattail County*, was selected as a Bank Street College Best Book of the year and earned a spot on the coveted Oklahoma Library Association Children's Sequoyah Masterlist. She is also the author of short stories in Wyvern Publications and Vine Leaves Literary Magazine.

Prior to her current roles in publishing, Victoria was an English teacher, first as a Teach for America Corps Member for middle school students in New York City, then at Pace University. Victoria continues to work with middle grade students, both as a school volunteer and as a Girl Scout leader, helping kids to find their voice and passion. When she's not writing, you can find her reading, hiking, or wrangling her three children and a big fluffy dog.

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Discussion Guide



THE SPIRIT OF CATTAIL COUNTY

By Victoria
Piontek

- Summarize the plot of *The Spirit of Cattail County*. What are the themes of the novel? Can you use quotes from the story to support your ideas?
- Can you find an example of figurative language like metaphors or similes in *The Spirit of Cattail County*? Explain what you think it means. Does the use of the metaphor or simile help you better understand the story or think about what it describes in a new way?
- At the beginning of the book, Sparrow feels like an outcast. Why do you think she feels this way? Have you ever felt different or left out?
- Sparrow loves her house even though it's old and rickety. Why do you think she loves it so much? Is there a special place that you love? What do you like about it? Do other people see the same beauty you see or is it a place that means something only to you?
- Why don't the people of Beulah like the Castos? If you lived in Beulah would you be friends with the Castos? Why or why not?
- Why do you think Elena wants to be a fortune teller? Do you think Elena and Sparrow have anything in common?
- Describe the different personalities of Sparrow, Elena, Maeve, and Johnny. Which character is your favorite and why? Who are you most like?
- Auntie Geraldine is hiding a secret. Why do you think she is keeping this secret? How does hiding who she is prevent her from loving Sparrow?
- How are Auntie Geraldine and Sparrow alike? How are they different?
- If *The Spirit of Cattail County* was told from Auntie Geraldine's point of view, how might that change the story?
- Sparrow finds a picture of Mama. Written on the back of it is the phrase, *love never says goodbye*. What do you think this means? Do you believe love stays with us forever?
- Eli, Elena's uncle, encourages Sparrow and her friends to use the town archives to discover information about the past. Have you ever searched your town's historical documents? Is there something you've always wondered about your city or other place of interest that you could learn more about through research?
- The Boy has an interesting history. While the Boy's backstory is fiction, did you know the Orphan Train movement really happened? During 1853-1929 over 200,000 homeless and orphaned children ranging in ages from 1 to 17 were placed on trains and sent West. Some children were adopted. Others were indentured (forced to work for free for a period of time). Why do you think these children were sent West? How do you think they felt?

ELA-LITERACY RL 3.1,
RL 3.3, RL 3.10, RL 4.10,
RL 4.2, RL 5.2,
RL 5.3, RL 5.4, RL 5.6,
RL 5.10

Common Core Standards

Vocabulary List

USE THIS WORD LIST TO HELP PRE-TEACH VOCABULARY OR INTRODUCE WORDS THAT MIGHT BE NEW TO READERS.

Alabaster (Ch. 3)
Allegiance (Ch. 27)
Anomaly (Ch. 1)
Archive (Ch. 21)
Beloved (Ch. 7)
Brackish (Ch. 2)
Cemetery (Ch. 6)
Charlatans (Ch. 3)
Congregation (Ch. 9)
Conjured (Ch. 4)
Corrosion (Ch. 2)
Devoted (Ch. 7)
Everglades (Ch. 1)
Familiar (Ch. 2)
Fickle (Ch. 1)
Flea market (Ch. 21)
Forbidden (Ch. 10)
Formidable (Ch. 2)
Fortune Teller (Ch. 5)
Furrowed (Ch. 8)
Generations (Ch. 2)

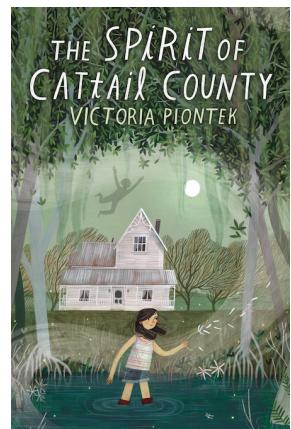
Humidity (Ch. 6)
Hymns (Ch. 7)
Inquisitively (Ch. 10)
Invader (Ch. 12)
Luminous (Ch. 18)
Moseyed (Ch. 3)
Off-Kilter (Ch. 7)
Omen (Ch. 1)
Oppressive (Ch. 6)
Philanthropy (Ch. 23)
Prankster (Ch. 10)
Pristinely (Ch. 4)
Prudent (Ch. 2)
Ramshackle (Ch. 2)
Skirmishes (Ch. 23)
Sulfurous (Ch. 3)
Superstition (Ch. 12)
Tidbit (Ch. 3)
Undertow (Ch. 15)
Ushered (Ch. 9)
Vendor (Ch. 21)

“The two of them had always been different. She, a girl who looked at death. He, a ghost who looked like life.

—The Spirit of Cattail County by Victoria Piontek

COMMON CORE STANDARDS ELA-LITERACY

W3.3, W4, W5.3, W3.2, W4.2, W5.2,
W5.7, W5.8, L3, L4, L5



Writing Prompt

Write about a place that you love. Use as many sensory details (sight, sound, smell, touch, and taste) as you can to describe it. Try to think of details that only you might notice. If you feel inspired, use this piece of descriptive writing as a setting for your own story.

Research & Writing

Research the Orphan Train Movement. Look for primary source materials like recorded interviews from orphan train riders, newspaper articles, advertisements, photographs and songs. When you’re done write a short research paper, draw a comic or produce a slide show to teach someone else about the Orphan Train. Don’t forget to provide a list of your sources.