



## **Character sketches. The Phantom Tollbooth**

**Milo** is a young boy with too much time and too little to do. At the beginning of the novel, Milo is perpetually bored and glum. The mysterious delivery of the Phantom Tollbooth is especially suited to shake Milo out of his thoughtless and disinterested rut. Indeed, it is addressed to Milo "who has plenty of time." Despite his glum outlook and lack of interest in anything, Milo is an appealing character in whom a reader can usually identify some of his own bad traits and habits.

Milo's journey to the Lands Beyond begins his true education. Milo has never been interested in school, in part because he has never had it explained to him why learning is important. In the Lands Beyond, Milo will be shown over and over why learning and knowledge are important. His journey begins in the Doldrums, where the lassitude and lack of interest that have defined Milo's life are shown to be a dead end. If one does not think or care, one may as well just give up and be a sleepy Lethargarian, who does nothing all day long. Fortunately, Milo is saved from this life of nothingness by the watchdog, Tock, who becomes his first friend and companion in the Lands Beyond.

As Milo's travels continue, he is exposed to new ideas, meets new creatures and people, and taught a great deal about learning, knowledge and wisdom. One of Milo's most appealing characteristics is that he almost always underestimates himself but rises to challenges without really being aware of how or why he got there. As the novel progresses, Milo's boredom disappears and his respect for learning and knowledge grows. Milo also becomes able to use the tools or skills that he has been given along the way in a quest to save the princesses, Rhyme and Reason. By the end of the novel, Milo is changed. The Phantom Tollbooth disappears while he is sleeping, because he has learned to learn and will continue to find new things to think about and try.

### **Tock**

Tock is a watchdog, a truly large dog with an enormous alarm clock for a body. He is, naturally, interested in time. When he first meets Milo, Tock reprimands him for wasting or "killing" time. Tock is also a dog, and he shows the fierce loyalty to Milo that one associates with a dog. He also loves car rides, as many dogs do, and it is this that first brings him to accompany Milo on his journey.

Tock treats Milo as the unquestioning leader of their journey and, later, of their quest to save the princesses, Rhyme and Reason. But, even as he follows Milo's leadership, Tock is still a thoughtful creature. He is often the voice of reason when Milo is expressing bemusement about some one or thing that they have met. When Milo is befuddled by the volume of words used by King Azaz's advisors, Tock wisely points out that they are using a lot of words to say very little. Tock is also good with numbers, and is the one who can solve the math problem given by the Dodecahedron about which road to take into Dictionopolis.

The friendship between Milo and Tock forms fast, thanks to Tock's habit of loyalty and ability to follow. Since Milo has so little judgement of his own, at least in the beginning of the novel, he learns



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to trust the good advice of his steadfast friend. This is the relationship that makes Milo's leave-taking sad. No other character has become so close to Milo by the book's end.

### **The Humbug**

Primarily a humorous character, the Humbug also becomes a member of Milo's team and, at times, shows some worth other than as a belligerent fool. Milo first meets the Humbug in the word marketplace of Dictionopolis. The Humbug approaches, loudly denouncing the Spelling Bee and demanding to be introduced to Milo. The Humbug is nearly always wrong, and shouts his wrong opinions at the top of his voice, but he is neither ill-natured nor, as the Spelling Bee says, "a very dislikable fellow."

The Humbug inadvertently "volunteers" to accompany Milo on his quest to save Rhyme and Reason by thoroughly articulating the path and the dangers involved with the impossible journey. He is of little use to Milo along the way, usually shouting out exactly the wrong thing at the wrong time. Somehow, however, he is so predictably wrong yet good-natured (at least toward Milo), that one cannot find him nearly as disagreeable as he ought to be.

### **King Azaz**

The monarch of Dictionopolis, King Azaz is obsessed with words. His name, Azaz, is spelled only with the first and last letters of the alphabet, as if his name encompasses all the letters, and therefore all the words, in the world. Faintly Macabre, the Which, tells Milo the history of the Kingdom of Knowledge and about the never-ceasing argument between King Azaz and his brother, the Mathemagician, over the importance of words versus numbers. Azaz and the Mathemagician sent their foster sisters, the princesses Rhyme and Reason, to the Castle in the Air when the princesses said that neither words nor numbers were more important than the other.

King Azaz has a small role in the book, presiding over a strange royal banquet in which the guests eat their words and agreeing to send Milo on the quest to rescue Rhyme and Reason. He is blustering and quick-tempered, and the reader can easily imagine that he is involved in an argument that has sunk the Kingdom of Knowledge into disarray. King Azaz gives Milo a box containing all the words, and therefore all the ideas, in the world. This gift helps Milo escape the Gelatinous Giant in the Mountains of Ignorance.

### **The Mathemagician**

The Mathemagician is the brother of King Azaz and the ruler of Digitopolis, the city of numbers. Just as boisterous and argumentative as his brother, the Mathemagician is extremely knowledgeable in his area of expertise (numbers) but insensitive to anyone else's ideas or opinions. He refuses to agree with King Azaz to send Milo on a quest to save Rhyme and Reason until Milo proves that by agreeing to always disagree, the Mathemagician and King Azaz are actually in agreement. The Mathemagician gives Milo a magic staff, which is actually a pencil, to use to figure out any problem he may find on his quest. Milo uses his magic staff to determine that the jobs given him and his companions by the Terrible Trivium will take hundreds of years to complete.

### **Rhyme and Reason**



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The princesses Rhyme and Reason are not so much characters in the novel as personifications of ideas. It is the absence of Rhyme and Reason that has the Lands Beyond in disarray. None of the characters (except the demons in the mountains of Ignorance) in the Lands Beyond are evil or deliberately cruel. Most of them are just lacking perspective and moderation. The absence of Rhyme and Reason is the reason for this lack of balance.

When Milo actually meets the princesses in the Castle in the Air, they are beautiful, wise, and kind, just as fairy tale princesses ought to be.

### **The Whether Man**

The first person Milo meets on the other side of the Phantom Tollbooth, the Whether Man greets Milo in Expectations. The Whether Man is jolly and lively but incapable of making a decision for himself.

### **The Spelling Bee**

The Spelling Bee is a large insect that spells words as he talks. Milo meets the Bee in the word market of Dictionopolis.

### **Officer Shrift**

Officer Shrift is an incredibly short, pushy policeman who throws Milo and Tock into prison for the disturbance in the word market.

### **Faintly Macabre**

Faintly Macabre is the "Which" whose former job was to determine which word was appropriate. She is now in the prison of Dictionopolis for temporarily enforcing silence, and she tells Milo the story of the banishment of Rhyme and Reason.

### **King Azaz's Cabinet**

King Azaz's advisors, The Duke of Definition, the Minister of Meaning, the Earl of Essence, the Count of Connotation, and the Undersecretary of Understanding, use synonyms to say very little with a great deal of words.

### **Alec Bings**

Alec Bings is the boy who sees through things. Milo meets Alec in the Forest of Sight on his way to Digitopolis. Alec's head is at an adult's height and his feet are off the ground at about the height of Milo's head. Alec gives Milo the telescope that will show him what is actually there instead of what something looks like. Milo uses it to see the Demon of Insincerity as he really is.

### **Chroma the Great**

Chroma the Great is the conductor who conducts the orchestra of color that gives everything in the world its color.

### **Dr. Dischord and Dynne**



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Dr. Kakaphonous A. Dischord is a carnival-style doctor, who claims to cure people of a lack of noise. The awful Dynne is a genie-like creature, who works as Dr. Dischord's assistant.

## **The Soundkeeper**

The Soundkeeper lives in a fortress, where she keeps all the sounds away from the citizens of the Valley of Sounds. When Milo helps to destroy her fortress and release the sounds, she gives him a package containing some of her favorite sounds, including the sound of laughter. This sound helps Milo get away from the Senses Taker in the Mountains of Ignorance.

## **The Dodecahedron**

The Dodecahedron is a twelve-faced creature, who changes his face to match his feelings and introduces Milo to the Mathemagician.

## **Demons and Other Creatures in the Mountains of Ignorance**

The Everpresent Wordsnatcher takes everything Milo says out of context. The Terrible Trivium assigns meaningless and time-consuming tasks. The Demon of Insincerity never means what he says. The Gelatinous Giant is afraid to think for himself. The Senses Taker wastes time recording facts and steals Milo's sense of sight, Tock's sense of smell, and the Humbug's sense of sound.

