

The Evolution of Calpurnia Tate
Jacqueline Kelly
Discussion Questions

The author uses quotes from Darwin's *The Origin of Species* to introduce each chapter. What purpose do these introductions serve? Do you find that the quote Kelly uses for the first chapter is relevant to Calpurnia's excitement about nature? How do you think Darwin's quote, "When a young naturalist commences the study of a group of organisms quite unknown to him, he is at first much perplexed to determine the differences to consider..." relates to Calpurnia?

The first time Calpurnia and Granddaddy go to the riverbank together, Calpurnia learns that she shares her name with "Pliny the Younger's fourth wife, the one he married for love. ... There's also the natal acacia tree, genus *Calpurnia*, a useful laburnum mainly confined to the African continent. Then there's Julius Caesar's wife, mentioned in Shakespeare" (p. 27). Do you think the name "Calpurnia" suits this character? Why or why not?

Much of the book's action is set in the heat of the summer. How might the weather affect the characters?

This novel is set in 1899. We learn a lot about Granddaddy through his war stories, but he never mentions the name or purpose of the war (p. 40). Which war did he fight in? How do you think Granddaddy's experiences in that war affect his relationship with Viola? Do you find their relationship to be unusual for that time? How does Viola fit into the Tate family?

Calpurnia is the only daughter of six sons. She is expected to learn cooking, sewing, knitting and other domestic skills to be a good wife and mother. In chapter 8, Granddaddy and Calpurnia examine a fuzzy, probably poisonous, caterpillar. When Calpurnia questions the "sting" (p. 109) of the caterpillar, Granddaddy replies, "I suppose you could touch him and find out. Which raises an interesting point: How far are you willing to go in the name of science?" (p. 109). How does this question relate to Calpurnia's struggle with her mother about a woman's role in the household?

A simile is a literary device that uses "like" or "as" to compare two things. How does Calpurnia use similes? Find some examples in the book. How do Calpurnia's similes help readers understand her character and the story?

Throughout the novel, Calpurnia is always claiming Granddaddy and Harry as "mine" (p. 166) and she is always nervous when other people come between her and them. Why does she react this way?

Viola calls Calpurnia "Miz" (p. 224) for the first time as she instructs her to mix the ingredients to make apple pie. As Calpurnia is introduced more and more into

womanhood by her mother and other women in her life, how do you think her relationship with Viola changes?

After trying his latest Pecan alcohol experiment and claiming it to be unsuccessful, Granddaddy says, “The day the experiment succeeds is the day the experiment ends. And I inevitably find that the sadness of the ending outweighs the celebration of success” (p. 324). How does this comment relate to Granddaddy’s reaction upon receiving the letter from the Smithsonian?

The year 1900 begins with a rare snow storm. What does this symbolize for Calpurnia and her family? Do you think that Calpurnia will continue her observations in science or do you think she is going to become the woman her mother wants and expects her to be?

Jacqueline Kelly uses rich vocabulary throughout *The Evolution of Calpurnia Tate*, and you may not be familiar with all the words. As you read, use context to determine the definitions of words you don’t know. Then use a dictionary to check your definitions. Start with these words:

pestiferous (pg. 3)	moldering (pg. 4)	accorded (pg. 11)	loitered (pg. 13)
dilapidated (pg. 18)	consternation (pg. 19)	stupefying (pg. 29)	begrudge (pg. 37)
dragooned (pg. 40)	duchy (pg. 50)	minutiae (pg. 56)	pedagogic (pg. 63)
protuberant (pg. 74)	feigning (pg. 83)	desiccated (pg. 96)	jettison (pg. 116)
ignominy (pg. 131)	tedium (pg. 155)	ensconced (pg. 172)	prodigious (pg. 197)
malevolent (pg. 213)	efficacious (pg. 230)	debacle (pg. 247)	purgatives (pg. 269)
odious (pg. 288)	feral (pg. 310)	surreptitious (pg. 323)	gingerly (pg. 336)