

EDUCATORS' GUIDE

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ABOUT THE DRAGONS IN A BAG SERIES

A fantasy series following Jaxon, former apprentice to a witch called Ma, as he learns about magic in Brooklyn and Chicago.

ABOUT THE CREATORS

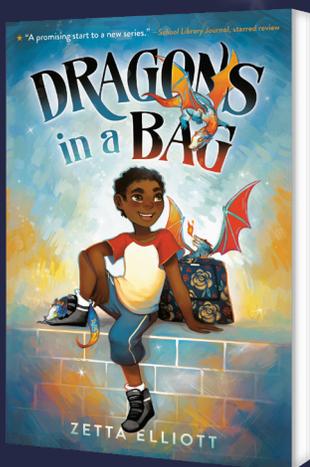


ZETTA ELLIOTT was born in Canada and moved to the United States in 1994. She is the author of over forty books for young readers, including the Dragons in a Bag series and the award-winning picture books *Bird* and *Melena's Jubilee*. She is also a contributor to the anthology *We Rise, We Resist, We Raise Our Voices*. Elliott is an advocate for greater diversity and equity in publishing. A longtime resident of Brooklyn, she currently lives in Chicago. Visit her at zettaelliott.com or follow her on Twitter at [@zettaelliott](https://twitter.com/zettaelliott).

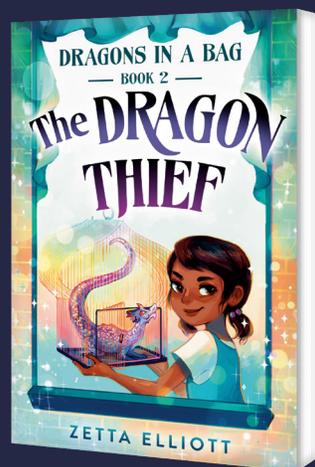
CHERISE HARRIS spent much of her childhood in Barbados writing stories and making art. She went on to complete an associate's degree in visual arts at Barbados Community College, a bachelor's of fine arts in illustration at the School of Visual Arts in New York City, and a master's in illustration at Falmouth University in the United Kingdom. She now lives in Barbados with her husband and daughter.



AGES: 8-12 | GRADES: 3-7



HC: 978-1-5247-7045-7
TR: 978-1-5247-7048-8
EL: 978-1-5247-7047-1



HC: 978-1-5247-7049-5
TR: 978-1-5247-7052-5
EL: 978-1-5247-7051-8



HC: 978-0-593-42770-5
TR: 978-0-593-42773-6
GLB: 978-0-593-42771-2
EL: 978-0-593-42772-9



HC: 978-0-593-42774-3
GLB: 978-0-593-42775-0
EL: 978-0-593-42776-7

PRE-READING QUESTIONS AND ACTIVITY

1. This book series fits into the urban fantasy genre. This means that the urban setting is integral to the plot of the books. The series switches between locations in Brooklyn, NY; Chicago, IL; and Palmara, the magic realm. Brainstorm with your students why the author might have chosen an urban location for her series.
2. Draw on your students' background knowledge of fantasy novels. Prompt students to think about the characteristics of a fantasy novel. For example, what types of animals or creatures might they encounter in the books?

3. Create a gallery walk of the covers of the four books, using enlarged covers so that students can examine each in detail. Prompt students to notice people, animals, and creatures from each book cover, and make predictions about the main characters and about the plot.



QUESTIONS AND ACTIVITIES

1. In *Dragons in a Bag*, Mo accidentally imprints on Kavita soon after hatching. What examples of this imprint do we see throughout each book? Think carefully about how Mo and Kavita interact with one another, as well as how they act when they are separated.
2. Each of the dragons hatched from a pearly purple egg, and all three have purple scales when they are born. However, only two of the dragons have wings. The third dragon is special because it has plates down its back and can breathe fire.
 - ★ What could be some reasons the dragons look different from one another and have different abilities?
 - ★ What predictions can you make about the future actions of Mo, Lex, and Rex? Revisit these predictions throughout the books as new information is learned. Were student predictions correct or incorrect?



3. On pages 116 and 117 of *Dragons in a Bag*, we learn that there are some people who want the realms of magic and Earth to be kept separate, and other people who want the realms to be merged.
 - ★ Keep a list of the characters who are on Team Separate Realms and Team Merged Realms. Ask students to keep track of proof of each character's opinion, and to note whether a character changes their mind on the topic.
 - ★ Ask students to form their own opinion: Based on what they have learned, is it better to keep the realms separated or to merge them? What are the benefits and drawbacks of each course of action? You can revisit this question throughout the series as both the characters and your readers learn more.
4. Throughout the book, Zetta Elliott uses terms like *piezoelectricity* and *Jyotish astrology*. For each of these new words, prompt students to use context clues to determine meaning. Then look at the roots/affixes to determine both denotations and connotations of the words. Ask students to consider why the author chose these words, and if they think word choice is important to the story.

5. Blue likes to strike bargains to further his own interests, even if it means lying to others.

- ★ Ask students to keep a list of the ways Blue helps Jaxon and his friends and the ways he hurts them.
- ★ Talk about whether students think a person's intentions matter more than how they make others feel.

6. Many characters in the books do both good and bad things. Sis guards Palmara and keeps the creatures safe, but she also imprisoned her brother. Ma takes Jaxon on adventures and teaches him about witchcraft, but also lies about the court case.

- ★ Are people ever all good or all bad?
- ★ What other examples do we have of characters who are both good and bad?

7. Define the word *prophecy*. During the book series, Jaxon is told to “beware the crow.”

- ★ Do prophecies always need to come true?
- ★ What other books have you read where a character is given a prophecy, and what happened to that character?
- ★ Discuss the prophecy Jaxon is given, and ask students to predict what will happen if he does or does not heed the prophecy.

8. We learn in *The Dragon Thief* that Kenny has dyslexia.

- ★ Do you know of other book characters who have disabilities or learning disorders?
- ★ How can a person's disability or disorder be a strength?
- ★ How can people's differences be strengths?



POST-READING



1. Throughout the book, we learn about many different types of connections between characters.

- ★ Ask students to create a character relationship map to visualize these connections. Begin with Jaxon in the middle, and place Vikram, Sis, Ma, and Jaxon's mother at each cardinal direction. Have students draw lines to connect characters to one another and label each line with how the characters are connected. For example, a student could draw a line from Ma to Elroy and write: “Elroy gave the dragon eggs to Ma.”
 - What does the word *family* mean? What does *community* mean?
 - In what ways can a family be more than just people you are related to?
 - Who belongs in Jaxon's community?
 - How do members of a community take care of one another?

2. *The Dragon Thief* is told from two perspectives.

Each chapter is told from either Kavita's or Jaxon's point of view. In *The Enchanted Bridge*, some chapters are told from the perspectives of magical creatures, like the phoenix and Mo, the dragon. Rewrite a scene from one of these books from a different perspective, using what you know about another character's personality and actions to make the writing authentic.

3. At the end of *Dragons in a Bag*, Zetta Elliott refers to the hashtags #BlackGirlMagic and #BlackBoyJoy. Discuss these social media movements with your students.

- ★ What do these hashtags mean?
- ★ What examples of Black Girl Magic and Black Boy Joy do we see in the books?

4. Early in *The Witch's Apprentice*, Jaxon is given a phoenix egg, which is described as looking like a “burnt tennis ball.”

- ★ Compare and contrast the phoenix egg to the dragon eggs. How are they similar, and how are they different?
- ★ What is different about how Jaxon cares for the phoenix and dragon eggs?

5. Throughout the book series, Zetta Elliott refers to social justice movements like Black Lives Matter and the realities of police brutality, slavery, and segregation. When Jaxon visits Chicago, he even mentions seeing a statue of George Washington with red spray paint on it. This statue is real and was really marked with graffiti in 2020.

- ★ What are some reasons that people use spray paint to mark public property?
- ★ One of the things written on the George Washington statue was “slave owner.” Why was this written on the statue? Why did the person who wrote it feel that it was an important message for others to see?
- ★ Why does Zetta Elliott include this detail in her book?
- ★ Why does American segregation after slavery come up in more than one book? What parallel is Elliott drawing?

6. This book series borrows heavily from the Maasai, Gujarati, K'iche', and Malagasy languages and cultures. Readers can infer that Elliott was inspired by African mythology and history. Split your students into small groups, and either assign or allow them to choose one of the above languages and cultures. Provide students with at least one folktale from their selected culture. Prompt students to look for similarities between their tale and the book series.



7. The author refers to lots of colors, especially when she is describing magical characters. Look through the pages for descriptions of the dragons, Jef the fairy, the phoenix, and Blue. Make copies of these passages, and guide students through a mini symbolism lesson.

- ★ Why do authors use colors as symbols?
- ★ What examples of colors as symbols or metaphors can you think of? For example, often a person who is jealous or envious is described as “green with envy.”
- ★ Provide students with a basic list of color symbolism and ask them to discuss (or write a response to) why Elliott chose to assign each character their color description.
- ★ What can we infer about these characters based on the colors used to describe them?

8. On page 146 of *The Dragon Thief*, Sis tells Jaxon, “If you want change, you must hold [your leaders] accountable—or become a leader yourself.” This idea is echoed throughout the series: Jaxon is a leader for the new generation of magic users. Discuss with your students some of the ways that we can hold our leaders accountable, and some of the ways that we can act as leaders when we wish to create change.

- ★ This could also be extended into a service project for a local or national cause to impact an issue your students feel strongly about.

9. We learn throughout the series that Jaxon, Vikram, Kavita, and Kenny all gained unique magical powers which mimic the powers of magical creatures from Palmaria.

- ★ Why do you believe each character gained their specific powers?
 - ★ What do these powers infer about each character's personality?
 - ★ If you could have powers like a mythical creature, which powers would you choose, and why?

10. This book series has two illustrators: Geneva B and Cherise Harris. What are the similarities and differences between these illustrators' art styles and portrayals?

★ Students can complete a Venn diagram, comparing a character across the series.

11. We learn throughout the series that the dragons Mo, Lex, and Rex look different, and have different abilities. Dragons tend to be classified as either western-style or eastern-style dragons. Western dragons are large, with sturdy bodies and big wings. Western dragons can breathe fire and have legs. On the other hand, eastern dragons do not usually have wings and have bodies that resemble snakes, long and skinny and without legs.

★ Have students create artistic renderings of Mo, Lex, and Rex based on either a western- or eastern-style of dragon.

12. During Jaxon's trip to Chicago, he learns a great deal about Chicago's history of fires and unrest. In a way, Zetta Elliott seems to say that Chicago itself is like a phoenix, burning down and then being born again. Have students research one of the events mentioned by Vonn on page 92 of *The Witch's Apprentice*. Students should seek to understand the historical context of the fire, as well as its causes and effects if they are known. You can also modify this activity and ask students to research events within your state, county, or school district that could also be seen as a death and rebirth—perhaps an important local business closed and another opened in its place, or a sports team had a losing season followed by a winning season.

13. As the book series goes on, we learn about events that happened in the past that continue to affect the future. You can ask students to create a timeline of events (such as the relationship between Sis and Ol-Korrok) so that they can better understand how events affected one another. This can also be used as a prompt for a written response about cause and effect.

14. Zetta Elliott uses a great deal of imagery in her writing. Ask students to choose a scene to illustrate, based on the vivid writing in the books. Some good scenes to choose might be the hatching of the phoenix egg in *The Witch's Apprentice* or the destruction of the bridge in *The Enchanted Bridge*. Alternatively, you could ask students to create a comic panel of a scene, or a series of images to summarize a scene or chapter.

15. On page 206 of *The Witch's Apprentice*, the judges opened the proceedings of the court case with a "land acknowledgement," which is a way to recognize groups of people whose ancestors were the traditional stewards of the land. Work with students to discover the original stewards of the land where your school or homes are built: Who were they then, and who are they now? Where does this group of people live now, and how did the land come to be owned by your local government?

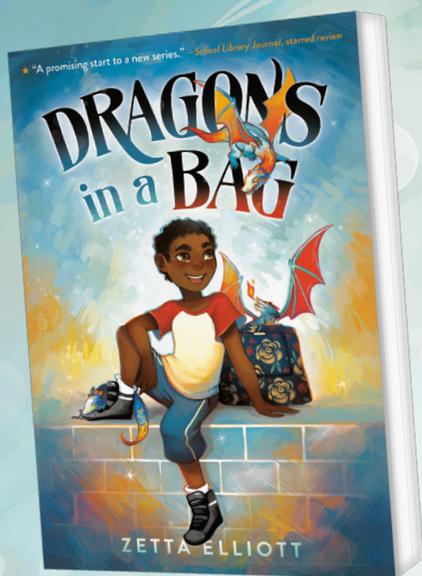
16. Throughout the book series, we meet Nate the rat, Soot the pigeon, and the gray squirrel. These animals can be found in Brooklyn on a daily basis. If this story had been set in your location, instead of in Brooklyn, New York, which three everyday animals could readers expect to see? Prompt students to choose three local animals that would appear if this book series was set in your location and write a brief justification of why they chose each animal.



PRAISE FOR THE DRAGONS in a BAG SERIES



A Chicago Public Library Best Book of the Year List • An ALA Notable Children's Book
A Florida Sunshine Young Readers Nominee • A Massachusetts Children's Book Award Nominee
A Pennsylvania Readers' Choice Nominee • A Utah Beehive Book Award Nominee
A Wisconsin Golden Archer Award Nominee
A Wisconsin Reading Association Recommends List Selection



★ “What a breath of fresh air: a chapter-book fantasy with an urban setting, an array of brown-skinned magic wielders, and a lovable black protagonist readers will root for.”—*Kirkus Reviews*, starred review

★ “Elliott skillfully introduces themes about creating positive change, examines issues of othering and the fear of differences, and touches upon the complexities of family, gentrification, and segregation.”

—*School Library Journal*, starred review

“A wonderful, and wonderfully inclusive, fantasy for any collection.”

—*Booklist*

“Elliot seamlessly blends the culture of the streets of Brooklyn, the culture of Madagascar, and the magic of a fantastical world.”—*The Bulletin*

“Filled with entertaining characters.”—*Publishers Weekly*

“Engaging, with a number of twists and turns.”—*The Horn Book*

“An adventurous, fantastical read.”—*Booklist*

“Quick-paced, suspenseful, and entertaining.”

—*The Horn Book*

“Fans will be happy to return to Jax’s story (and encounter a new magical creature).”

—*Kirkus Reviews*



This guide was prepared by Heather J. Matthews, PhD (she/her). Heather is an assistant professor of literacy in the department of early elementary education at Salisbury University in Maryland.



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