

# The Song of the Swan by Karah Sutton

## Illustrations by Pauliina Hannuniemi

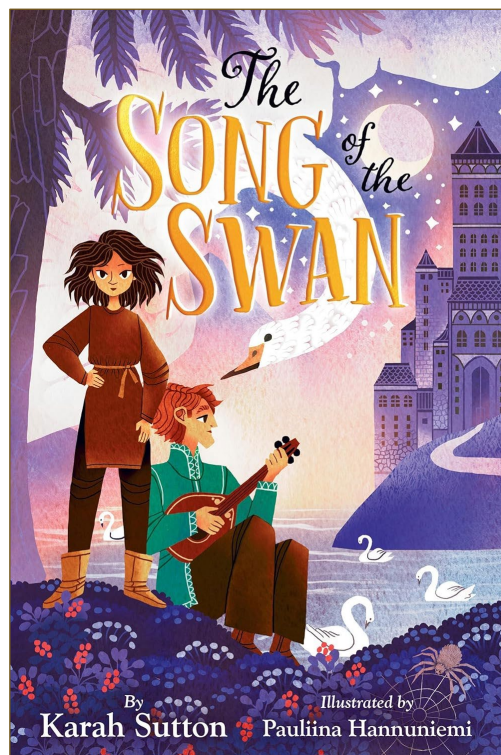
### Educator Guide

*A magical retelling of Swan Lake, featuring a clever orphan, a castle filled with enchanted swans, and a quest to unearth the secrets of the past.*

Olga is an orphan and a thief, relying on trickery and sleight of hand to make her way in the world. But it's magic, not thievery, that could get her into trouble.

When Olga and her partner-in-crime Pavel learn of a valuable jewel kept in a secluded castle, Olga sees an opportunity to change their lives: a prize so big, they'd never have to steal again. But the castle is not as it seems, ruled by an enchanter who hosts grand balls every night, only for the guests to disappear each morning, replaced by swans. Guided by cryptic clues from the palace spiders, Olga soon realizes she's in over her head—torn between a bargain with the enchanter, loyalty to Pavel, and determination to understand how the enchanted swans are linked to her own fate.

One thing is certain: there is dark magic behind the castle's mysteries, and Olga will stop at nothing to unmask it.



Knopf Books for Young Readers

Middle Grade (8-12)

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#### *Past praise for **A Wolf for a Spell**:*

A Junior Library Guild selection, American Booksellers' Association Indies Introduce selection, Indie Next Fall 2020 Top 10, Goodreads 2021 nomination for Best Children's Book of the Year, Bank Street College of Education list of Best Books of 2020

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#### About the Author

Karah Sutton is an American/New Zealand author and former bookseller. Inspired by her many years as a ballet dancer, *The Song of the Swan* is her second novel. Her first novel, *A Wolf for a Spell*, also features illustrations by Pauliina Hannuniemi and is available from Knopf Books for Young Readers

Karah is experienced in talking to groups in person and virtually about a range of topics, including her writing as well as her experience in the video game and film industries. Karah is available for school visits, talks, and other events.



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### Educator Guide

“An enchanting fairy tale. . . . The characters are interesting, and the story, lovingly inspired by the ballets *Giselle* and *Swan Lake*, moves briskly.” —Kirkus Reviews

“Wise spiders, magical threads, and flawed illusions anchor this traditionally structured fantasy that nods to *Swan Lake*, focused on a child who uses her magical powers to help her swindling merchant caretaker.” —Publishers Weekly

“Ripe for fairytale fans. . . . As in her acclaimed debut, Sutton conjures a folkloric Eastern European setting. . . . and illustrator Hannuniemi lends a cozy feel with angular black-and-white renderings. Like the ballet it’s inspired by, this middle-grade fantasy emphasizes the power of choice.” —Booklist

“Sutton’s prose shines in this fast-paced adventure featuring engaging characters, a unique take on magic, and some truly creepy moments. I loved it!” —J.A. White, award-winning author of *Nightbooks*

#### Classroom Connections:

**Swan Lake and ballet** – The book is a retelling of the ballet *Swan Lake*, told from the point of view of a minor character. Opportunities for discussion involve the ballet itself, as well as the elements of Slavic folklore present in this retelling.

**Animals and the environment** – The book plays with perceptions of animals, particularly swans and spiders.

**Morality and the power of choice** – The story features characters making questionable choices, and a narrator asks the reader to consider and discuss further.

**Craft study** – literary writing with examples of descriptive language, sensory detail, metaphor, simile, assonance, alliteration, and personification.

#### Points of interest:

- **Mystery and adventure** with exciting plot twists and turns
- Fun for **animal lovers**, with swan/birds as well as mischievous spiders
- The **story of *Swan Lake*** uniquely retold, ideal for students of ballet
- Discussions of **music** and its impact, perfect for young music lovers
- 30+ gorgeous black-and-white **illustrations** by Pauliina Hannuniemi, the illustrator of *A Wolf for a Spell*
- Lyrical and sparkling prose, perfect for **reading aloud**



# A History of Swan Lake

*Swan Lake* is a beloved ballet that's been enchanting audiences for generations. Here's a simplified history that you can share with your class:

**The Birth of an Idea (1871-1875):** In the 1870s, the Russian composer Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky was hired to create a ballet for the Bolshoi Theatre. The story was inspired by folktales about swan-maidens, which can be found in many countries across Europe and Russia.

**The Musical Masterpiece (1875-1876):** While Tchaikovsky had composed music for symphonies and operas, *Swan Lake* was to be his first ballet. It was 1875 when Tchaikovsky began working on the music, and he composed very quickly—most of the initial music was composed within a year! He was inspired by other ballets of the time, including *Giselle*. The music of *Swan Lake* is known for being highly emotional. It also makes great use of “leitmotif”—having musical themes associated with different characters or moods.

**The First Dance (1877):** *Swan Lake* had its world premiere in 1877 at the Bolshoi Theatre in Moscow. A choreographer named Julius Reisinger created the dance moves for the ballet. But the first performances were not well received. The music was considered too complicated to dance to, and audiences did not like the story or the dances. Despite this, it was still moderately successful, and continued to be performed for six years.

**A New Beginning (1880s-95):** By 1890, there were talks of revising and re-presenting *Swan Lake*. However, Tchaikovsky's death in 1893 meant he made no revisions to the music himself (though his brother Modest continued to be involved!). With musical revisions by Riccardo Drigo, and choreography by Marius Petipa and Lev Ivanov, it is the 1895 version of *Swan Lake* that made it the ballet phenomenon it is today.



**Resources:** Marius Petipa Society. “*Swan Lake*’ Discoveries Allow for a Deeper Dive Into Its History”, *The New York Times*

**Images:** Top: Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky, photographed in Paris around 1875 by Charles Reutlinger. Public domain.

Bottom: Anna Sobeshchanskaya played Odette in early 1870s productions. The character Anna in *The Song of the Swan* is named after her. Getty images.






### Pre-reading Questions:


- Look closely at the cover for *The Song of the Swan*. Are there any details which feel unexpected? What do you think will happen in the story based on the cover alone? What can you guess about the main characters based on how they are shown on the cover?
- The story begins with a tale told by a spider. How do you usually think of spiders, and have your thoughts about them changed after hearing the spider's story?

### End of book discussion/essay prompts:

- The story describes swans and spiders, and what they usually symbolize. What do swans or spiders represent to you, and how is that different to how they are presented in the book?
- How familiar were you with the story of Swan Lake before reading *The Song of the Swan*? Consider other fairytales you know and write the events of the story from the villain's perspective.
- Olga learns to use her magic to save not just herself but to help other people. What is something you're good at, and what are some ways those skills are useful in helping others?
- One of the ways the baron's magic overpowers Olga and Pavel is through senses—dancing, music, and delicious food. What things would most make you want to stay at the palace? What is a time when you had too much of a good thing?

### Extension activities:

- Many fairy tales have characters who are cursed to become an animal. Write a story about a character cursed to become an animal that hasn't been featured in a story you already know. What animal did you choose? What ways would it be bad to be that animal? What ways would it be good?
  - Ballets are stories that are told using only movement set to music. Re-enact a scene from the book using only movement, setting it to a song of your choice. Why did you choose that song?
  - The book features many illustrations which show exciting or important moments in the story. What is a scene that doesn't have an illustration? How would you draw it?
  - The book describes songs as a way of connecting people. Think of a song that is special between you and another person. What does it mean to you? Please share the song with the class.
  - The baron has a collection of birds in his aviary. Research and present a bird that might live in the baron's aviary.
- 



*The Song of the Swan* features “Spider Stories”, each with a different question posed at the end. Follow along and use these spider stories as a point to pause and discuss the spider’s prompt.

- ***The young man got his wish, but was it worth the price? (p 5)***

This story asks about making choices even when it’s possible those choices can have bad consequences. What are things we can consider when making difficult decisions? What is a time when you chose to do something and there were results you didn’t expect?

- ***What becomes of a heartstring that is used for power instead of love? (p 48)***

This story asks us to think about how we can perform actions for good or for ill. What are some ways that a good deed could be bad, or a bad deed could be good? Has there ever been a time when you’ve tried to help someone but accidentally hurt them instead?

- ***Is such a peace worth pursuing? (p 78)***

This story asks whether it’s better to know about things that will make us feel bad, or to avoid those bad things and but in doing so avoid what’s real and truthful. How does this make you feel? Are there times when you were sad to find out something true? In what ways was it good to find out that truth, even though it made you feel bad at the time?

- ***Did his wish come true? (p 108)***

This story asks about our wishes, and what happens when we get something different from what we wished for. Is it possible the boy’s wish was granted in an unexpected way? Have you ever had a time when you thought you wanted something, but what you actually needed was something different?

- ***If she braved treacherous woods and wicked spirits to reach her goal, did she ever truly lack what she longed for? (p 142)***


This story asks about our feelings about ourselves. Sometimes we don’t always see ourselves the way other people see us – we think we aren’t good in certain ways, but the people who love us believe we are. What are some things you’ve undervalued in yourself? How did it feel to have someone view you more positively than you expected?

- ***Did she make the right choice? (p 207)***

This story asks us to consider times when we might have judged other people for their choices, and if our opinion about them changed once we knew more about them. Has there been a time when you understood someone better once you got to know them?

- ***Your stories are still ahead of you. I hope that when you see a strand before you, you will remember what I’ve told you. And if you are presented with a similar choice, I hope that you will make the right one. The right choice, little ones, is what you must decide for yourselves. (p 243)***

What do you think the spider means by this? Have any of the spider stories made you change your mind about something?



## Questions while reading

**Chapter 1:** What are your first impressions of Olga and Pavel? What makes you think of them that way? How are they different from each other, and how are they alike?

**Chapter 2:** Mr. Bulgakov says, “Some things are real when it seems like they aren’t, and some things aren’t real when it seems like they are.” What do you think he means by this?

**Chapter 3:** Olga thinks of crying as something showing weakness. Do you think this is true? What are ways that crying can mean a person is strong?

**Chapter 4:** When Olga wakes up in the palace, she observes the room around her. Are there any clues that the room is different from how it seems?

**Chapter 5:** What are your first impressions of the baron and Anna? What makes you think that about them?

**Chapters 6:** How have your impressions of the palace changed during this chapter? What events and descriptions make you feel this way?

**Chapter 7:** Pavel is described as “the kind of person who felt better after running around and jumping a bit.” Have you ever felt this way?

**Chapter 8:** Pavel says, “Now we’re here, and we can dance and eat and sing and do anything we wish. Isn’t that the new life we wanted?” Do you think this is true?

**Chapter 9:** Anna says her favorite word is “persimmon.” Do you have a favorite word?

**Chapter 11:** How has the story hinted at the baron’s true motives before now? What are ways the story foreshadowed that his magic was an illusion and he was not trustworthy?

**Chapter 12:** Pauk asks, “What are stories but truth in a fine gown?” What do you think he means by this?

**Chapter 13:** Mokosh says, “Be careful, Olga. Playing deadly games yields only deadly rewards.” What do you think she means by this?

**Chapter 14:** Anna believes she needs to be beautiful to be like a heroine in a story. What are some other misbeliefs the characters have?

**Chapter 15:** What are some ways this story shows the truth in Pauk’s observation that “people are messy and tangled”?

**Chapter 16:** Anna says she agreed to be cursed to get what she wanted. Do you agree with her choice?

**Chapter 17:** Do you agree with Pavel when he tells Olga that she only cares about herself?

**Chapter 18:** Do you agree with Olga’s reasons for tricking Pavel? What do you hope Olga will do next after deceiving him?

**Chapter 19:** Olga realizes the creatures aren’t as frightening as she first thought. Is there anything that frightens you that you don’t need to fear?

**Chapter 20:** Olga realizes that her father wanted her after all. Do you think this fulfills her wishes? How does this relate to Anna’s wish in the story?

**Chapter 21:** What is the meaning of Olga’s dream?

**Chapter 22:** Pavel says, “My love for [Anna] is different, but it doesn’t mean I love you less.” Can you think of different ways people love each other?

**Chapter 23:** Do you think Olga would have been happy growing up in the palace?

**Chapter 24:** Anna says, “If I looked only at how things are, I’d miss out on imagining what they could become.” What does this mean to you?

**Chapter 25-27:** Compare the times the songs are sung throughout the book. How does the meaning change each time the song is sung?

# Vocabulary

**Chapter 1:** notorious, deceitful, disassemble, meandered, exquisite, shoddy, temptation, extravagantly, malformed, dismantling, magistrate

**Chapter 2:** luxurious, gnawing, coveted, rasping, specter

**Chapter 3:** bludgeon, embellishments, sleep-addled, obscured, ominous, terrain, husky

**Chapter 4:** murk, tranquil, upholstery, replenished, sashayed, flourish, unaccustomed, exuberance, affability

**Chapter 5:** quizzical, sauntered, cacophony, aroma, canapés, garnished, accentuated

**Chapter 6:** geniality, admonished, groggy, brimming, snippets, labyrinthine

**Chapter 7:** plaque, enormous, unmistakably emblazoned, jostling, jittered, reluctance, erratic, constricting

**Chapter 8:** triumphantly, alliance, spindly, crescendoed, relented, conservatory, orangery filament, translucent, brittle, copse, lattice, bevy

**Chapter 9:** tsaritsa, urchins, reticule, jaunty

**Chapter 10:** sprawled, aflutter, warbled, plunged, solitary

**Chapter 11:** amidst, marionette, rapt, tendrils, naïve, congenial, paltry

**Chapter 12:** deftly, trudged, entrancing, bewitched, tremor, writhed, smelted, nimble, vista, intertwined, quavering

**Chapter 13:** misshapen, bewildering, peculiarity, wretched, untwining, harbored, quelled

**Chapter 14:** disarray, feverish, fracture, voluminous, unfulfilled, captivating, sensation, cherished, resentment, contradict

**Chapter 15:** vulnerable, underestimated, barbs, peril, gait, revelers, fatiguing

**Chapter 16:** tamped, secluded, silhouetted, morphing, contorted, reassurance, plodded, minuet, overthrown, lilt, decaying, disobedient, replenish

**Chapter 17:** merry-maker, unfettered, manipulations, unearthing, besotted, inseparable, obtained

**Chapter 18:** retraced, eluded, deteriorated, remnants, hulking, topiaries, irrepressible

**Chapter 19:** unspooling, fumbling, corruption, severing, lurching, demeanor, distorted, raiment, esteemed, swaddling

**Chapter 20:** ensnaring, accrue, kindling, expendable, conniving, dignity, uncoiled, resemblance, unmistakable, impenetrable

**Chapter 21:** taut, intensified, subsided, crescents, maneuvered

**Chapter 22:** concentration, perch, surged, rhythmic

**Chapter 23:** assessing, crimson, camouflage, resounded, interwoven

**Chapter 24:** shrubbery, onyx, quiver, commotion, agitated, kerchief, dispirited, rummaged, pried, suffice, reserve

**Chapter 25:** foraged, mischievous, crude, craggy, impenetrable, radiance, eerie, discarded, nonchalant, grotesque, ominously, traipsing, withered, reverberated, debris

**Chapter 26:** bedraggled, imploring, scoffed, earnestness, brusque

**Chapter 27:** gravity, forlorn, restoration

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Write whether each statement about Swan Lake below is TRUE or FALSE.

	1. Swan Lake's story draws inspiration from folktales about swan-maidens in various cultures as well as other ballets.
	2. Composers Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky first began writing the music for Swan Lake in 1875.
	3. Prior to writing the music for Swan Lake, Tchaikovsky composed his famous ballets The Nutcracker and Sleeping Beauty.
	4. Tchaikovsky composed most of the initial music for "Swan Lake" within three months.
	5. The music of "Swan Lake" features examples of "leitmotif."
	6. The ballet premiered at the Bolshoi Theatre in Moscow in 1877, with choreography by Julius Reisinger.
	7. Initial reviews of the ballet praised it as the greatest ballet ever created.
	8. The 1895 version of "Swan Lake" featured musical revisions by Riccardo Drigo and choreography by Marius Petipa and Lev Ivanov.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Look at each description from *The Song of the Swan*. Next to the terms below, write the # of each quote that corresponds with the literary device. The first has been done as an example.

1. "The eyes of the children widened in wonder as they watched the dancer twist and twirl"
2. "It unfurled from her chest, a cobra performing its hypnotic dance."
3. "She'd always found the cacophony of crowded rooms to be like scratches on her skin"
4. "Like fog burning away in the sunlight, her memories were rapidly evaporating"
5. "Together they navigated unfamiliar corridors over carpets that were snowy with dust."
6. "An owl hooted overhead. Frogs croaked. But the aviary appeared empty."
7. "The crimson silk was slippery in her hands."
8. "Overhead the *chack chack* of thrushes and the *puu puu* of cuckoos cheered them on."
9. "The sun, reigning from its mountain throne, threatened to blind them with its radiance."
10. "Together we're never alone."

Simile:

\_\_\_\_\_

Metaphor:

\_\_\_\_\_

Personification:

\_\_\_\_\_

Onomatopoeia:

\_\_\_\_\_

Alliteration:

1

Assonance:

1



Name: ANSWER KEY

Write whether each statement about **Swan Lake** below is **TRUE** or **FALSE**.

<b>TRUE</b>	1. Swan Lake's story draws inspiration from folktales about swan-maidens in various cultures as well as other ballets.
<b>TRUE</b>	2. Composers Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky first began writing the music for Swan Lake in 1875.
<b>FALSE</b>	3. Prior to writing the music for Swan Lake, Tchaikovsky composed his famous ballets The Nutcracker and Sleeping Beauty.
<b>FALSE</b>	4. Tchaikovsky composed most of the initial music for "Swan Lake" within three months.
<b>TRUE</b>	5. The music of "Swan Lake" features examples of "leitmotif."
<b>TRUE</b>	6. The ballet premiered at the Bolshoi Theatre in Moscow in 1877, with choreography by Julius Reisinger.
<b>FALSE</b>	7. Initial reviews of the ballet praised it as the greatest ballet ever created.
<b>TRUE</b>	8. The 1895 version of "Swan Lake" featured musical revisions by Riccardo Drigo and choreography by Marius Petipa and Lev Ivanov.

Name: ANSWER KEY

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10. "Together we're never alone."

**Simile:**

3, 4

**Metaphor:**

2, 5

**Personification:**

3, 8, 9

**Onomatopoeia:**

6, 8

**Alliteration:**

1, 3, 7

**Assonance:**

1, 7, 10