



BARTOLOMÉ: THE INFANTA'S PET BY RACHEL VAN KOOIJ

- Colourful setting in 17th-century Spain
- Inspired by a famous painting – *Las Meninas* by Velázquez
- Suitable for boys and girls of 10–12

About the book

Bartolomé, a disabled child, lives with his family in a sleepy village in the Spanish countryside. There is great excitement when his father decides to move the family to Madrid, where he has work at the court of King Philip IV.

But what are they going to do about Bartolomé? People like him are scorned and abused and he would bring shame on his family as they start their new life in the city. The only solution is to keep him well hidden in a small back room. He's not even allowed to look out of the window.

When Bartolomé breaks the rules and leaves his hiding place, he is spotted by the Infanta, the king's five-year-old daughter, who immediately wants him as her 'human dog'.

What the Infanta wants, the Infanta gets, and so a new and humiliating life starts for Bartolomé. It is not until he discovers the artists' studio that he has any hope of finding a decent way of life for himself.

About the author

Rachel van Kooij is Dutch, but she has lived in Austria since she was ten years old, and she wrote this book in German. It was translated into English by Siobhán Parkinson, who is a well-known author for children in Ireland. Rachel (pronounced Rah-kell) has written several books for children. She lives near Vienna and works as a teacher and carer.

About these notes

These notes take the form mostly of questions you can ask the children, along with ideas for discussion and small research projects, and they are grouped into blocks, corresponding to a few chapters at a time.



1. CHECK OUT THE COVER

This is a very international book. There are four countries involved in it. Can you work out what they are? (You don't need to read the book to do this: just look at the cover and the pages before the story begins.)

There is something very unusual about this book cover. Can you spot what it is? Take a look at a few other books, and then see if you can say what is so different about this one. (Hint: Where is the blurb?)

Can you think why this book cover was designed in this unusual way?

The blurb is not the only thing about this cover that is in an unusual place. Where is the barcode? What is a barcode for? Why do you think the cover designer put the barcode where it is?

There is a close-up of part of a very famous painting on the back cover. Look on the inside of the book to find out what the painting is called, when it was painted, who the painter was. Then take a look at the full painting, which you can find online (web information included in book). (And of course, if you ever visit Madrid, you could go to see the real painting in the Museo del Prado.)

On the front cover are two 'details' from the painting. One shows the Infanta Margarita, who is a character in this story. Velázquez painted another very famous portrait of the Infanta. See if you can find that online too.

Look at the way the little girl is dressed in the paintings. What do you think about that? (Remember, she is only five years old.)

See if you can find out a bit more about the Infanta before you read the book. (She doesn't come into the story until about halfway through, though.)



2: IN THE VILLAGE (PP 3-15)

This book is set in Spain.

If you didn't know that before you started to read it, when do you think you might start to notice it?

What are the clues that let you know it's Spain?

The main character in this story has a condition called dwarfism. The word 'dwarf' is often used to describe people of very short stature, although people with dwarfism often prefer to be called 'little people'. At the time when this story is set, however, the word 'dwarf' was used, and that is why it is used in this story. In any case, being very short is only one of Bartolomé's physical problems: he also has a pronounced hump and has very deformed feet, which make it hard for him to walk.

The author never says, 'Bartolomé is a disabled dwarf', but by the end of the first or second chapter of the book, you know that. What information does the author give so that you know that? Why do you think the author has given the information in this way instead of just telling you straight out?

If you were writing a story yourself, would you give information about your main character just like that ('Bartolomé was a disabled dwarf') or do you think you'd be able to find a way of letting the reader pick up the information from the way you describe things?

Have a go! Imagine a character who has something unusual about him or her. Now write a paragraph about this character – don't say what is unusual about your character, but still let your reader know. (This is hard!)

What else do you know by the end of the third chapter? Write out six facts you know about Bartolomé, his family, his life in the village.

As well as knowing facts about the Carrasco family, you also know things at a different level — you know a bit about how Bartolomé feels. How do you know this? Point out one sentence in the first, second or third chapter that lets the reader 'inside Bartolomé's head'.

Now imagine that you are Bartolomé. Imagine that your father has just come home from Madrid and has told the family that he is planning to move them to the city. Write two or three sentences about how you feel about this.



3: JOURNEY TO MADRID (PP 16–40)

The next set of chapters is about the family's journey to Madrid. Before you read the chapter called 'Departure', try to imagine what that journey might be like. Write a couple of sentences describing your idea of the journey.

Now read the chapters called 'Departure', 'The Mill', 'Torre de la Parada'.

How does Bartolomé's mother Isabel feel about leaving the village? Do you think the children would feel the same way or differently? Why?

Why do you think it is so important for the family to reach the mill before nightfall on the first day of their journey?

Imagine you are the miller or the miller's wife. Write a paragraph about the family that came to stay overnight in your mill.

On the second night of their journey, the family stays in a small castle or hunting lodge belonging to the king. Can you tell the story about what happens when they get there?

Who expects to have the better night? Bartolomé or the rest of the family? And who actually has the better night? Why?

In the chapter called 'Arrival', Bartolomé remembers an incident that happened back in the village, when the priest told him, 'The last shall be first.' Find out where this quotation comes from and what it means.

On arrival in Madrid, the family is overwhelmed by the city. These people have come from a little village and have never seen a city before. Read 'Arrival' and 'New Home' and imagine you are one of the older children in the family, Ana or Joaquín. Write a letter to a friend back in the village, describing life in Madrid. (In fact, Ana and Joaquín can't read or write, so you have to pretend!)



4: LEARNING TO READ (PP 41–86)

Read the chapter called ‘El Primo’. Now think back to the scene in the village where Bartolomé begged to be allowed to go to Madrid with the rest of the family. What do you think now? Is he better off in the city with his family or would life have been better for him if he had stayed in the village, as his father wanted?

Why do you think it is so important to Bartolomé’s father that Bartolomé is kept out of sight? Do you think he is right?

Read the chapters called ‘Don Cristobal’, ‘The Secret Plan’ and ‘Reading and Writing’.

Learning to read is terribly important to Bartolomé. Think about your own life, and how you would manage if you weren’t able to read and write.

Do you think the family is right to keep the reading lessons a secret from Juan? Why?

Read the chapter called ‘A Book’. Imagine you are Isabel, Bartolomé’s mother. Remember that you can’t read and write yourself (as Isabel), and that you find it very hard to understand what it is all about. Now imagine you have made friends with a neighbouring woman, whom you meet at the market. Make up a conversation you might have with her about this boy you know who is learning to read and write. (Of course, Isabel could not tell her neighbour that the boy is her own son, because that is a secret.) You could get a friend to be the neighbouring woman, and the two of you could act out the conversation the two women have at the market place.

Read ‘The Pawnbroker’ and then find someone who doesn’t understand how pawnbrokers work, and explain the system to them.

Pawnbrokers used to be very common in Irish towns and cities, but nowadays there are very few. See if you can find out if there is one near where you live. Go and have a look at it. (Sometimes there are interesting things in the window.)

The book that the pawnbroker’s daughter recommends is *Don Quixote* by Cervantes. This is the most famous novel ever written in the Spanish language. It is often published with illustrations for children. See if you can find a copy of it in your local library. Look it up on the Internet and write out a few sentences explaining the story.

Sometimes when you read a book, there are things in it that you don’t fully understand. As long as you can understand most of it, it doesn’t really matter if you don’t get every single thing. For example, in the chapter ‘Pen and Ink’, Don Cristobal explains something quite complicated to



Bartolomé, in the paragraphs beginning 'At the royal court' and 'Cervantes is the fool'. Read these paragraphs a few times and see if you get it. If you do, that's great, but don't worry if you can't understand it. It won't spoil the story for you.

In the chapter 'Joaquín goes away', Bartolomé is very upset that his older brother is leaving the family. Why do you think that is? Do you think he is fair to Joaquín?

What does the very last sentence of the chapter mean? (The one that Bartolomé writes on his picture.)



5: A CHANGE FOR BARTOLOMÉ (PP 87–109)

What do you think of Ana's plan to get Bartolomé to the monastery? Bartolomé is disabled, but so is Jéronima, in a different kind of way. Do you think what Ana does is fair to her? What would you do if you were Bartolomé's sister and you couldn't think of any other way to get him to his teacher?

Write a paragraph describing what happens in the chapter called 'Accident'.

Read the chapters called 'Home Again' and 'Parting'. Now think about the members of Bartolomé's family. Do you think any of them are bad? Is their behaviour bad? Can you understand why the different people in the family behave as they do? Which of them is your favourite (apart from Bartolomé himself)? Why?



6: AT THE ROYAL COURT (PP 113–128)

This novel is in two parts. The first section is about life in the village, the journey to Madrid and Bartolomé's life in his parents' home in the city, and we don't know yet what is going to be in the second part. Why do you think the author has split the book into two parts like this?

In 'Alcazár', Bartolomé's father hands Bartolomé over to the Infanta. Why do you think he does this? Do you think he could have refused? Imagine he didn't do it. What do you think might have happened to the family?

The Infanta Margarita is five years old at the time this story is set. Find out what you can about her.

In this chapter, a lot of new characters are introduced, and since they all have names in an unfamiliar language, it can be a bit confusing, so here's a tip – look at this Wikipedia webpage:

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Velazquez-Meninas-key3.jpg>

It shows you a black and white image of the picture *Las Meninas*, and it names all the people who are in it. These people are nearly all characters in this part of the story, so it's worth working out who is who.

Look at the picture on the back of your book, and see if you can match the people there to some of the people named on the website. The easiest one to recognise is of course the Infanta herself, who is in the middle of the full picture, but is on the left in the part of it that you have on the back of the book.

In the 'Alcazár' chapter, we meet Doña Marcela de Ulloa. Find her on the webpage picture, and see if she is also in the picture on the back of your book.

Doña de Ulloa is far too important to look after Bartolomé herself, so she sends for a young maid-in-waiting or maid-of-honour called Doña Maria Augustina de Sarmiento. Find her on the webpage picture, and then see if she appears on your version of the picture on the back of the book.

And we also meet the dwarf Marie Barbola, in this chapter and the next one, 'A Human Dog'. She is definitely on both the webpage picture and on the back of the book, and she's an important character in the story.



When Bartolomé first arrives in the palace, Doña de Ulloa says to him, 'Have you any idea what an honour it is to have attracted the interest of the Infanta?' Do you think it is an honour? Marie Barbola says something similar to him: 'You're lucky that Maria Augustina has taken you on.' Would you think that Bartolomé is going to have a good life now?

Read the chapters 'A Human Dog' and 'Dog-training' and see if you have changed your mind about the life Bartolomé is going to live at the palace.

Is there anyone in the palace who seems to be on Bartolomé's side?



7: LIFE WITH THE INFANTA (PP 129–153)

Read the chapter called ‘The Infanta’. What do you think of her? Would you like her as a friend? Would you like to be her, to have her life?

What do you think of Marie Barbola? Is she kind or nasty? Why do you think she is the way she is?

How do you think Bartolomé feels about being a ‘human dog’? What do you think about it?

In the chapter ‘Friendship’ we meet another dwarf, called Nicolasito. See if you can find him on the webpage picture and in the picture on the back of the book.

Read the next chapter too, ‘Heaven and Hell’, and think about the character of Nicolasito. Why do you think he behaves the way he does?

Imagine you are Nicolasito, and then this new dwarf arrives in court and the Infanta is very fond of him. How would you feel? What would you do?

In this chapter, Bartolomé visits the artists’ studio for the first time, and we meet the famous painter, Velázquez, who painted *Las Meninas*. He also appears in his own painting. He is not visible on your back cover, but you can see him on the webpage picture, to the left. (There is another person also with the surname ‘Velázquez’ at the back of the painting. He was the queen’s attendant and may have been a cousin of the painter’s.)

Why do you think Bartolomé enjoys being in the studio?

The apprentice, Andrés, explains to Bartolomé that one of the painters, Juan de Pareja, is ‘a moor’. What does this mean?

We also learn that Velázquez freed Juan de Pareja from slavery. What does this tell you about the kind of person Velázquez is? Do you think Bartolomé would like him?

This chapter is called ‘Heaven and Hell’. What do you think is the heaven part, and what is the hell?

The ‘Bullfight’ chapter really is like a piece of hell, isn’t it? In this chapter, we meet Bartolomé’s father again, but here we see a different side to him. What do you think of him now? Do you think he has changed? If so, why?



8: ARTISTS (PP 154–177)

What do you think of the advice Marie Barbola gives Bartolomé at the beginning of the chapter called 'Pictures'? Do you think she is Bartolomé's friend? Has Bartolomé got any friend in the palace?

We learn quite a lot about painting from these chapters. What have you learnt that you thought was interesting?

The chapter 'A Masterpiece' is about the painting of a picture of the Infanta and her retinue. That's 'our' picture, of course, *Las Meninas*.

Isabel de Velasco arrives into the studio with the Infanta in this chapter. She is one of the ladies-in-waiting, and she is also in the picture. Find her first on the webpage and then also on the back of your book.

The king and queen are in the picture too, but in a very unusual way. Find them on the webpage. (They are not visible on the book.)

In the chapter 'Sittings', Bartolomé has to pose for the picture too, lying at the Infanta's feet. Do you think the dog in the picture actually is Bartolomé?

Don Velázquez has quite complex feelings about Bartolomé in this chapter. At first he seems to be angry with him. Then he is violent towards him, then horrified that he has hurt him. And towards the end of the chapter, he is upset. What do you think these reactions tell us about him as a character? Do you like him? Do you think Bartolomé likes him?

At the beginning of the chapter 'Dream of the Future', Velázquez is trying to find a solution to the problem he has with painting Bartolomé. What exactly is the problem? And why do you think the painter has the problem? What does this tell us about the kind of man he is?

He is trying to 'paint Bartolomé as the Infanta saw him'. And then we see that he paints not Bartolomé but a real dog. Can you make sense of that?

Bartolomé is delighted when it turns out that he is not in the painting after all, but a real dog is in his place. Why do you think he has that reaction?

Velázquez says that he did paint Bartolomé, but then he goes on to explain that he could not paint Bartolomé as he actually looks, but instead he has painted his 'inner self'. That is quite mysterious. Can you understand what he means?



Anyway, even if you don't quite understand it, the main thing is that Bartolomé is not in the picture after all, and he is absolutely sure now that he will never be a dog again. Why do you think he has made that decision at this point? Do you think he will be able to act on this decision and stop being a human dog?

Later, the apprentices show Bartolomé's painting to the master, Velázquez, and he asks Bartolomé why he painted the mill so white. Bartolomé has thought about this, and he has an explanation. What does this explanation tell you about how paintings work?

Bartolomé longs to become a painter, but there are various obstacles in his way, the most important being the rules of the guild, which did not allow a disabled person to be a painter. Find out what the guilds were and how they worked in the Middle Ages and later in Europe.

At that time, not only was it *allowed* to be prejudiced against people who were in any way different, but you were actually *supposed* to discriminate against them. Nowadays, people are still very often prejudiced, but at least that is not approved of. Do you think it would have been harder to be disabled in those days than it is today?

There are lots of jobs these days where being disabled should not be a problem. Name three jobs you think could easily be done by a disabled person today. Now think, do disabled people actually get to do those jobs very often? It's not like in Bartolomé's time, when the rules said 'No disabled people allowed'; in fact the rules often say 'Disabled people should not be discriminated against.' And yet you don't see disabled people all that much at work. Why do you think that is? Do you think attitudes towards disability have changed at all? Or just a bit? Or quite a lot?

By the end of this chapter, the painters have agreed to bend the rules and let Bartolomé become a painter. But how is he going to get free of the Infanta? Can you think of anything?



9: ENDING (PP 178–200)

In the chapter ‘A Real Dog’, we are back with Bartolomé’s family. His father, Juan, has changed his mind about Bartolomé, and wants to rescue him. Do you believe a person could change like this?

The family hatches a plan to get Bartolomé free, and the most important person in the family for this plan is Beatríz, Bartolomé’s little sister. We know her already from the first part of the book. What sort of a girl do you think she is? Do you like her? Why or why not?

We learn something about the financial situation of the Carrasco family when it comes to the matter of the puppy. What is that? And does it surprise you?

When Bartolomé’s father meets the painters in the tavern, he tells them that he wants to rescue Bartolomé and take him home. Do you think going home would be a good solution for Bartolomé? Why or why not?

Do you think that the plan Juan and his family have come up with to free Bartolomé is a good one? Do you think it can work?

Juan de Pareja is able to add a twist to the plan that is absolutely brilliant, as we see in the final chapter, ‘The Magician and his Trick’. Why do you think he is the one who comes up with this crazy but amazing idea?

The trick is quite complicated, so you need to read this bit very carefully; but if you do, you should be able to follow it. It would be fun to try to act it out in the classroom, if you can improvise a box or crate – but don’t use a real puppy, or you will terrify it (not to mention the mess!). You’ll need a toy puppy and people to dress up as the Infanta, as the lady-in-waiting, as Nicolasito and as Bartolomé (in his dog costume!).

Think back over the whole story and look at this list of themes:

- Spain
- History
- Royalty
- Disability
- Painting
- Prejudice



- Reading and writing
- Families
- Friendship
- Bullying
- Poverty

These themes are listed here in random order. Decide which ones you think are most important in the story, and write out the list again, starting with the theme you think is most important to the story and working your way down to the least important. Add in any other themes that you think should be there too.

One very interesting thing about this book is that many of the people in it are trapped in situations over which they have no control. This includes not only Bartolomé, but also his mother and his father, the other dwarves at court, the courtiers too, probably, and even the Infanta, in a funny kind of way. The characters act in ways that are very often hostile or mean or violent, but most of the time, they behave as they do because they are trapped, and because they can't change things in their lives. Do you think the way things were in those days explains why the characters act as they do?

The characters often change when things around them change. What do you think about that? Do you think characters in stories are usually just mean or just cheerful or just friendly or just violent and don't change much, or do you find that in some stories they do change? Do you prefer stories where the characters remain the same or ones where they can change? Why?

Think back to the early part of the book. Remember when the priest said to Bartolomé, 'The last shall be first'. Do you think this has turned out to be true for Bartolomé?

Go back now and re-read the very first paragraph of the book. Now that you've read the ending, can you see why the author describes the village as she does in that paragraph?

Things like this give a book a unified feeling, even though it falls into two very distinct parts. Can you spot any other things in the story that help to unify it in this way?

Did you enjoy the story? It is quite hard in places, and it really makes you think, but it is a good story too – or do you have a different opinion? Why?

After reading this story, are you glad you live in the 21st century? Would you prefer to live in the 17th century, like Bartolomé? Why? Or is there some other century you would like to live in?