

The Witch's Boy

by KELLY BARNHILL



SEPTEMBER

MIDDLE GRADE FICTION

Ages 10 and up, Grades 5 and up

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BOOK TALK

When Ned and his identical twin brother tumble from their raft into a raging, bewitched river, only Ned survives. Villagers are convinced the wrong boy lived. But when the Bandit King comes to steal the magic Ned's mother, a witch, is meant to protect, it's Ned who safeguards the magic and summons the strength to protect his family and community.

Meanwhile, across the enchanted forest that borders Ned's village lives Áine, the resourceful and pragmatic daughter of the Bandit King, who is haunted by her mother's last words to her: "The wrong boy will save your life and you will save his." When Áine's and Ned's paths cross, can they trust each other long enough to stop the war about to boil over between their two kingdoms?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kelly Barnhill lives in Minnesota with her husband, three children, and very old dog. Her debut novel, *The Mostly True Story of Jack*, received four starred reviews. Her second book, *Iron Hearted Violet*, was a Parents' Choice Gold Award Winner and an Andre Norton Award finalist. *The Witch's Boy* is her third novel.



PRAISE FOR *The Witch's Boy*

"A story with many alluring elements . . . Barnhill creates an absorbing world of kingdoms and prophecies in which transformation comes through language, and through courage and self-awareness as well . . . [*The Witch's Boy*] should open young readers' eyes to something that is all around them in the very world we live in: the magic of words."

—*The New York Times*

"The classic fantasy elements are all there, richly reimagined, with a vivid setting, a page-turning adventure of a plot, and compelling, timeless themes."

—*Kirkus Reviews*, starred review

"A classic origin-quest tale . . . brimming with a well-drawn, colorful supporting cast, a strong sense of place, and an enchanted forest with a personality to rival some of the best depictions of magical woods."

—*School Library Journal*, starred review

"In a story of an unexpected hero, a thief's daughter, and some very tricky magic, Barnhill weaves a powerful narrative."

—*Publishers Weekly*, starred review

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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Ned is always compared with his brother and referred to as “the wrong boy” by everyone around him. Even Áine’s mother, who never meets Ned, calls him that on her deathbed. Have you ever felt unfairly compared with another person? Have you ever compared one person and another, perhaps unfairly?
2. At the end of chapter 2, Tam’s soul is stitched to Ned’s body. What did you think the consequences would be for Ned? Were you surprised by what happened to him?
3. Many characters, such as Sister Witch, the Queen, and the Bandit King, are never called by their actual names. Why do you think Kelly Barnhill chose to name her characters this way? Can you think of people in your life or in other stories that aren’t often referred to by their given names?
4. While Áine is a very pragmatic girl, Ned is timid and clumsy. How do their personalities complement one another on their journey? Did you identify with either Áine or Ned as you were reading?
5. When Áine first meets Ned and the wolf, she’s mistrustful of both. But by the end, all three are friends. At what point do you think her opinion of Ned, and her opinion of the wolf, changed? Have you ever changed your mind about someone the more you got to know him or her?
6. Why do you think the Queen and King Ott behave so differently? In the beginning of chapter 6, it’s mentioned that even when the Queen took the throne at the young age of seventeen, she displayed her famous sardonic humor. Do you think that an older King Ott would also act as he had in youth?
7. Consider the pros and cons of Sister Witch’s small portion of magic. Would you ever want to possess this kind of magic in your day-to-day life? Why or why not?
8. Ned’s and Áine’s parents feature heavily in *The Witch’s Boy*. How are Ned’s parents similar to Áine’s? How are they different? Where do you see each parent’s influences in Ned and Áine’s adventure?
9. At the end of *The Witch’s Boy*, the Bandit King frees himself from his obsessive greed and makes the ultimate sacrifice for his daughter. Do you think the Bandit King was a villain or a hero—or both? Are there other characters in the novel that seemed either good or evil when you began reading but changed as the novel progressed?
10. In the beginning and end of *The Witch’s Boy*, Ned longs to go out to the sea. Why do you think that is?
11. Kelly Barnhill used many elements from classic fairy tales in *The Witch’s Boy*, such as beginning with “Once upon a time.” What else makes this book similar to a fairy tale? What makes it different? In the end, would you consider *The Witch’s Boy* a fairy tale?