

# BOOKNOTES

READERS GUIDE

## thematic connections

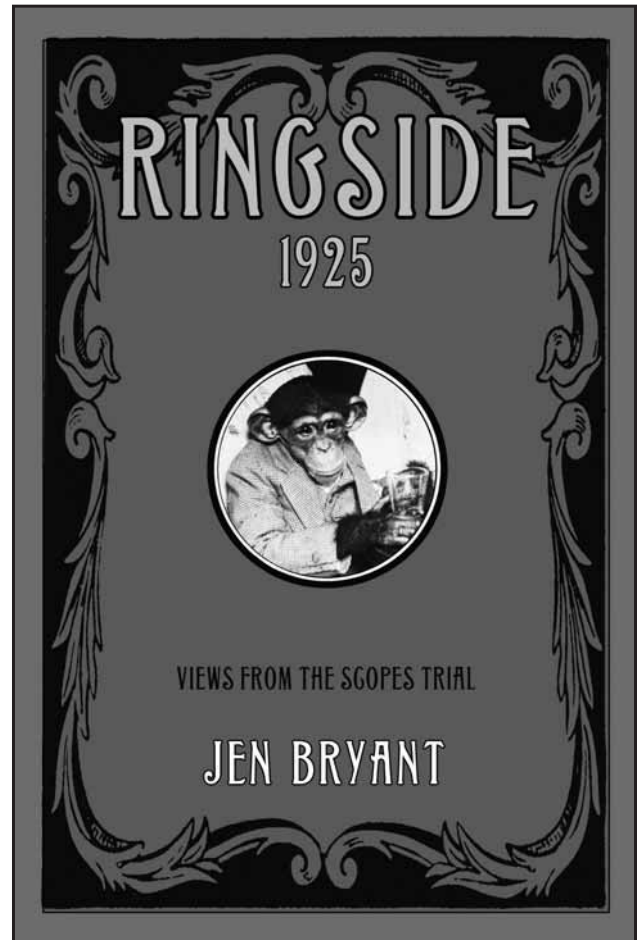
Historical Fiction/  
20th Century  
Values in Conflict  
Religion • Friendship

Grades 7 up

## about the book

The town of Dayton, Tennessee, hosts the “monkey trial,” one of the most controversial trials in U.S. history. Mr. Scopes, accused of teaching evolution in the classroom, listens in the courtroom as his students and the citizens of Dayton choose sides and settle in for the fight of their lives.

When a group of town leaders decides to test the Butler Act that prohibits the teaching of evolution in Tennessee schools, they ask J. T. Scopes if they can arrest him for teaching evolution to his students. Mr. Scopes agrees, and the town of Dayton, Tennessee, is inundated with reporters, lawyers, and spectators from all over the country as the most controversial and divisive trial in America’s history gets under way. Amazed at the conflict and the hoopla, Marybeth, Pete, Jimmy Lee, and Willy watch the trial and try to remain friends even as the townspeople draw up sides in the emotion-filled drama.



Alfred A. Knopf HC: 978-0-375-84047-0 (0-375-84047-8)  
GLB: 978-0-375-94047-7 (0-375-94047-2)

This compelling novel in poems lets young readers take a ringside seat at one of the most controversial trials in American history.

## pre-reading activity

The Scopes Trial occurs in 1925 and the social and economic morays of that time vastly differ from the society in which students live today. In order to acquaint students with the time period, ask them to investigate life in 1925, just after World War I and before the Depression. Have groups of students report on transportation, clothing styles, entertainment, racial tensions, economic standards, religious attitudes, and social customs such as dating and women's rights. Have each group write and practice a script presenting their topic. Film all groups and create a "1925 Revisited" video.

# questions for

- Peter Sykes asks, "Why should a bigger mind need a smaller God?" (p. 11) How would Mr. Darrow answer this question? How would W. J. Bryan answer it?
- On page 13, Marybeth Dodd explains to her daddy Mr. Scopes's intentions and reasons for teaching evolution. Why do most of the adults in Dayton disagree with Marybeth's explanation? Who else in Dayton agrees with her explanation?
- Mr. Dudley Malone, one of Mr. Scopes's defense lawyers, says, "The truth is no coward. It does not need the protection of the law or the forces of government." (p. 25) Does the truth win in the Scopes's trial? Why or why not?
- Prosecution lawyers use Mr. Scopes to test the constitutionality of the Butler Act, which prohibits the teaching of evolution in the classroom, and they portray Mr. Scopes as evil. What character traits does Mr. Scopes possess that prove he is not evil? What do Mr. Scopes's students think about him?
- Marybeth and Tillie try to determine the true meaning of Christianity on pages 61–64. Do they agree on a definition? Would their definition be true in today's society? Why or why not?
- The trial forces people to choose sides, and with the choosing comes a change in friendships. How does the trial affect Jimmy Lee and Peter's relationship? What about Mr. Darrow and Mr. Bryan? What other relationships are affected by the trial?
- A reporter from the *New York Times* says, "This is no trial; it's a fundamentalist revival." (p. 76) What does the reporter mean by this statement? On what does he base his opinion?
- Tillie Stackhouse may be considered the most open-minded and forward-thinking person in Dayton. What evidence in the book supports this opinion?
- Paul Lebrun does his best to develop an understanding of Mr. Scopes by interviewing him and others in the community. (pp. 65–66; pp. 101–103) What does he learn about Mr. Scopes? What does Mr. Scopes say about the true reason behind the trial?

# group discussion

- “I sat speechless . . . a ringside observer at my own trial, until the end of the circus.” (p. 107) Why didn’t Mr. Scopes play more of a role in his own trial? Why does he refer to his trial as a circus? How does this quote relate to the title of the book?
- The Butler Act is passed to protect students from harmful ideas, but the students don’t seem to need or want protecting. How is this ironic? Why do the adults think the students need to be protected from the evil idea of evolution?
- The basic question that everyone tries to answer is asked by Jimmy Lee when he says, “Christians believe in the Bible which says God created man in his likeness and the whole world in seven days. So how can he be a Christian and also believe in evolution?” (p. 131) Did the trial answer the question? Did the trial change anyone’s belief about evolution? What purpose did the trial serve?

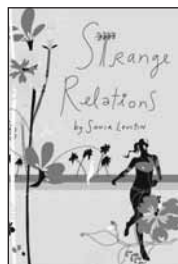
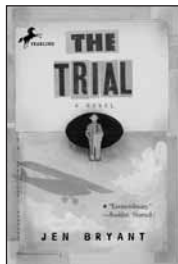


## writing activities

- Throughout the book, the author makes reference to people who lived during the time period of the trial. Ask students to select one of the following people and report to the class on his or her impact on American society: a person in the Ku Klux Klan, H. L. Mencken, Gertrude Ederle, Al Jolson, William Jennings Bryan, and Clarence Darrow. Have each student write a speech as if speaking to that individual directly, thanking, acknowledging, or condemning them for their impact on American history. Present a “radio broadcast” of the speeches.
- Teaching evolution is still highly controversial in many states. Have students investigate the laws in their state to determine if teaching evolution is legal. Then have students take it a step further and find out if evolution or creationism or both are taught in their school and written about in their science books. Ask students to take a stand on the teaching of creationism and/or evolution in public schools. Have them prepare arguments supporting their view. Stage a debate on the subject and invite other classes to witness the arguments.

## related titles

### by theme



### The Trial Jen Bryant

Historical Fiction/20th Century  
Morals and Values in Conflict • Friendship  
Grades 3–7  
Yearling PB: 978-0-440-41986-0 (0-440-41986-7)  
GLB: 978-0-375-92752-2 (0-375-92752-2)

### Evolution, Me, and Other Freaks of Nature

Robin Brande

Censorship • Religion • Friendship  
Grades 7 up  
Alfred A. Knopf HC: 978-0-375-84349-5 (0-375-84349-3)  
GLB: 978-0-375-94349-2 (0-375-94349-8)

### Strange Relations

Sonia Levitin

Family • Community Life • Religion • Friendship  
Grades 7 up  
Alfred A. Knopf HC: 978-0-375-83751-7 (0-375-83751-5)  
GLB: 978-0-375-93751-4 (0-375-93751-X)

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## about the author

Photo © 2006 www.visual-technology.com



Jen Bryant has always loved books and views them as personal works of art. Her passion for reading led her to writing and her love for language allows her to play with the sounds of words while creating pictures. She considers writing “to be a blend of music and painting,”

and her readers recognize her art when they read her work.

Bryant is the author of *The Trial*, *Pieces of Georgia*, and *Ringside, 1925*. She teaches children’s literature at West Chester University and lives in Pennsylvania.

## internet resources

### Scopes Museum Home Page

[www.tnhistoryforkids.org/places/scopes\\_museum](http://www.tnhistoryforkids.org/places/scopes_museum)

An explanation of what happened and why in July 1925 when J. T. Scopes was arrested for teaching evolution.

### Famous Trials in American History

[www.law.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/scopes/scopes.htm](http://www.law.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/scopes/scopes.htm)

A detailed account of the Scopes trial.

### PBS Timeline for the “Monkey Trial”

[www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/monkeytrial/timeline/index.html](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/monkeytrial/timeline/index.html)

Beginning with the publication of Darwin’s *Origins of Species*, through the Scopes trial, and ending with the death of William Jennings Bryan.

### The Scopes “Monkey Trial” Answers

[www.answers.com/topic/scopes-trial](http://www.answers.com/topic/scopes-trial)

Provides answers to many questions asked about the Scopes trial and key participants.