



THE  
MIRACLE  
& TRAGEDY  
OF THE  
DIONNE  
QUINTUPLETS

SARAH MILLER

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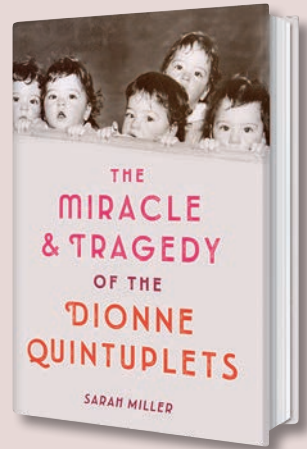
DISCUSSION GUIDE

# THE MIRACLE AND THE TRAGEDY OF THE DIONNE QUINTUPLETS DISCUSSION GUIDE

## ABOUT THE BOOK

In this riveting, beyond-belief true story from the author of *The Borden Murders*, meet the five children who captivated the world.

When the Dionne Quintuplets were born on May 28, 1934, weighing a grand total of just over thirteen pounds, no one expected them to live so much as an hour. Overnight, Yvonne, Annette, Cécile, Émilie, and Marie Dionne mesmerized the globe, defying medical history with every breath they took. In an effort to protect them from hucksters and showmen, the Ontario government took custody of the five identical babies, sequestering them in a private, custom-built hospital across the road from their family—and then, in a stunning act of hypocrisy, proceeded to exploit them for the next nine years. The Dionne Quintuplets became a more popular attraction than Niagara Falls, ogled through one-way screens by sightseers as they splashed in their wading pool at the center of a tourist hotspot known as Quintland. Now, Sarah Miller reconstructs their unprecedented upbringing with fresh depth and subtlety, bringing to new light their resilience and the indelible bond of their unique sisterhood.



**Grades: 7 & Up**  
**HC: 978-1-5247-1381-2**  
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**EL: 978-1-5247-1383-6**

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

SARAH MILLER is the author of *The Borden Murders*, a *School Library Journal* Best Book of the Year and an ALA-YALSA Quick Pick for Reluctant Readers. She is also the author of two historical fiction novels for young adults, *Miss Spitfire: Reaching Helen Keller* and *The Lost Crown*, about the Romanovs, both ALA-YALSA Best Books for Young Adults. In addition to her work for young readers, she is the author of the *USA Today* bestselling *Caroline: Little House, Revisited*, which was named a Barnes & Noble Discover Great New Writers Selection, among other accolades. Visit her on the web at [sarahmillerbooks.com](http://sarahmillerbooks.com) or on Facebook at @SarahMillerwritesbooks.

## PRE-READING ACTIVITY

The survival of the Dionne Quintuplets gave reporters a feel-good story when the United States, in the grips of the Great Depression, needed it most. Discuss the meaning of *feel-good story* and cite examples from today's headlines. Because the news of the day was mostly bad, people were happy to hear about the Dionne babies and their "fairy-tale" existence. But it was a false narrative. All was not well in Quintland, despite the way media coverage made it appear. Define *false narrative* and describe how it can be created, inadvertently or intentionally.



## A MIRACLE AND A PROBLEM (pp. 11–14)

When she learned she had given birth to five babies, Elzire cried: “What am I going to do with five babies?” The only way she could explain it to herself was that it was a miracle from on high. But she knew better than to expect anyone else to see it that the same way. “They will say we are pigs,” she said. News of the extraordinary births began to spread the moment Dr. Dafoe stepped from the Dionnes’ porch.

Why was the birth of the Dionne Quintuplets newsworthy? What challenges do multiple births

present for parents? What was Oliva’s immediate concern upon learning he was now the father of ten children?

**CURRICULUM CONNECTION:** Direct students to create two pie charts illustrating the costs of raising a child, one based on their own estimates of selected categories like food, clothing, and housing and the second based on actual numbers from internet research. Have students present both charts, illustrating their estimate versus reality.

## A SIMPLE COUNTRY DOCTOR AND MEDIA DARLING (pp. 30–31)

After telling everyone the quintuplets couldn’t possibly live, Dr. Dafoe began taking steps to give them a fighting chance to survive. The author writes that Dr. Dafoe harnessed the power of publicity for the babies’ benefit, feeding reporters any small tidbit on the newborns’ progress to kindle the public’s interest. Discuss the ethics of Dr. Dafoe’s actions. Do you think he overstepped his role as a clinician and breeched the boundaries of doctor/patient confidentiality?

How did Oliva react to being the center of attention?

**CURRICULUM CONNECTION:** Dr. Dafoe could be described as a “media darling.” Have students look up the term and read the Columbia Journalism Review’s article about another media darling: [archives.cjr.org/feature/media\\_darling.php](http://archives.cjr.org/feature/media_darling.php). Discuss the pros and cons of being the focus of media and social media attention as elucidated in the article.

## A HOUSE DIVIDED (pp. 46–55)

When the other five Dionne children developed bronchitis, they were sent to live with relatives for a month. Five-year-old Thérèse left in tears “like an orphan,” thought her mother. The Dionnes’ parlor was transformed into the “babies’ sanctuary,” separated from the rest of the house by a sheet hung over the door. “We are outcasts in our own home,” said Elzire. How is the sheet a metaphor for both

what the family was experiencing and what lay ahead?

**CURRICULUM CONNECTION:** Have students create a political-style cartoon to illustrate how the older Dionne children might have felt after the quints were born. What might they have thought and said to each other? What might they have felt toward their new siblings?

## THE POWER OF THE MEDIA (pp. 84–86)

Likely resentful of Oliva and Elzire’s habit of dodging photographers and wincing at the sight of reporters, the newspapers covering the Dionnes’ publicity tour in Chicago began making fun of the quints’ parents. What role did this media coverage play in the Canadian government’s decision to seize custody of the girls until adulthood without their parents’ consent? Do you think the government was acting out of concern for the babies? What did Ontario’s premier, Mitchell Hepburn, reveal about his prejudices when he said Elzire and Oliva “have no value except as parents of the Quintuplets.”

In what way might things have been different if the Dionnes were wealthy and of a higher social class?

**CURRICULUM CONNECTION:** Select two articles in the news about multiple births: one that portrays the births in a positive light, and another that is negative, such as one about “Octomom.” Make copies for each student. Have students highlight words and phrases used to describe the parents and write a paragraph comparing and contrasting the ways in which they are characterized.





## SAD MOTHER (pp. 99–103)

Battered by bad publicity, Elzire accepted an invitation to share her story in-depth with a sympathetic reporter who would, at last, tell her side of the story. “Don’t, I beg you, talk to me any more about the protection of the government,” Elzire said. “What I want is my babies and will never stop fighting until I get them.” How was her message received? Why did one woman

say Elzire’s scorn for the government aid her babies were receiving was “perfectly disgusting”?

**CURRICULUM CONNECTION:** Divide the class in half and assign one group to argue on behalf of returning the Dionne Quintuplets to their parents and the other group to argue on behalf of the Canadian government.

## QUINTMANIA (pp. 109–132)

The Dionne Quintuplets became the most famous babies in the world. By 1936 “Quintland” rivaled Niagara Falls as Canada’s leading tourist attraction. “The government had seized custody of Oliva Dionne’s daughters to protect them from being exhibited on the American stage, then looked the other way as the hospital’s front porch turned into a kind of theater,” the author writes. As adults the Dionne sisters reflected, “There was a terrible tendency on the part of some people to think of us in terms of property and scarcely ever in human terms.” What does it mean to be exploited?

How were the Dionne quints being exploited? How did Dr. Dafoe and the guardians justify putting the girls on display?

**CURRICULUM CONNECTION:** Divide your class into three groups. Ask one to research the history and popularity of freak shows, one to research public displays of incubator babies, and one to research human zoos. Have groups present what they learn and lead a discussion on how turn-of-the-century and Depression-era values about human dignity and individuality differ from today’s. Why did society tolerate, and in some cases support these activities?

## NO SUBSTITUTE FOR A MOTHER (pp. 145–149)

To the baby quintuplets, their mother, Elzire, was an unfamiliar figure. The children were much more attached to their nurses: but not a single nurse lasted more than three years and each departure was akin to losing a parent. Why did their grief at losing a beloved caretaker widen the gap between them and Elzire? The president of the American Pediatric Society thought the babies were getting adequate maternal

care from nurses. What does his attitude reveal about his views of women and motherhood?

**CURRICULUM CONNECTION:** Have students research the parent-child bond and write a paragraph on its importance to mental health and development. Then discuss whether they think the treatment of the Dionne babies was cruel.

## YOUR PEOPLE ARE DIRTY (pp. 169–171)

As their parents competed with the nursery staff for their affections, the girls “for the first time . . . distinctly felt the two sides pulling at them.” According to Elzire, the nurses were “poisoning her daughters’ minds behind her back,” telling them, “Your people are dirty. . . . You don’t want to love dirty people, do you?” For their part, the parents encouraged their daughters to spread the notion that “they were secretly miserable . . . and wanted nothing more than to live with their parents and siblings. It wasn’t true. It was just another kind of performance.”

The sisters said, “We were brought up, in short, to practice deceit.” What does it mean to practice deceit? Have you ever pretended to feel something you didn’t, or lied to make someone happy? Describe how it made you feel.

**CURRICULUM CONNECTION:** The quintuplets were not unlike many children of divorce, caught between two quarreling parents. Instruct students to write a letter to the nurses and parents from the quints’ point of view explaining their feelings about their treatment.





## GOING HOME? (PP. 184–187)

When Yvonne, Annette, Cécile, Émilie, and Marie moved into their parents' home at age nine, they experienced "a rude dose of culture shock." The sisters said Oliva and Elzire "competed to see who could treat us more strictly." The author writes, "The words their parents used in anger were as painful as . . . blows. *Brat. Stupid. Crazy. Dirty pig. . . If I had raised you, you'd be normal like the others.*" What underlying emotions are fueling the parents' behavior? Why were the girls the wrong target for their parents' wrath?

Compare and contrast the way the girls were treated in the hospital nursery versus home.

**CURRICULUM CONNECTION:** Instruct students to reflect on the quint's experience living in their family's home for the first time, and then have them write an essay about the familiarity of their home and the culture and traditions of their family—things that are taken for granted or simply are second-nature. Have students contrast their experience to those of the Dionne Quintuplets.

## VIOLATED (PP. 198–201)

When the girls were thirteen years old, their father allegedly began touching them inappropriately—rubbing their bare chests with liniment, taking them by surprise with a French kiss during car rides. When Annette confided in the chaplain and the nuns at school, no one helped them; as much as this information disturbed them, the nuns did not dare tell what they knew. How does this example fit the pattern of abuse and betrayal the Dionne quint's experienced at the hands of the adults in their lives?

**CURRICULUM CONNECTION:** Everyone—Dr. Dafoe, the Ontario government, Elzire and Oliva, even the nuns and the chaplain—claimed to be acting in the quintuplets' best interest. Divide the class into groups representing the characters listed above. Have the groups discuss and determine their character's interest in the Dionne Quintuplets. Choose an "actor" from each group to present their conclusions aloud in the form of monologue. For example, Elzire might say, "I am angry that these babies caused me so many problems. I want my authority as their mother recognized. I will assert my control over them to show them and the world who is boss." To conclude, have the class share what the experience teaches them.

## BROKE AND BITTER (PP. 249–250)

By age four, the girls' trust fund had swelled to \$1.8 million, but by the 1990s the three surviving sisters were living together and pooling their pensions so they could get by on \$746 per month. The sisters sought to recover money from the government that was stolen from their trust fund. Explain the meaning of the word *reparations*. Under what circumstances does a government or other party make reparations? The media helped the sisters get some of their money back. Explain the irony of the media's role here and throughout the sisters' lives.

**CURRICULUM CONNECTION:** Ask students to calculate the value of \$1.8 million in 1938 in today's dollars. Using [businessinsider.com/what-100-was-worth-in-the-decade-you-were-born-2016-6](https://www.businessinsider.com/what-100-was-worth-in-the-decade-you-were-born-2016-6) as a resource, lead a class discussion on how the purchasing power of \$100 has changed over the decades since the quint's births. Alternatively, ask students to find other examples of a time when a government or other group has paid reparations to individuals, and share their findings with the class.



# COMMON CORE CORRELATIONS

## GRADES 9 AND 10

### CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.9–10.10

By the end of grade 9, read and comprehend literary nonfiction in the grades 9–10 text complexity band proficiently, with scaffolding as needed at the high end of the range. By the end of grade 10, read and comprehend literary nonfiction at the high end of the grades 9–10 text complexity band independently and proficiently.

### CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9–10.7

Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects to answer a question (including a self-generated question) or solve a problem; narrow or broaden the inquiry when appropriate; synthesize multiple sources on the subject, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation.

### CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9–10.8

Gather relevant information from multiple authoritative print and digital sources, using advanced searches effectively; assess the usefulness of each source in answering the research question; integrate information into the text selectively to maintain the flow of ideas, avoiding plagiarism and following a standard format for citation.

## PRAISE FOR *MIRACLE & TRAGEDY OF THE DIONNE QUINTUPLETS*:

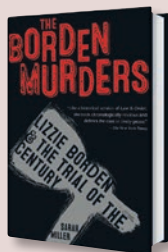
★ “Miller (*The Borden Murders*, BCCB 12/15) demonstrates herself once again to be a **dab hand at examining a historic media frenzy** and analyzing the legacy of its lore, leaving trails of ill-informed opinion and blame that lingers into the present.”

—*Bulletin*, Starred Review

★ “Plenty to ponder in this **thorough, fascinating deep dive** into the lives of five girls who captured the attention of millions.”

—*Booklist*, Starred Review

ALSO BY  
SARAH  
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