

THE SECRET INVESTIGATOR OF ASTOR STREET

STEPHANIE MORRILL

EDUCATOR'S GUIDE FOR YOUNG ADULTS, AGES 13 +

*“My name is Piper Sail.” I try to ignore the dizziness and press on.
“And I am a private investigator” (353).*



SUMMARY

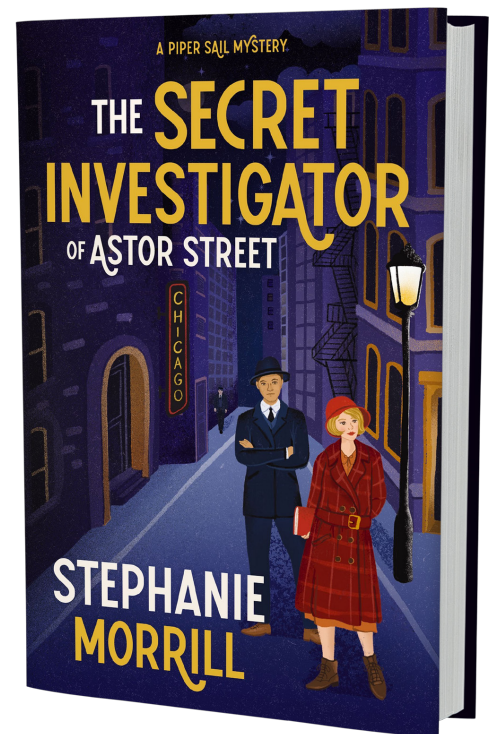
Welcome to 1920s Chicago—a city alive with jazz, speakeasies, and secrets lurking in every corner. For eighteen-year-old Piper Sail, this bustling backdrop is more than just home; it's the stage for her most daring pursuit yet.

When a young girl's brother, Clarence Dell, is found dead under suspicious circumstances, Piper isn't content with the police's lack of answers. With razor-sharp instincts and a fearlessness that refuses to be hemmed in by convention, she launches her own investigation into the mystery—in the process facing danger, deception, and the shadows of corruption hiding behind the city's glittering façade.

Driven by her dream of becoming a private investigator, Piper navigates a world of smoky alleyways, glamorous soirées, and shifting alliances. But as she digs deeper, the threads of her relationships with family, friends, and her boyfriend are pulled taut. Every clue she uncovers comes with a cost, and the closer she gets to uncovering the truth, the higher the stakes become.

Can Piper outwit those who'd rather keep the truth buried? Or will her bold ambition put her—and those she loves—at risk?

Packed with intrigue, dynamic characters, and a rich, historical setting, *The Secret Investigator of Astor Street* is a thrilling tale of determination, heart, and the courage it takes to stand up for the truth, no matter the odds.



PRE-READING ACTIVITIES

Prepare your students for an engaging and enriching experience with these pre-reading activities designed to connect their existing knowledge to the novel's themes, setting, and characters.

1. Explore 1920s Chicago Through a Visual Timeline

- **Objective:** Students will understand the social, cultural, and technological advancements of 1920s Chicago and connect them to the novel's setting.

- **Activity:**

1. Divide students into small groups and assign each group a topic related to Chicago in the 1920s, such as Prohibition, jazz music, organized crime, or fashion trends.
2. Ask groups to research their topic (using teacher-approved websites or resources) and create a visual timeline or collage highlighting key events and trends.
3. Groups will present their findings to the class, and as a group, students will discuss how these elements might influence the story.

Extension: Post the visuals on a classroom wall to serve as a backdrop while reading the novel.

2. The Role of Women in the 1920s

- **Objective:** Students will investigate the societal changes influencing women's roles during the 1920s, connecting these findings to the protagonist's ambitions.

- **Activity:**

1. Pose an open-ended question to the class, such as, "What challenges might women have faced while pursuing careers in male-dominated fields like private investigation during the 1920s?"
2. Students will read short articles or watch videos about women's roles during this time, focusing on milestones like the suffrage movement and increased workforce participation
3. Host a class discussion addressing how these societal shifts might impact someone like Piper Sail, the novel's protagonist.

Hint: Encourage students to think critically about how these roles compare to the modern day.

3. Create a Character Profile for a Private Investigator

- **Objective:** Students will explore the traits and skills a private investigator needs, encouraging them to analyze and predict Piper Sail's character.

- **Activity:**

1. Start with a group brainstorm session and list the qualities, tools, and knowledge a private investigator might require to solve a mystery (e.g., attention to detail, persistence, cleverness)

2. Ask students to create their own fictional private investigator inspired by this list, detailing their background, strengths, and challenges.
 3. Conclude by comparing the students' creations to the novel's description of Piper Sail (after sharing without spoilers) and lead a discussion of how these traits might play into the storyline.
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PRE-READING QUESTIONS

1. What qualities do you think a good detective needs to solve a mystery?

Reflect on whether you have these qualities or how they might help someone uncover the truth.

2. Imagine living in the 1920s. How do you think life would be different compared to today?

Consider the clothes, culture, technology, and rules people followed back then. Would it be easier or harder to investigate a crime?

3. Have you ever pursued a goal or dream that others thought was difficult or impossible?

What motivated you to keep going? Think about how ambition and determination might play a role in this novel.

4. Why do you think secrets are such a common element in stories about people and communities?

Consider how secrets can shape relationships, trust, and unfolding events in a mystery.

5. If you uncovered a mystery in your own life, how would you go about solving it?

Think about how you would gather clues, get help, or face any obstacles. Would you try to solve it on your own or work with others?

DURING READING

Clue Tracker and Character Detective

Engage young adults in following the mystery and character development throughout the story by tracking important clues, suspects, and character actions. This activity enhances comprehension and critical thinking as students connect the dots and form their own theories.

1. Clue Tracking:

As you read, fill out the "Clue Tracker" section of the chart each time a new piece of evidence or a suspicious detail is revealed. Include who found the clue, where it was located, and why it might be important.

2. Suspect Analysis:

Keep track of the suspects Piper encounters or investigates. Fill in their names, possible motives, and any suspicious behavior or actions described in the book.

3. Character Deep Dive:

Pay attention to Piper Sail’s actions and decisions in each chapter. Use the “Character Detective” section to jot down moments that reveal her personality, strengths, and growth as a private investigator.

4. Mid-Read Reflection (Optional):

Halfway through the novel, pause and review your notes. Write a brief hypothesis about who you think is behind Clarence Dell’s mysterious death and why.

5. Classroom Discussion (Optional):

Share your charts or reflections with classmates. Compare your tracked clues, suspect lists, and hypotheses. Discuss how the author builds the mystery and develops the characters.

CLUE TRACKER

CLUE	WHO FOUND IT?	WHERE WAS IT FOUND?	WHY IT’S IMPORTANT?
Example: receipt for socks	Piper	Clarence’s box of possessions	Hints Clarence may not have planned to die.

SUSPECT ANALYSIS

SUSPECT NAME	POSSIBLE MOTIVE	SUSPICIOUS BEHAVIOR OR EVIDENCE AGAINST THEM
Example: Enemies of Dean O'Banion	Know Clarence once saved O'Banion's life.possessions	The mob wars are increasing, and someone might be looking to get rid of any remaining loose ends around O'Banion.

CHARACTER DETECTIVE

SCENARIO OR ACTION

WHAT IT SHOWS ABOUT PIPER

<p>Example: Piper sneaks into a speakeasy to follow a lead.</p>	<p>She's brave and willing to take risks.</p>

POST-READING QUESTIONS FOR WRITING AND DISCUSSION

Analytical Questions

- 1. How does Piper Sail challenge societal norms for women in the 1920s?**
Consider how her dreams, decisions, and actions reflect the evolving role of women during this historical period.
- 2. What role does the setting of 1920s Chicago play in shaping the story?**
Discuss how the cultural and historical elements—like Prohibition, speakeasies, and organized crime—enhance the novel’s mystery and atmosphere.
- 3. How are the themes of friendship and loyalty explored through Piper’s relationships?**
Analyze her friendships and decisions, especially when they conflict with her investigation.
- 4. What clues did you notice that hinted at the resolution of Clarence Dell’s death?**
Reflect on how the author used foreshadowing and red herrings to maintain suspense and mislead the reader.
- 5. How does Piper grow as a character from the beginning to the end of the book?**
Identify specific moments or challenges that helped shape her personal and professional development.

Interpretive Questions

- 1. Why do you think the author chose to focus on a teenage private investigator in this historical setting?**
Discuss how Piper’s age and ambition make her unique and relatable to young readers.
- 2. What were the most surprising or unexpected moments during the investigation?**
Evaluate how these twists contributed to the overall impact of the story.
- 3. How does the author create and maintain suspense throughout the novel?**
Consider elements such as pacing, dialogue, and revealing key information at critical moments.
- 4. How do the minor characters contribute to the development of the plot and Piper’s investigation?**
Reflect on the roles of characters like her friend Emma, the police officers, or Clarence’s family members.
- 5. What moral dilemmas does Piper face, and how do they affect her choices?**
Discuss how these dilemmas deepen the story and add complexity to her character.

Personal Reflection Questions

- 1. If you were in Piper’s position, would you have made the same decisions she did?**
Reflect on her bravery, persistence, and the risks she takes, and consider how you might have acted differently.

2. What ambitions or dreams do you have that might face challenges or skepticism from others?

Connect Piper’s determination to your own experiences, and think about what drives and inspires you.

3. Did this story change how you view trusting others and uncovering secrets?

Explore how the mystery and relationships in the novel made you think differently about these concepts.

4. Do you think there’s a “right” way to pursue justice, as Piper does? Why or why not?

Discuss whether taking risks and bending the rules, as Piper often does, is justified in the pursuit of truth.

5. How does the novel make you feel about the time period it’s set in?

Reflect on whether the 1920s seemed glamorous, dangerous, or a mix of both, and how that affected your ability to connect with the story.

POST-READING ACTIVITIES

1. Design Piper’s Case File

- **Objective:** Encourage students to dig into the mystery-solving aspect of the novel by creating a comprehensive “case file.”

- **Activity:**

1. Provide students with templates resembling police or detective case files.
2. Students will fill in sections such as “Suspect Profiles,” “Clues Collected,” “Key Witness Statements,” and “Case Resolution.”
3. Prompt them to include quotes and evidence taken directly from the novel.
4. If working in groups, students can present their case files to the class, showcasing their understanding of the plot and the mystery’s resolution.

2. Rewrite the Ending

- **Objective:** Foster creativity and deeper engagement by allowing students to explore alternative endings.

- **Activity:**

1. Ask students to rewrite the final chapter or scene of the novel, altering the resolution or adding new twists.
2. They should justify their changes in a short reflection, explaining how their ending keeps or transforms Piper’s character development and relationships.

3. Optionally, students can share their alternate endings in small groups or in a classroom “author read-aloud.”

3. 1920s Debate: Justice vs. Risk

- **Objective:** Analyze the societal and moral dilemmas in the novel through a historical lens.
- **Activity:**
 1. Divide students into two teams for a debate on the topic, “Were Piper’s risks justified in the pursuit of justice?”
 2. Teams should use examples from the book and research societal norms of the 1920s to strengthen their arguments.
 3. Conclude with a class discussion on how risk and justice are viewed differently in modern times versus the novel’s setting.

4. Character Instagram Profiles

- **Objective:** Engage students in contemporary visual storytelling by imagining how the characters would express themselves on social media.
- **Activity:**
 1. Ask students to create mock Instagram profiles for key characters like Piper Sail, Louisa, and others.
 2. Profiles should include a display photo, bio, and at least three post captions. Posts can relate to specific scenes or themes from the book.
 3. Students can collaborate in pairs or small groups, with a focus on creativity, humor, and insight into each character’s personality.

5. Create a Historical Fiction News Broadcast

- **Objective:** Connect the novel’s events to its historical context in a fun, performative way.
- **Activity:**
 1. Students work in small groups to create a news broadcast reporting on Clarence Dell’s death or one of Piper’s major discoveries.
 2. The broadcast should include “live” updates, character interviews, and commentary on how 1920s societal norms impacted the investigation.
 3. Encourage students to dress up or use props reflecting the time period for added authenticity.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

STEPHANIE MORRILL writes books about girls who are on an adventure to discover their unique place in the world. She is the author of several contemporary young adult series, as well as two other historical young adult novels, *The Lost Girl of Astor Street* and *Within These Lines*. *Within These Lines* was a Junior Library Guild Gold Standard selection, as well as a YALSA 2020 Best Fiction for Young Adults pick. Since 2010, Stephanie has been encouraging the next generation of writers at her website, GoTeenWriters.com, which has been on the *Writer's Digest Best Websites for Writers* list since 2017. She lives in the Kansas City area, where she loves plotting big and small adventures to enjoy with her husband and three children. You can connect with Stephanie and learn more about her books at StephanieMorrill.com.
