

**4th Grade Curriculum Guide Book Summary**

**Book Title: *The Tale of Despereaux***

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**Executive summary:** A mouse named Despereaux saves the princess from the evil rats that live in the castle’s dungeon. Despereaux, Princess Pea, a servant girl named Mig and a rat named Roscuro all discover that forgiveness frees their own hearts from darkness and pain.

**Detailed summary:** This tale begins with the birth of a mouse, an imperfect mouse, very small with large ears. He was the only one of the litter to be born alive. His mother was sad and disappointed. Thinking only of herself, she vowed to have no more babies, because it was too damaging to her beauty. Because of her immense disappointment and despair, she named the little mouse Despereaux.

When other mice saw him, they commented on his size and his big ears. Nobody had anything nice to say about little Despereaux. His own mother said, “You are a disappointment to your mama.”

Despereaux was not like other mice. He was very thoughtful, and he was not at all interested in the things that mice were supposed to be interested in. His brother Furlough tried to teach him to scurry, but Despereaux had no interest in scurrying. His sister Merlot tried to teach him to nibble the pages of a book, but instead he discovered that he could read.

Despereaux lived in a castle and spent his days exploring. One day he heard a beautiful sound. It was the king playing the guitar and singing to his young daughter, Princess Pea. Despereaux crept out of hiding and was seen by the humans. Princess Pea saw the little mouse, but the king thought he was a bug. Princess Pea smiled at Despereaux, and he fell in love with her.  
 Continued on Back

***The Tale of Despereaux***, Page 2  
  
Pea picked up Despereaux. She said his ears were like velvet. Pea wanted to keep him as a pet, but her father said he wouldn’t allow her to keep a “rodent” as a pet. The king ordered Despereaux to “scat.” That made Pea cry and Despereaux did something a mouse is never supposed to do, he spoke to the princess. He begged her not to cry. Now the king was very angry and chased him off into a hole in the wall. Before he disappeared into the hole, Despereaux told Princess Pea his name and shouted, “I honor you.”

Furlough saw his brother interacting with humans and told his parents. They were shocked at Despereaux’s behavior, so un-mouselike. They decided to punish him, and made him go before the mouse council.

The council held a trial to determine what to do with Despereaux. The head mouse demanded that the trial be “civilized.” Despereaux admitted to associating with humans, talking to them and letting the princess touch him.

The council banished Despereaux to the dungeon where he would surely be killed by the rats. His father, Lester, cried at the ruling, but he did not oppose it. His mother also did nothing to stop it.

As the mice prepared to take Despereaux to the dungeon, he wondered if the “Happily Ever After” he read in books really existed. Despereaux’s mother said *Adieu*, Farwell, to her son as two hooded mice took him to his fate. He discovered one of the mice was his own brother, Furlough. Despereaux begged his brother to let him go, but Furlough said, “no way” and added, “Rules are rules.” Despereaux felt anger for his brother’s disloyalty. He repeated the word “Perfidy” which means treachery, betrayal. Alas, the hooded mice pushed him over a ledge and he tumbled down the steps into the dungeon.

In the dungeon he tried to be brave. To calm his fears he recited a story, “Once upon a time…” he said. A voice in the darkness spoke back to him. He discovered that the voice belonged to Gregory, the jailer, who had lived in the dungeon for many years. Gregory warned Despereaux of the rats, with hearts as dark as the dungeon itself. Despereaux told Gregory that he could not die, because he was in love with the princess. Gregory scoffed at the mention of love, which he said has caused him only misery. Then Gregory told Despereaux that he would save him from the rats, if he told him a story.

Continued on Next Page

**The Tale of Despereaux,** Page 3

**Book Two: Chiaroscuro**

We are now introduced to Chiaroscuro, a rat born in the dark dungeon several years before Despereaux even existed. When Chiaroscuro, known as Roscuro, was a young rat, he knew nothing of light, until one day Gregory snatched him up by the tail and burned his whiskers with a lighted match for chewing his rope.

Roscuro spoke with an evil rat named Botticelli about his fascination with light. Botticelli discouraged him from his interest in light. He told him “The meaning of life is suffering” and described ways he can torture unfortunate dungeon prisoners with false hope of friendship and forgiveness. After talking to Botticelli, Roscuro is convinced that he will welcome the day when he too can make a prisoner suffer.

On the day that a new prisoner arrived, Roscuro again saw the light on the other side of the doorway. He was fascinated by its beauty and wanted to see more of it. He wanted to go upstairs. Once again Botticelli discouraged him from going into the light.

Roscuro convinced the new prisoner to tell him his sins. The prisoner confessed that he had once traded his own daughter for a red cloth, a hen and some cigarettes. Roscuro then took the man’s red cloth and left him with nothing but his own remorse. Roscuro did not find comfort in taking the cloth from the man. He still longed to be in the light, to go upstairs.

One day he did go upstairs. He wondered from room to room in the castle, swept up by the glittering beauty around him. He entered the ballroom where the King, princess and other humans were dancing to music. Roscuro climbed up and hung from a glittering chandelier. Princess Pea saw him and shouted, “A rat!” Her scream caused Roscuro to fall down and into the Queen’s bowl of soup. When the Queen saw him, she screamed and had a heart attack. The princess looked at Roscuro with eyes filled with hate. That look broke Roscuro’s heart, and he returned to the dungeon, to the darkness. The whole experience hurt him deeply and he vowed to have his revenge.

The King also wanted revenge for the death of his Queen. He declared all rats were outlaws, to be put to death, and he banished all types of soup, soup bowls and spoons from the kingdom.

Continued on Back

**The Tale of Despereaux,** Page 4

**Book Three: Gor! The Tale of Miggery Sow**

There was a girl named Miggery Sow, who was just six years old when her mother died. Mig begged her dying mother to stay, but her mother said, “what does it matter what you are wanting?” After her mother’s death, Mig’s father sold her into service to a hateful man for a red cloth, a hen and some cigarettes. Mig was the man’s house slave. She worked very hard. He made Mig call him “uncle” and was mean to her and slapped her on the side of the head so much that she could no longer hear very well and her ears became deformed.

On her seventh birthday, Mig saw the King, Queen and Princess Pea pass by surrounded by knights and horses in shining armor. As they passed, Mig had a strange feeling, a feeling of hope. Perhaps one day she too could be a princess.

Years later, after the King had outlawed all soup bowls and spoons, the guards came to Uncle’s home to confiscate his bowls and spoons. They discovered that the man owned a slave girl, which was against the law. The guards took Mig to the castle where she would be a paid servant.

At the castle Mig met Princess Pea for a second time. She was delivering a spool of thread. Mig told the Princess that she too would be a princess one day.

At the castle Mig finally had enough food to eat, and she ate a lot and grew quite plump. She also grew lazy and failed at her most of the jobs that were assigned to her. Finally she was given the task of bringing the jailer his meals in the dungeon. Roscuro saw Mig and learned of her dream of being a princess. He knew that Mig would fit into his plan for revenge on Princess Pea and imprison her in the dungeon forever.

Mig gave Gregory his food and returned the empty tray to the kitchen. As she climbed back up the stairs, Roscuro stopped her and told of his plan to bring the Princess Pea to the darkness. He convinced Mig that if she helped him, she would be able to trade places with Princess Pea. She would be a princess. As Roscuro told Mig his plan, something was listening from under a napkin on Mig’s tray.

Continued on Next Page

**The Tale of Despereaux,** Page 5

**Book 4: Recalled to the Light**

Gregory had wrapped little Despereaux in a napkin and placed him on the tray. “Back to the light” Gregory whispered as he did this one kind act.

In the kitchen, Mig cleared the tray and shook the napkin. Despereaux fell to the floor. The cook ordered Mig to kill him. She tried but only succeeded in cutting off his tail. Though he mourned the loss of his tail, Despereaux was glad to be out of the dungeon, so he could save Princess Pea from Roscuro’s evil plan.

With Roscuro giving orders from her pocket, Mig went to Princess Pea and forced her to go down to the dungeon by knifepoint. As they led her to the dungeon, Princess Pea felt hatred for the rat who caused her mother’s death. She also felt sorry for Mig, who wanted so desperately to be a princess.

When Despereaux awoke he discovered Princess Pea was gone. The Cook cried over the missing Princess. She said that Mig had gone missing as well and poor Gregory was lost in the Dungeon, because someone had cut his rope. Despereaux went to the King to tell him what happened. As he searched for the king, he came upon the mouse council and his own father, who had been part of sending him to the dungeon. His father was old now and when he saw Despereaux, he thought it was a ghost. He asked Despereaux to forgive him for what he had done. And though it seems unlikely that someone could forgive another for sending them to their death, Despereaux said, “I forgive you.” By forgiving his father Despereaux’s own heart could mend from the terrible thing that was done to him.

Despereaux scurried out of the room and found the King sitting on Princess Pea’s bed, weeping. He told him that his daughter was in the dungeon, but the King refused to believe it. Despereaux would have to save the Princess himself. He got a spool of thread from Hovis, the Thread master, to tie around himself, so he wouldn’t get lost in the dungeon.   
  
 Continued on Back

**The Tale of Despereaux,** Page 6

Despereaux pushed the spool of thread through the castle and through the kitchen, where he discovered Cook making a pot of soup. She saw Despereaux, but was relieved that it was a mouse and not a guard for soup was still against the law. She let Despereaux taste the soup and wished him well on his quest to save the princess. “Strange days, indeed!” she said.

When he reached the dungeon, his love for the princess was stronger than his fears of the darkness and the rats. The spool of thread tumbled down the steps away from Despereaux. He was sad and scared that he lost the thread. It meant going forward through the darkness without it.

Botticelli saw Despereaux and told him that he would lead him to the princess. He wanted to make Despereaux suffer, to show him the thing he loved most in the world and then kill him. Despereaux held Botticelli’s tail and allowed the rat to lead him through the darkness.

*Note: The story now goes back to the events that occurred when Mig brought Princess Pea into the dungeon.*

Roscuro ordered Mig to put the chains on Pea, but Mig first wanted the princess’s dress, so she could be the princess. Roscuro told Mig that she was ridiculous. She could never be a princess. Mig realized that Roscuro was right. It made her sad. The princess felt sorry for Mig and spoke gently to her, asking her what she wanted. Mig said she wanted her mom. Pea said she missed her mom, too. It was the first time anyone had been that kind to Mig.

Mig refused to put chains on Princess Pea. Roscuro refused to lead Mig out of the dungeon. So Pea and Mig sat in the room with a candle burning. That’s when Despereaux came along with Botticelli. Roscuro tried to stop Despereaux from entering the room, but Mig still had the knife and she cut off Roscuro’s tail. Now Despereaux pointed his sword, which was really a sewing needle, at Roscuro’s heart.

A strange thing happened. Despereaux still had some soup on his whiskers, and the smell of the soup brought Roscuro back to the moment when he was in the light of the castle. He remembered the music, the laughter, the soup. And he started to cry. Just then the princess realized how much darkness was in her own heart because of her hatred for the mouse that she blamed for her mother’s death. To free her heart from the darkness, she forgave Roscuro. She told Roscuro if he led them out of the dungeon, she would give him soup to eat in the light of the banquet hall. When they got out of the dungeon, they all ate soup together.

To do a good deed of his own, Roscuro told of the man who was in the dungeon--Mig’s father. Mig did not get to be a princess, but her father was released from the dungeon and was loving and kind to her for the rest of her life. And Despereaux and Princess Pea were best friends and had many adventures together.