

Approved for use in 7th grade

Summary of the Work:

Catherine, Called Birdy takes place in the year 1290 in the England of King Edward I. It is one of few young adult novels to shed light on the little known lives of medieval adolescents. Written in accessible and entertaining prose, the book melds contemporary language with the stylistic flourish, tone, vocabulary, and idioms of medieval custom. The author's style is at once a linguistic invention and a historical testament.

The book takes the form of a diary kept by 14-year old Catherine, "called Little Bird or Birdy." The diary, begun at the command of her brother Edward in the hopes that it will help her become "less childish and more learned" (and embraced by Catherine mainly because it relieves her of other, more painful lady-like chores), chronicles the hopes, duties, impressions, frustrations, and antics of a fiery and independently-minded young woman at a time when women had few rights or means of expression and the burdens of daily life were heavy.

Rationale:

The greatest strength of *Catherine, Called Birdy* is its success in bringing this distant time period to life. Cushman's language and style is also a delight. She succeeds almost effortlessly at a daunting task, creating a language that is contemporary and accessible as well as steeped in historical rhythm, vocabulary, and tone. Young teens should identify with Catherine on many levels, including the expectations and demands of parents, a child's inevitable obligations and concessions along these lines, and the search for love and a place where one can be oneself without making unreasonable sacrifices.

Professional Reviews and/or Critical Essays:

From Booklist
Like the recent *The Ramsey Scallop*, this is a story of life in the last decade of the twelfth century as seen through the eyes of a young teenage girl . . . The diary format helps portray the tedium of life in the Middle Ages, the never-ending sewing, cooking, and other chores; the dirt and the illness; and, worse, the lowly role of women in medieval life. But this diary style also inhibits the ability of the characters to come alive. Birdy's is the only real voice. Fortunately, it's a sprightly voice, complete with its own brand of cursing ("God's thumbs!"), that moves the action.

From *Kirkus Reviews* (1994)
Birdy's frequent saint's day entries begin with pithy summaries of the saints' claims to fame; their dire deaths have a uniquely medieval tang, as do such oddities as St. Bridget turning bathwater into beer. Much else here is casually earthy—offstage bedding among villagers, home remedies, pissing out a fire—while death is commonplace. The period has rarely been presented for young people with such authenticity; the exotic details will intrigue readers while they relate more closely to Birdy's yen for independence and her sensibilities toward the downtrodden. Her tenacity and ebullient naiveté are extraordinary; at once comic and thought-provoking, this first novel is a delight.

* Print resources are available from the library media center and libraries in the district. Contact any library media specialist to view the scholarly sources.

* Scholarly reviews are also available online through Books in Print and Gale. Contact the library media specialist to obtain username and password information to access the subscription database of full-text reviews.

Noted Distinction:

- 1995 Newbery Honor Book
- Notable Children's Books of 1995 (ALA)
- 1995 Best Books for Young Adults (ALA)
- 1995 Recommended Books for Reluctant Young Adult Readers (ALA)
- 1995 Teachers' Choices (IRA)
- 1995 IRA Distinguished Book Award for Fiction
- 1995 Fanfare Honor List (The Horn Book)
- 1994 Golden Kite Award for Fiction (SCBWI)
- 1995 Notable Trade Books in the Language Arts (NCTE)
- 1994 Golden Kite Award for Fiction (SCBWI)
- 1994 "Pick of the Lists" (ALA)
- Outstanding Books of 1994 for Middle School-Aged Teens (V)

Readability:

- Lexile Score: 1170
- Readability Level:

Learning Resources Guidelines:

- The novel meets the Learning Resources Guidelines.

Standard Alignment: [\(link\)](#)

Approval:

Submitted to Committee:

Approved for Adoption:

Notes on the Text:

(The best way to evaluate and understand a novel is to personally read the book in its entirety.)

Overall, *Catherine, Called Birdy* is a delightful and non-controversial read. Sources of concern or disapproval may include the author's frank depiction of medieval life and her authentic use of occasionally lewd (but never vulgar) language. The issue of virginity and adolescent promiscuity also appears, though in very cursory fashion. Again, this is not a major issue, but it does occupy Catherine's thoughts and surface in her diary entries.

Connection to the Curriculum:

This book would be a great addition to a Social Studies or Humanities unit on the Middle Ages. Taught in conjunction with history texts and other supplementary references, *Catherine* may provide a compelling, insightful, and fun perspective on a traditionally drab academic subject.

English teachers, on the other hand, may want to focus on literary elements like diary format, point-of-view, tone, and use of humor, as well as exploring the interconnected themes of voice, identity, and oppression.

Additional Connections:
(AP, Honors, Essential/Applied, Dramas, Films, etc.)

WebQuest - <http://coe.west.asu.edu/students/cimpullitti/webquest.html>

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