Reading notes and discussion ideas for exploring The Kite Rider by Geraldine McCaughrean

Gou Haoyou knew that his father’s spirit lived among the clouds . . . (p1)

Set in Ancient China, this is the story of Haoyou, a boy whose father has died, and whose mother is being forced into a marriage she does not want. Haoyou believes his father is now a spirit in the skies.

He becomes a kite rider and joining the fabulous Jade Circus he gets the chance to save his mother and seek his father—and travel across the empire and perform for Kublai Khan.

About the author

Geraldine McCaughrean is one of the most highly-acclaimed living children’s writers. She has won the Carnegie Medal (twice), the Whitbread Children’s Book Award (three times), the Guardian Children’s Fiction Award, and the Blue Peter Book of the Year Award, and is known and admired for the variety and originality of her books, as well as her stunning storytelling skills.

She was chosen by the Trustees of Great Ormond Street Hospital for Children to write the official sequel to Peter Pan. Peter Pan in Scarlet was published to worldwide acclaim and became an instant classic.

What readers say . . .

‘A masterpiece of storytelling’
The Times

‘It snatches you up from the first chapter, and like Haoyou riding his kite, carries you up into a realm that is shocking, beautiful and compulsive.’
Sunday Times

‘. . . this novel has an atmosphere so compelling that it is impossible to separate exotic fact from inspired invention . . . continually exciting, and fundamentally compassionate.’
Independent

‘a marvellous, soaring story that give you a glimpse into another world . . . A wonderful, dense novel, singing with the truth that part of loving your parents is knowing how to escape them.’
Guardian

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THEMES FOR DISCUSSION

Haoyou and his family
Have a look at the ‘Cast of Characters’ at the front of the book and talk about how Haoyou feels about the different members of his family.

You could draw a simple family tree, with details about each person, to show their place in the family.

Haoyou felt helpless and bewildered. In all his life no-one had ever taught him anything but blind obedience to his parents, to his elders, to his fate. (p147)

What do you learn from this story about family customs and beliefs in Ancient China?

What do you think about the way that children were expected to behave towards their elders?

How does Great-Uncle Bo use his power as the head of the family after the death of Pei, Haoyou’s father? And what pressure is there on Qing’an, Haoyou’s mother, as a widow and mother of children?

The characters in the story
Thinking about each person in the story, what is a particular thing about each of them which makes them stand out for you? It might be how they look? Or the way that they think or do things?

Who is your favourite and your least favourite character? Who do you find the most interesting? What do they do that makes you think this?

An exultant triumph somewhere in his chest was singing like a nightingale, and he knew that the Realm of Air was his today and whenever he chose to walk it. (p68)

What do you think about Haoyou’s feelings and motives for being a kite rider?

Mipeng was altogether the least proper person he had ever met. (p50)

Look at the things which Mipeng says and how she behaves—is this usual for a young woman of her day?

Bo pushed his big lips forward and cleaned his teeth with his tongue, savouring the power he had on such occasions as this. (p25)

How do you feel about Great-Uncle Bo and Di Chou? Might you have any sympathy for them, if you take into account the beliefs and expectations of their time?

Being a kite rider: up in the air
Haoyou looked about him and saw the whole world beneath him. And it was his. (p64)

Think of all the different feelings which Haoyou has about being up in the air: the physical demands of being a kite rider, the fear—and the ecstasy!

Imagine you are Haoyou, spread on a kite, high up, looking down upon your home and the town or landscape around it. Think of the patterns of streets and fields and rivers, the markers of churches and tall buildings, the houses like matchboxes.

Describe what you would see, or draw a plan or picture of your local landscape as seen from a height. Where might you need to be to get a view like this?
Kites

Haoyou made triangular kites and square ones, oblongs and pennons with swallow tails. He made box kites and tubular kites, and with every one, he mastered some new deftness . . . (p31)

Have a look at the description on page 66 where Haoyou considers how he would improve on the making of the wind-tester kite.

Find a book about making kites and use this to help you design your own kite. What materials would you use and what do you need to think about when constructing it?—for example, the frame, the cladding, the colours, the tail.

Draw what it would look like, and add notes about the materials and design.

He and Mipeng painted it scarlet and crammed each red panel with golden writing . . . ‘crane’, ‘luck’, ‘sunrise’, ‘fortune’, ‘happiness’ . . . (p84)

What lucky and special words would you choose to write on your kite?

Superstitions

‘If it (the kite) rises up straight, the voyage will prosper. If it flies out . . . at an angle . . . there may be problems.’ (p5)

‘. . . every day they offer up prayers and a libation of mare’s milk to their ancestors for your safe recovery . . . ’(p132)

Collect examples of superstitions which drive this story, like the wind-testing, and rituals to the gods. Think of the unlucky omens at Pei Gou’s funeral, and the messages sent into the sky by the people of Yangcun: The slightest thing to drop out of the sky . . . took on a magical significance and was held to have been sent by the spirits. (p232)

This story is set in Ancient China and reflects the beliefs of that time.

How superstitious are we today? Did you know that it’s thought to be unlucky to paint a boat green or to whistle on board ship? (If you whistle you may change the wind!)

‘We all of us need luck’ (p93)

Haoyou and Mipeng decorate a kite with lucky words, and Haoyou depends on the charm and protection of ‘Little Dog Wu’, a patch on his jacket which was embroidered by his mother.

What superstitious sayings or charms do we use today to bring luck?—e.g. ‘fingers crossed’, or a four-leaf clover.

Do you carry a lucky charm with you? Perhaps something given to you by someone who means a lot to you? Or do you follow any special ways of doing things to bring you luck?

Then he dressed with great care, buttoning alternate buttons from the bottom upwards (because he had always found that brought him luck). (p279)
**THEMES FOR DISCUSSION**

The Kite Rider gives us a rich picture of life in Ancient China. Fill in the picture further by finding out more about these people and topics from the book.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TOPIC</th>
<th>YOUR RESEARCH FINDINGS</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Daily life in Ancient China</td>
<td><em>He had risen into air unpolluted by rotting fish, sewage, and cooking, by cinnamon sacks and horse manure.</em> (p63)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>China and the Mongols</td>
<td><em>... the Mongols were barbarians and had stolen Cathay from the Chinese.</em> (p43)  <em>‘My best riders are Mongols... Steppes men and women. Born in the saddle.’</em> (p80)</td>
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<td>Kublai Khan</td>
<td><em>‘Emperor of all Cathay.’</em> (p81)</td>
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<td>Xanadu</td>
<td><em>‘Summer capital of the Great Khan, pleasure garden of the Conqueror.’</em> (p164)</td>
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<tr>
<td>The Chinese calendar</td>
<td><em>‘Bad-faced rogue... Born in the year of the snake.’</em> (p71)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Paddy fields</td>
<td><em>The paddy lay like a chessboard... Water buffalo were all that disturbed the silver sheen of the flooded fields...</em> (p124)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Punishment by carpet</td>
<td><em>To and fro, to and fro they would ride, across the rolled-up carpet... until carpet and contents were nothing but a flattened, shapeless mound.</em> (p227)</td>
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_Artwork © Melissa Castellon_
MORE TO THINK ABOUT AND DISCUSS

Dreams

*I dreamt there was this cormorant! . . . A big black cormorant! It came swooping down on me . . . and I couldn’t move!’ (p18)

What causes Haoyou to have this dream and what do you think is its meaning?

What dreams do you have? Are they happy, or sometimes frightening?

Do you dream about freezing to the spot like Haoyou, or being chased, or falling from a cliff?

What might our dreams mean?—e.g. falling may mean you are worried about something; a dream about food may mean we are hungry for new ideas and experiences.

Facing up to reality

*Sometimes the gods are deaf.* (p48)

Talk about the tensions between what Haoyou has been taught to believe about obedience, and about gods and spirits—and his realisation that these beliefs may not work out in real life.

*Haoyou knew he was remembering, just remembering.* (p241)

Losing his sight in one eye

*It was a blackberry stain, a scorchmark, a tiny tear in the stretched white fabric of Life.* (p249)

Talk about how Haoyou comes to terms with being blind in one eye.

Being home

*It was Paradise.* (p250)

Why do you think Haoyou feels this about Dagu, his home town? Where is your ‘Paradise’, and why is it your special place?

Words

*In my opinion, young readers should be bombarded with words like gamma rays, steeped in words like pot plants stood in water, pelted with them like confetti, fed on them like alphabetti spaghetti, given Hamlet’s last resort: “Words. Words. Words”.*

This is an excerpt from a speech recently made by The Kite Rider’s author, Geraldine McCaughrean, when she won the Carnegie Medal for her latest book, Where the World Ends.

On the next page (p6) are just a few of all the evocative words in The Kite Rider, some of which may be new to you. See if you can work out what they mean from what is happening in the story. Then look them up to see if you are right—and make up a new sentence for each of them.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>WORD</th>
<th><strong>MEANING</strong></th>
<th><strong>YOUR NEW SENTENCE</strong></th>
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<tr>
<td>... merchants <strong>mustering</strong> on the dockside. (p4)</td>
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<td>He wanted to <strong>imbue</strong> the word with everything he felt. (p29)</td>
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<td>Up went the dragon, bucking and <strong>undulating</strong> (p37)</td>
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<td>... <strong>impaling</strong> them (his notices) on lantern hooks (p41)</td>
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<td>... fragments of countless kites rode on the <strong>incandescent</strong> updraught . . . (p45)</td>
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<td>... the <strong>hugger-mugger</strong> housing of Dagu town tumbling down towards the water’s edge. (p63)</td>
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<td>... his wind-tester had flown a perfect <strong>trajectory</strong> over the (ship) . . . (p67)</td>
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<td>... he . . . felt only the <strong>acid</strong> simmer of terror and glee tucked in under his ribcage (p90)</td>
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<td>A crowd was drawn like iron filings to a <strong>lodestone</strong> . . . (p135)</td>
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<td>... scattering a <strong>miasma</strong> of shimmering green leaves . . . (p202)</td>
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<td>It was as damp as an otter’s <strong>halt</strong>. (p259)</td>
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<tr>
<td>... the traitors, the <strong>absconders</strong>, the disobedient scum . . . (p279)</td>
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Imagery

The Kite Rider is rich with imagery, especially similes, which create vivid descriptions by making comparisons.

On page 200 there is simile after simile, building the sense of danger and excitement in the kite rider challenge between Haoyou and the Mongols.

Below are some examples from the story—have a look for more. Which are your favourites?

But the noise of the crowd swallowed Haoyou’s voice **like the sea swallowing a whisper.** (p7)

. . . his heart, over-crammed with fear, had **burst like a sack of grain** . . . (p10)

Mipeng’s delicate, gentle face set hard **like the water on a pond freezing over.** (p40)

The hatch-cover . . . looked now as heavy and **unflyable as a butcher’s table top.** (p61)

. . . she slipped away **like a slender lick of red flame** . . . (p74)

Elephants **like drought-dead trees** . . . (p80)

. . . the clouds were piled **like fleeces on shearing day.** (p177)
THE KITE RIDER QUIZ

Choose a, b or c, for the right answer.

1. Why was Pei, a sailor and Haoyou’s father, tied on to a kite and sent up into the sky?
   a. For sport
   b. To try out the kite
   c. As a wind-tester, to see if the wind was favourable for a ship’s voyage

2. After causing Pei’s death on the kite, what does the first mate Di Chou plan to do?
   a. Leave the town quickly
   b. Marry Haoyou’s mother
   c. Look for a replacement for Pei on the ship’s crew

3. Why did the guests leave Pei’s funeral early?
   a. The food had run out
   b. They had another funeral to go to
   c. There were several unlucky omens at the event

4. Haoyou’s Great-Uncle Bo is pompous and greedy—how does Haoyou behave towards him?
   a. He ignores him
   b. He has a fight with him
   c. He obeys him, as it is the custom to treat the head of the family with complete respect

5. Mipeng, Haoyou’s cousin, acts as a medium, giving information and advice for the future. What does she say Haoyou should do to earn money for his family?
   a. Make kites
   b. Go to sea
   c. Get a job in the town

6. Why doesn’t Di Chou marry Qing’an, Haoyou’s mother?
   a. She stands firm and refuses him
   b. He changes his mind
   c. Haoyou and Mipeng get Di Chou drunk and put him on a ship which then sails away with him

7. Haoyou and Mipeng leave town to travel with the Jade Circus. What circus act does Haoyou perform?
   a. He is a juggler.
   b. He becomes a kite rider, in the hope that he may find his father’s spirit up in the sky
   c. He learns to be an acrobat

8. As a kite rider Haoyou is given the name Qiqi. What does it mean?
   a. ‘Quick’
   b. ‘A quiver of arrows’
   c. ‘Up in the air’

9. Riding the kite, what is Haoyou able to do which earns him the gratitude of the circus people?
   a. Look down from the sky and find and rescue the bird-catcher’s daughter
   b. Map the countryside so that the circus knows which way to travel
   c. Give warning of an attack from the Mongol army
10 Why does Great-Uncle Bo follow the circus and catch up with Haoyou?
   a. To fetch him home
   b. To take the money Haoyou has earned, which is Bo’s by right as head of the family
   c. To join the circus himself

11 Who is Miao, the circus manager?
   a. An escaped convict
   b. A gypsy
   c. A member of the Chinese Song royal family

12 What has Miao sworn to do?
   a. Create the best circus in the world
   b. Avenge his father’s death and kill Kublai Khan, the Mongol leader
   c. Never marry

13 What message does the Mongol army bring to the circus?
   a. Come and perform for Kublai Khan
   b. Give yourselves up to be prisoners
   c. Join the Mongol army

14 What wager, for 100 taels, does Bo make with the Mongol army in a contest between their kite rider and Haoyou?
   a. The first man down is the loser
   b. The one who goes highest is the winner
   c. The one who catches a bird is the winner

15 Hayou manages to win—how does he eventually land?
   a. The circus people catch him and lower him to the ground
   b. He falls on a cart of earth and grass which Kublai Khan has brought from his birthplace on the Steppes of Central Asia, as a travelling temple.
   c. He falls in a bog

16 When Kublai Khan realises who Miao is, he orders him to be killed by being wrapped in a carpet and trampled to death by horsemen riding over him. How is Miao saved?
   a. He rolls away in the carpet, down a hill and into a river
   b. The circus people overcome the guards and pull him out of the carpet
   c. All the circus people lie down on the carpet to share the punishment—Kublai Khan spares them but takes Haoyou away to join the Mongol army

17 Kublai Khan uses Haoyou to attack the city of Yangcun by dropping explosives from the kite. What saves Haoyou and the city?
   a. A storm causes havoc and puts the Mongol army to flight
   b. The explosives are faulty
   c. The gods send a warning to the city.

18 How does the story end?
   a. Haoyou and Mipeng return home and rescue his mother from working in a gambling den
   b. Di Chou and Bo get their just deserts
   c. Miao and Mipeng have married and are expecting a child
   d. Haoyou becomes a kite maker
   e. Haoyou and his family join Miao, Mipeng and the circus to sail away to new adventures

(The answers are at the end)
## MORE READING

### More books by Geraldine McCaughrean

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<th>Title</th>
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<td></td>
<td><em>A Pack of Lies</em></td>
<td>OUP</td>
<td>9780192752031</td>
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<td></td>
<td><em>Peter Pan in Scarlet</em></td>
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<td><em>Stop the Train</em></td>
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<td><em>Where the World Ends</em></td>
<td>Usborne</td>
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### Stories & non-fiction about China and the East

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<tr>
<td>Ying Compestine Chang</td>
<td><em>D is for Dragon Dance (The Chinese New Year)</em></td>
<td>Holiday House</td>
<td>9780823440290</td>
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<td>Terry Collins</td>
<td><em>Ancient China: An Interactive History Adventure</em></td>
<td>Capstone Press</td>
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<td>Arthur Cotterell</td>
<td><em>Ancient China (DK Eyewitness)</em></td>
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<td><em>Chinese Myths and Legends</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>Donna Jo Napoli</td>
<td><em>Bound</em> (YA: the life of a girl in Ancient China)</td>
<td>Simon Pulse</td>
<td>9780689861789</td>
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<td>Darren Shan &amp; Zack McLaughlin</td>
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<td>Barrington Stoke</td>
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<td>Laurence Yep &amp; David Wiesner</td>
<td><em>The Rainbow People (Chinese myths, collected from a Chinese American community)</em></td>
<td>HarperCollins</td>
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<td><strong>Kites and flying</strong></td>
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<td>David Almond</td>
<td>My Dad's a Birdman</td>
<td>Walker</td>
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<td>Richard Bach</td>
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<td>Grace Lin</td>
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<td>David Wiesner</td>
<td>Tuesday</td>
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<td>Jane Yolen &amp; Dennis Nolan</td>
<td>Wings (OP)</td>
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<td><strong>Circuses</strong></td>
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<td>Cassie Beasley</td>
<td>Circus Mirandus</td>
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<td>A F Harrold &amp; Sarah Horne</td>
<td>Fizzlebert Stump: The Boy Who Ran Away From the Circus (and joined the library)</td>
<td>Bloomsbury</td>
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<td>Jacqueline Wilson</td>
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<td><strong>Children’s Journeys</strong></td>
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<td>Charles Dickens</td>
<td>Oliver Twist</td>
<td>Vintage</td>
<td>9780099582632</td>
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<tr>
<td>Philip Pullman</td>
<td>The Book of Dust: La Belle Sauvage</td>
<td>Penguin/David Fickling</td>
<td>9780241365854</td>
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**Quiz answers**

1c, 2b, 3c, 4c, 5a, 6c, 7b, 8c, 9b, 10b, 11c, 12b, 13a, 14a, 15b, 16c, 17a, 18 – a,b,c,d,& e!