

Melanie Heuiser Hill

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Giant Pumpkin Suite Discussion

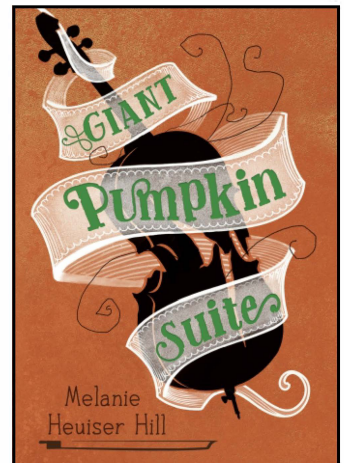
A book discussion about *Giant Pumpkin Suite* gives readers an opportunity to discuss music and dance and gardening and reading and books, along with friendships and neighborhoods. There are quite a few questions here – ask those that you sense will interest you and your group the most.

Characters in the book:

- Rose Brutigan (sister, fraternal twin, age 12)
- Thomas Brutigan (brother, fraternal twin, age 12)
- Gram (Rose's and Thomas's grandmother)
- Mama (Rose's and Thomas's mother)
- Otis Pickering (next-door neighbor)
- Mrs. Kiyo (neighbor across the street, tea ceremony)
- Señor Ocampo (hardware store owner)
- Frances Holling (cello teacher)
- Maestro Harris Waldenstein (judge of Bach Cello Suites Competition)
- Calamity Jane Jacobi (neighbor across the street, age 11)
- Jesse Jacobi (an identical twin, Jane's teenage brother)
- James Jacobi (an identical twin, Jane's teenage brother)
- Mrs. Jacobi (across the street neighbor, mother of Jane, Jesse, and James)
- Mrs. Lukashenko (works at the public library, loves musicals)
- Kirk Stevens (the Happy Mailman, viola player)
- Jeff and Simon and baby Oliver (across-the-alley neighbors)
- Dr. Clare (Rose's surgeon)
- Will Stringer (Stringer's House of Music)
- Stanley and Wanda (a young couple in the neighborhood)
- Leroy Letch (pumpkin expert)
- Miss Sarah (Jane's tap dance teacher)
- Ole Bessie (the Giant Pumpkin)

Setting for the book: 3308 Library Lane, based on a real neighborhood in Minnesota, this neighborhood could be located in most cities.

Pumpkin weight: 1,365 pounds





Discussion Questions

1. Do you live in a neighborhood with houses up and down your block? Do you live in an apartment building or a townhouse? Do you know the people in your neighborhood? By name? And what do you know about them?

(Have your students or book club draw a map of their neighborhood on which they can identify the people they know by name and a one-word or two-word description for that family or person.)

2. Are there houses or apartments or townhomes in your neighborhood where you don't know the people who live there? Have you made up stories about who they are? Do you have a made-up name for them or for their home? Tell us about one or two of those houses.
3. After reading *Giant Pumpkin Suite*, what do you like most about Rose and Thomas's neighborhood? Are there people in their neighborhood that you would like to know better? Why is that so?
4. What do you wish were true about your neighborhood? Have you given thought to how you might make those wishes come true? Is there someone you could ask to help you?
5. Which character in *Giant Pumpkin Suite* would you like to know better? What interests you about them? What could you offer them as a friend?
6. Is there something outside of school that you are passionate about doing? (Prompt: a craft, music, reading, gardening, sewing ...) Why do you think Rose felt so passionately about playing her cello? Can you compare how you feel to the way Rose feels?
7. Thomas didn't have something he was passionate about until he tried growing a giant pumpkin. Why do you think he was so fascinated with his project?
8. Do you have someone in your life like Mr. Pickering or Mrs. Holling? What makes them important to you?
9. Rose and Thomas don't know Mrs. Kiyo when the book begins but they had imagined several things about her. What did they find out about her that surprised them?
10. How do you feel about Calamity Jane and her brothers? Why did Rose react to Calamity Jane in the way she did? What's going on with Jane's brothers? Is there someone in your neighborhood or school with whom you suspect you might be better friends?
11. Have you read *Charlotte's Web* by E.B. White? Why do you think Rose cherished this book so much? How do you feel about the sleight-of-hand she pulled with the book? Why did the book matter so much to Jane? Do you have a book that you feel this way about?
12. Do you enjoy classical music? How were you introduced to it? Have you listened to Bach? What do you imagine Rose finds so interesting about?

(You might like to bring a recording of Bach's cello suites to the book club or classroom discussion for those who aren't familiar with his work.)
13. Are you a tap dancer? Do you do any kind of dance? Why do you think Jane Jacobi tap dances so much?

(Facilitator, are you a tap dancer? Could you show the students how to do a Shuffle Off to Buffalo? Or watch a YouTube instructional video?)

“ For a seed to achieve its greatest expression, it must come completely undone. The shell cracks, its insides come out, and everything changes. To someone who doesn’t understand growth, it would look like complete destruction.”

– Cynthia Occelli

14. Have you done any gardening? What is your favorite part of gardening? What don’t you care for as much?

15. Have you ever been around a giant pumpkin? At a fair near you? Or a special event for giant pumpkin growers? Can you share your experience with the group?

(Facilitator, there are photos on Melanie Heuiser Hill’s blog for you to share.)

16. What is it about Rose that makes her so human? Did you like her more or less by the end of the book? Can you tell us why?

17. At one point Mama tells Rose, “You are twelve and you’re living the life of an intensely focused middle-aged woman.” And yet Rose has a goal that she’s working very hard to accomplish. Do you think Mama’s advice was fair?

18. Mr. Pickering shares with Rose that his wife was awful at playing the bassoon. But she enjoyed it nonetheless. “Rose, you may have yet to discover the joy of doing something *badly*. I’m here to tell you, it can be a lot of fun. As they say, anything worth doing is worth doing badly.” Is there something you do that you suspect you do badly, but you enjoy doing it? What did Mr. Pickering mean by this?

19. Thomas is an important character. Why does he matter so much to the telling of this story?

20. Why do you think Rose made the choice to use the table saw? Have you ever done anything like this? Did it turn out badly or well?

21. Why did Rose hear loud music after she was injured? And then why didn't she hear any music inside of her head for a long time? What woke up her ability to hear music once again? Did that surprise you?

22. When we first meet Harris Waldenstein, he's not very likeable, do you agree? When Kirk reveals some of Maestro Waldenstein’s background, his story, do we understand him better? By the end of the book do we think he might be likeable?

23. What clues do we have along the way that Mr. Letch might not be what he claims to be? Why do you think the author lets us in on his untrustworthiness?

24. Have you ever been to a large fair like the Minnesota State Fair described in *Giant Pumpkin Suite*? What were the sights, sounds, and tastes of the Fair that you remember?

25. Were you expecting the extent of Mr. Letch’s treachery? What were the possible outcomes when Mr. Letch revealed what the prize was? Would you have been as confident as Rose and Jane and Thomas were to take the pumpkin home with them?

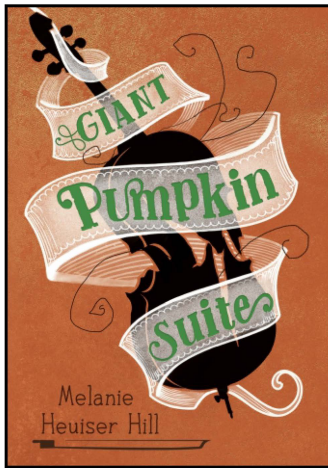
26. Do you think this book has a “happily ever after” ending? What was satisfying for you? What more would you like to know about Rose and Thomas and their neighborhood?



“...The bridge and the soundpost need to work together – that’s what gives the cello its sound, its soul.”

Giant Pumpkin Suite, page 319

About the book



Twelve-year-old Rose Brutigan has grown seven inches in the last eight months. She’s always been different from her twin brother, Thomas, but now she towers over him in too many ways. The gap in their interests continues to widen as well.

Rose, a gifted cellist, is focused on winning the upcoming Bach Cello Suites Competition, while Thomas has taken up the challenge of growing a giant pumpkin in the yard of their elderly neighbor, Mr. Pickering.

When a serious accident changes the course of the summer, Rose is forced to grow and change in ways she never could have imagined. Along the way there’s tap dancing and classic musicals, mail-order worms and neighborhood-sourced compost, fresh-squeezed lemonade, ancient Japanese pottery, and the Minnesota State Fair – as well as an eclectic cast of local characters that you are sure to fall in love with.

About the author



Giant Pumpkin Suite is Melanie Heuiser Hill’s first novel. It is filled with all kinds of things she loves: tap dancing, giant pumpkins, Bach’s Cello Suites, summer lemonade, neighbors, a little math, old musicals, yummy food, and *Charlotte’s Web*...

Hill writes on a walking desk, which her kids call a Wesk. That’s right, it’s a treadmill attached to a desk. She can’t do anything but type and read on the computer while on the Wesk – no writing with pencil, talking on the phone, eating, or drinking – and the walking helps the words come out.

When she’s not writing, Hill can often be found in her Very Large Garden, on the front porch reading, or out walking the neighborhood trails.

Melanie Heuiser Hill lives in the Twin Cities (Minnesota) with her husband and children.

Look for more information about Bach, giant pumpkins, and books on the author’s website: melanieheuiserhill.com.

Read Melanie Heuiser Hill’s column about books and reading, *Red Reading Boots*, bi-monthly in *Bookology* magazine: redreadingboots.com

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