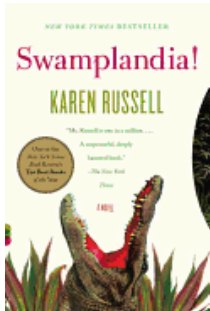


# ELPL Lit Kits



## **Swamplandia! by Karen Russell**

The Bigtree alligator wrestling dynasty is in decline, and Swamplandia!, its island home and gator-wrestling theme park, is swiftly being encroached upon by a competitor. To save her family, Ava must journey on her own to a perilous part of the swamp called the Underworld.

**About the Author:** Karen Russell, a native of Miami, has been featured in "The New Yorker"'s debut fiction issue and on "The New Yorker"'s 20 Under 40 list, and was chosen as one of "Granta"'s Best Young American Novelists. In 2009, she received the 5 Under 35 award from the National Book Foundation. Three of her short stories have been selected for the "Best" "American Short Stories" volumes. She is currently writer-in-residence at Bard College.

### **Discussion Questions:**

1. Now that you've read the novel, go back and reread the epigraph. Why do you think Russell chose this quote?
2. Some of these characters first appeared in the story "Ava Wrestles the Alligator" in Russell's collection, *St. Lucy's Home for Girls Raised by Wolves*. Have you read that story? How does it compare to the novel?
3. "'Tradition is as important, kids,' Chief Bigtree liked to say, 'as promotional materials are expensive.'" (page 5) Did the Chief show this in his actions? Which of the Bigtree tribe members paid the most respect to tradition?
4. How did Chief's myth-making affect his children? How might things have been different if he'd been more truthful?
5. On page 28, Chief introduces his theory of Carnival Darwinism, which he thought would save Swamplandia! How might it have been successful? Why wasn't it?
6. Where else does the notion of evolution come into play?
7. Belief—in Carnival Darwinism, in ghosts—plays a large role in the novel. What prompts Ossie's beliefs? Ava's? Where is the turning point in their belief systems?

8. Why do you think Ossie sees Louis and other ghosts, but never Hilola?
9. What does Ava's red alligator represent? And the melaleuca trees?
10. Why do you think Russell interrupted the novel for the story of the Dredgeman's Revelation? What exactly is the "revelation"?
11. There are biblical references throughout the book, especially in the World of Darkness sections. Why does Russell include them?
12. How do Kiwi's actions affect his family? What do we learn via his sojourn on the mainland?
13. On page 146, the Bird Man tells Ava, "Nobody can get to hell without assistance, kid." How does this compare to the quote from Dante that opens the chapter? What does it tell us about his character?
14. The three Bigtree children are innocent for their ages. Which one matures the most over the course of the novel?
15. The Bird Man calls the ending of the Dredgeman's Revelation "a vanishing point." (page 176) What does he mean by that?
16. Both the Bird Man and Vijay act as guides to a Bigtree sibling. How does each approach his role?
17. When Ava said "I love you" to the Bird Man on page 196, what did you expect to happen as a result?
18. On page 198, Ava recites a credo: "I believe the Bird Man knows a passage to the underworld. I believe that I am brave enough to do this. I have faith that we are going to rescue Ossie." Was she right about any of this?
19. Did the Bird Man believe in the underworld, or did he have an ulterior motive all along?
20. How does Kiwi's use of language change during the novel? What does it reflect?
21. Like the Dredgeman, several of the Bigtrees have revelations. Whose is the most surprising?