

Building Background Knowledge for Educators and Pre-reading Activity Themes for Students

The novel *A Crack in the Sea* by H.M. Bouwman (G.P. Putnam's Sons) opens a door from our world and our history into a second world. Through mysterious cracks in the sea, a group of Africans escape death at the hands of slavers in 1781, and a group of Vietnamese refugees escape death by exposure on the open sea in 1978. Each of the groups discover a world with a vast ocean and sparse islands where refugees from our world have begun again. Using unique gifts that manifest or change in the crossing, both the ancestors and the new arrivals build new families and a community of cooperation.

The novel presents opportunities to continue or introduce a study of slavery and forced migration, a study of economic and war refugees, and the use of storytelling to expose truths and provide hope in the darkest times. As we all know, none of these topics, especially slavery, can be taken on without preparation.

Below, we offer a series of Teaching Resources to Build Your Background Knowledge (BBK) and some ideas for Pre-reading Activities for Students. We are happy to edit and add to this document based on your clever feedback. Simply message us at curiouscitybooks@gmail.com.

1) Slavery & Forced Migration

The novel changes the outcome of the actual *Zong* slave ship incident of 1781. In the historical event, 133 Africans bound for enslavement in North America were murdered when they were thrown overboard and drowned. In the novel, two teens, Venus and Swimmer, have the astounding ability to walk on the bottom of the sea without the need for air. Taking their fellow Africans by the hand, the powerful siblings are able to take everyone thrown overboard with them. Together in a line, the formerly doomed people walk away from the ship and toward the refuge of a crack in the sea.

Students with a firm grounding in the history and impact of slavery will feel the relief and triumph of Venus and Swimmer's escape. When it is revealed to them before or after the reading what really happened on the *Zong*, be prepared for your students to feel the historic crime and horror more acutely. Questions may arise about why the author chose to reimagine a real incident. The novel's Afterword (p. 352-356) has an exploration of this very question. We would also highly recommend preparing for this conversation with "Tools for the Tongue-tied" from *Teaching Tolerance*.

The author H.M. Bouwman is not the first to imagine a magical or spiritual escape from the inescapable reality and utter cruelty of slavery. Bouwman was inspired by African American folktales that have impossible, fantastical visions of freedom. She was especially inspired by the title story in *The People Could Fly: American Black Folktales* (Random House). Consider a read aloud of "The

People Could Fly” story before students read *A Crack in the Sea*. Explore the role folktales by enslaved people play in offering hope in an utterly hopeless situation.

Teaching Resources:

a) “Tools for the Tongue-tied” from *Teaching Tolerance* (Highly Recommended)

This toolkit shows how *Teaching Tolerance’s* Critical Practices for Anti-bias Education can help foster safe and effective instruction about the sensitive and serious topic of slavery.

<http://www.tolerance.org/teach-sensitive-topics>

b) “What Learning About Slavery Can Teach Us About Ourselves” by James W. Loewen for *Teaching Tolerance*

<http://www.tolerance.org/magazine/number-55-spring-2017/feature/what-learning-about-slavery-can-teach-us-about-ourselves>

c) “Children in the Slave Trade” by Colleen A. Vasconcellos, University of West Georgia in *Children and Youth in History*

<http://chnm.gmu.edu/cyh/case-studies/141>

Age-Level Texts for BBK or Classroom Reading:

a) *A powerful visual exploration of the slave trade:*

The Middle Passage: White Ships/ Black Cargo

By Tom Feelings (Author), John Henrik Clarke (Introduction)

Focuses attention on the torturous journey which brought slaves from Africa to the Americas, allowing readers to bear witness to the sufferings of an entire people.

b) *To envision Venus and Swimmer’s lives if they had been enslaved in North America:*

To Be a Slave

By Julius Lester and illustrated by Tom Feelings (Puffin)

What was it like to be a slave? Listen to the words and learn about the lives of countless slaves and ex-slaves, telling the stories of their forced journey from Africa to the United States, their work in the fields and houses of their owners, and their passion for freedom. You will never look at life the same way again.

c) *For a primary source on enslavement:*

Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave

A Crack in the Sea: A Guide for Educators and Readers

By Frederick Douglass (Various Publishers)

This dramatic autobiography of the early life of an American slave was first published in 1845, when its young author had just achieved his freedom. Douglass' eloquence gives a clear indication of the powerful principles that led him to become the first great African-American leader in the United States.

d) *To share folktales featuring freedom:*

The People Could Fly: American Black Folktales

By Virginia Hamilton and illustrated by Leo Dillon and Diane Dillon Ph.D. (Random House)

Retells 24 black American folk tales in a sure storytelling voice: animal tales, supernatural tales, fanciful and cautionary tales, and slave tales of freedom.

e) *To share a story of a rare escape from enslavement and repatriation to Africa:*

Africa Is My Home: A Child of the Amistad

By Monica Edinger and illustrated by Robert Byrd (Candlewick Press)

Inspired by a true account, here is the compelling story of a child who arrives in America on the slave ship *Amistad* —and eventually makes her way home to Africa.

2) Immigration & Refugees

In *A Crack in the Sea*, the inhabitants of the second world are refugees from this world. Explore students' understanding of refugee situations. Why do people flee their own countries for another? Explore historical and/or current situations where countries have been welcoming to refugees and where they have not. For example, explore how Syrian and other refugees have crossed the Mediterranean Sea in recent years in hopes of resettling in Europe. Explore how Jewish refugees during WWII were both saved and lost because of American refugee policy.

It is important to clarify that many African Americans in this country cannot be lumped into the discussion of "America as a country of immigrants." (Neither can Native Americans.) Descendants of enslaved Africans are not here by immigration but because of a crime against humanity—slavery and forced migration. It may be worth exploring that Thanh and his extended family could have been ultimately welcomed to America as refugees if they had made landfall. Venus, Swimmer, and their people, however, had no hope in 1781 that America would shelter them from enslavement or death.

Teaching Resources:

a) "Teaching Resources" from the UNHCR: The UN Refugee Agency
<http://www.unhcr.org/en-us/teaching-resources.html>

b) "Teaching About the Refugee Crisis and Making a Difference" from IAmSyria.org
<http://www.iamsyria.org/teaching-about-the-refugee-crisis-and-making-a-difference.html>

c) "Holocaust Encyclopedia: Refugees" from the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum
<https://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10005139>

3) Vietnamese Refugees, mid-1970s and following

Vietnamese people like Thanh and his extended family took to the sea in boats because of the economic destruction and political retribution following the conclusion of the Vietnam War in 1975. Approximately 2 million Vietnamese left the country between 1975 and 1995 in hopes of starting a new life elsewhere. Close to 800,000 people left in boats and made landfall in Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Hong Kong, and Thailand. 500,000–600,000 are estimated to have been lost at sea. The majority of those who made it to Southeast Asian refugee camps were settled in Australia, Canada, France, Germany, the UK, and the United States.

Teaching Resources:

a) *For BBK and a lesson plan on what it would mean to leave home:*

"Vietnamese Boat People: Separation & Loss" from *Teaching about Asian Pacific Americans: Effective Activities, Strategies for Classrooms and Communities* edited by Edith Wen-Chu Chen and Glenn Omatsune (Rowman & Littlefield) Pages 7-9
bit.ly/TeachBoatPeople

b) *To share a first-person account of a 16-year-old "boat person":*

Video: Being a refugee is not a choice: Carina Hoang at TEDxPerth

In this remarkable and emotional talk, author and former refugee Carina Hoang discusses her experience as a "boat person."

<https://youtu.be/JwkVk16xecw>

c) *To make a connection between the Vietnamese refugee crisis and Syrian refugee crisis:*

Video: "Syrian refugee crisis: Lessons from Vietnamese boat people from CBC News" from CBC News, 9/11/15

CBC reporter Judy Trinh was four years old when her family fled from Vietnam. She compares her experience to that of refugees fleeing the Middle East and North Africa.

<https://youtu.be/M3U1WrvThLo>

Age-Level Texts for BBK or Classroom Reading:

a) *A Different Pond*

By Bao Phi and illustrated by Thi Bui (Capstone Young Readers)

Acclaimed poet Bao Phi delivers a powerful, honest glimpse into a relationship between father and son—and between cultures, old and new. Together with graphic novelist Thi Bui’s striking, evocative art, Phi’s expertly crafted prose reflects an immigrant family making its way in a new home while honoring its bonds to the past.

b) *Inside Out and Back Again*

By Thanhha Lai (HarperCollins Publishers)

Inspired by the author's childhood experience of fleeing Vietnam after the Fall of Saigon and immigrating to Alabama, this coming-of-age debut novel told in verse has been celebrated for its touching child's-eye view of family and immigration.

c) *Weeping Under the Same Moon*

By Jana Laiz (Crow Flies Press)

Mei is an artist whose life has been disrupted by the Vietnam War. Her anguished parents send her away on a perilous escape during the exodus of thousands of Vietnamese refugees known as “Boat People.” In Mei’s words, we learn of the dangers she faces caring for her two younger siblings on a sea journey fraught with hunger, thirst and deprivation, leaving behind everything she loves, to find refuge for her family.

d) *To be given context for the Vietnam War that led to the refugee crisis:*

Vietnam: A History of the War

By Russell Freedman (Holiday House)

Newbery Medalist Russell Freedman provides a succinct account of perhaps the most puzzling and contentious of America’s wars.

4) Family

In both the first and second worlds of *A Crack in the Sea*, families are made and remade based on circumstance and connection. Explore different definitions of how family happens: birth, adoption, foster care, blended, and chosen vs. biological. Create a chart that allows for characters to fall under

the different categories as you read the story. Have students take note of how their family may fit under more than one of the categories at the same time.

5) Gifts

The characters in the novel have extraordinary (and ordinary) gifts that allow them to support their community in astounding and unexpected ways. Have students brainstorm a list of gifts and talents they possess. Have them add to the list as they read the story. After the reading, have them envision how that talent would change if they crossed to the second world and how it would help the communities they found there. Consider connecting this gifts conversation to what gifts immigrants bring to their adopted country.

6) Fantasy Genre & Social Issues

Fantasy writer Beth Webb stated, “People are inclined to write off fantasy as escapism, but in fact it’s a roundabout way of engaging with genuine problems.” *A Crack in the Sea* will not be the first fantasy book your students have read that has something serious to say about the state of world. Prior to reading this novel, ask your students to name their favorite fantasy novels and ask them if those books comment on any social issues in our world. For example, the Percy Jackson series addresses ADHD, and the Hunger Games series addresses reality TV and televised violence.

After the reading, you might read aloud the final two paragraphs of the Afterword (p. 355-356) and explore student impressions. Explore their feelings about the author adding fantasy elements to the story of refugees lost at sea and Africans murdered by their captors.

The final sentence of the Author’s Note reads, “And sometimes, I think—I hope—a book can help us see that, and have courage, and take action.” Will reading this book inspire your readers to “take action”? If there is no “crack in the sea” for the people forced to take the Middle Passage or for refugees lost at sea, what is the responsibility of readers to make this world better? What do they want to change? How can they start to make that happen? You might consider having this conversation after the reading and providing some resources on social action.

Teaching Resources:

“The real purpose of fantasy” by Beth Webb for *The Guardian*, 4/23/07

<https://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2007/apr/23/bridgingthegapswhyweneed>

Age-Level Texts for BBK or Classroom Reading:

a) *Kids Make It Better: A Write-in, Draw-in Journal*

By Suzy Becker (Workman Publishing Company, Inc.)

This guide is a marvelously interactive way to involve kids in the challenges of life, from what to do about the ozone layer to how to mend a broken heart.

b) *Forthcoming Book (Spring 2018)*

By Marley Dias

Marley Dias, the powerhouse girl-wonder who started the #1000blackgirlbooks campaign, shows kids how to make their own dreams come true. In this accessible “keep-it-real” guide, Marley tells how she’s turned her passion into a literacy crusade that has captured the attention of the media, policymakers, and young people throughout the world.

c) *Be a Changemaker: How to Start Something That Matters*

By Laurie Ann Thompson (Simon Pulse/Beyond Words)

Empower yourself in today’s highly connected, socially conscious world as you learn how to wield your passions, digital tools, and the principles of social entrepreneurship to effect real change in your schools, communities, and beyond.

7) **Author’s Website**

Author H.M. Bouwman has a growing series of blog posts at HMBouwman.com that cover the “Background Material” and “Inspiration” for *A Crack in the Sea*. For example, she includes an interactive map that animates more than 20,000 voyages cataloged in the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database.

Look for teaching items like this in “Categories” link in the right column of the blog.

Discussion Questions: Introduction

- 1) What prediction can you make about the book just from the cover? What details inform your thinking?
- 2) What is meant by the declaration at the very beginning that, “AS WITH TRUE STORIES, Venus’s story has no beginning. As with fantasy, her tale weaves through everything.”? How does the suggestion of two genres co-existing in this story shape your experience going into the story?

Discussion Questions: Part 1

Chapters 1-3

- 1) Setting: After the first chapter, what do you know about the setting of the story? Use as many details as you can from the chapter to describe where we are, when the story takes place, and who the main characters appear to be. What are you curious about in terms of setting?
- 2) What is Pip's gift, and why might it be of importance to the people from Raftworld? What else do you know about Pip already?
- 3) Why is Kinchen so worried about Pip? What is it about Pip that makes Kinchen think he could be in danger? What does this reveal about Kinchen's role in Pip's life?
- 4) Character traits: Describe Kinchen and Pip using character traits, and provide textual evidence for your choices in one or two sentences each. Be sure to include page numbers for your evidence. Example: Kinchen is brave. Even though she wasn't invited to the governor's house, she sets out on her own to find her brother there and bring him home. (p. 8)
- 5) On page 7, the hair and skin color of the Raftworlders and the Islanders are described. On page 13, Ren is described as "the albino." What are you inferring about the racial makeup of this world? How does it make you feel that "white" skin is rare and not normal? How often does this happen in books you read?
- 6) Talk about Ren's relationship to Kinchen and Pip. What do you know about it so far in the story? How would you describe their family configuration?
- 7) Who are the Raftworlders? What brings them to Tathenn this time? What problems are they facing, and what does the Raft King hope to discover with Pip's help?
- 8) Is the role of the storyteller in Tathenn a valued one? How do you know? What is unusual about the stories this storyteller is known to share?
- 9) How do you think the governor handled the Raft King's declaration that he wants, "this boy, with his gifts. Only this boy." (p. 12)? How would you have handled the situation differently?
- 10) Narration: Describe the narrator of the story in the first three chapters. What is different about the point of view of the narratorial voice in the beginning of chapter three? How does that shift impact the reader?
- 11) Pip says in chapter three that it "felt good to have an audience when he was doing something right" (p. 16). What does this tell us about Pip? Can you recall a time when having an audience felt good to you?
- 12) Describe Pip's relationship with sea creatures using specific evidence from chapter three. What would you ask sea creatures if you could communicate with them? What other creatures would you like to talk to?
- 13) What does the Raft King want from the fish? Why?

- 14) What other characters can you add to your list of characters important to the story? What determines a character's' importance? Include two to three traits with evidence to describe them.

Chapters 4-7

- 1) How does the Raft King respond to Kinchen when she appears in the garden? What does this tell us about him? How would you have handled that moment if you were her?
- 2) What is significant about Pip's explanation of why the fish jumped? What does it reveal about Pip? (p. 22)
- 3) What is similar about the way the governor and Kinchen see Pip? Does his inability to recognize humans the way he recognizes fish make him more childlike to you? Have you ever treated someone differently because their way of relating to you or others was unfamiliar?
- 4) What is surprising about the end of chapter 5? Would you have made the same decision as Pip? Why or why not? What do you think the powder is for?
- 5) Return to the letter from the governor on pages 28-29. Imagine the letter was delivered to Kinchen in one to two sentences only. What would they be? Why?
- 6) Make a prediction about what will happen next in the story. Use evidence from the text to explain your answer. Be sure to include Pip, Kinchen, and the person in the bag.
- 7) Return to the list of character traits, and add a word for Kinchen and Pip now. Explain your thinking using evidence from the story.

Chapters 8-13

- 1) What is significant about Caesar's entry into the story? What does her explanation about why she was with Kinchen on the island reveal about the Raft King? What does her arrival imply about Pip's departure?
- 2) Describe the role of the illustration in the story. How does it impact the reader's experience?
- 3) What is Caesar's gift? Why didn't the Raft King want her to stay on Raftworld if she was able to do what she can? What do you think the doorway could be?
- 4) Prissy, the governor's cook, is someone who is "terrifying if she isn't on your side." (p. 43) What does that mean, and why won't the governor be "eating well for a long time"?
- 5) What is Ren's gift? Is it as important as the others?
- 6) What is your understanding of why Ren adopted Kinchen and Pip? Will he do the same with Caesar?
- 7) What does it mean if something is a "rash decision"? Why do you think Ren thinks this about the Raft King's quest?
- 8) Why does Ren decide to tell the story of Venus and her brother at this time? How might it impact Kinchen's hope to find Pip?

- 9) What is Venus longing for in the first part of her story? Can you relate to what she is missing?
- 10) What is happening to Venus in her dream? (p. 59)
- 11) Writing and reading about victims of the slave trade (whether the story is fiction or nonfiction) can be very difficult. Does the racial background of an author impact their ability to tell a story about severe race persecution? Does the racial background of the reader make it harder or easier to read these stories? Why?
- 12) Think about what happened on that ship. Who would have had the opportunity to tell future generations about what transpired? Why would the Africans who remained on the ship not be given the opportunity to tell what they experienced on that journey? Why would the white crew of the boat not tell the truth about what happened? What does this make you think about how stories of enslaved Africans were lost forever?
- 13) The author suggests that Venus was “hopeful” that she and her family would stay together. Knowing what you do about the slave trade in North America, is it probable that her family would stay together? Can you imagine being forcibly taken from your home and then separated from your family for the remainder of your life?
- 14) Venus tells the reader that she was the “wrong age and sex to be left alone for long.” (p. 64) What does she mean by this, and what does she think she can do to protect herself? Do you think her plan would have really worked?
- 15) What is the ghastly plan that the Captain has come up with, and what could Venus possibly do to stop it? What is your experience as a reader imagining this plan?
- 16) Imagine you are taking a photograph of what Kinchen, Caesar, and Ren encounter at the water’s edge. What would be in the photograph? (You may describe it, or draw a picture. Be certain to include the most significant details in your drawing.)
- 17) Explain the shift in narratorial voice in Chapter 13. Why do you suppose Ren did not “know this part of the story”? What does that tell us about Ren? What is the “illogical” thinking in the end of this chapter?

Discussion Questions: Part 2

Chapters 1-5

- 1) Looking back to Part 1, we see that Pip’s name was in parentheses on the title page next to Kinchen’s name. Why did the author choose to do that? What can we assume the next section is about? Do you think Kinchen will appear back in the story in this section?
- 2) What does Pip feel guilty about when he wakes up in the boat? (p. 77) Have you ever had a similar experience with a friend or sibling? Do you think Pip will be able to take care of himself alone? Why or why not?

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- 3) What new information do we have about Pip's gift? Why didn't he reveal it to anyone before? Should Pip tell people about his inability to read faces? Why or why not? Have you ever wrestled with a trait of yours that you weren't sure others might understand or appreciate? What prompted you to share it if you did?
- 4) What is the problem on Raftworld that Pip is here to address? How would you address it? How do you think Pip can help? What adaptations have they already made to deal with the problem thus far? How is the setting on Raftworld unique?
- 5) Why is Pip locked up? Would Pip run away if he could? Why or why not? What happens when Jupiter questions if he is a prisoner?
- 6) Describe Jupiter. What do you think his role will be in the story? How does he pick up where Ren left off? Explain.
- 7) Suddenly there are several illustrations included in the story. Why now, and what is their role in shaping our experience of the story within a story of Venus and the others? Does the inclusion of the images minimize in some way the horror of what was really happening? Why or why not?
- 8) Venus, Swimmer, and Uncle Caesar combine their gifts and lead their people away from the ship. What are you feeling? Relief? Triumph? Something else?
- 9) Reliable estimates suggest that the number of people enslaved in Africa and brought to the Americas by way of the Middle Passage stands at somewhere near 12.5 million (although some estimates range much higher). Does giving Venus, Swimmer, and their people an escape make the fact that 12.5 million were enslaved easier to bear? Or does knowing that 12.5 million people had no escape from slavery or no "crack in the sea" make you feel the horror of slavery more acutely?
- 10) Why does Pip like stories? What is a favorite story of yours that you like to tell, or have told to you? What is it about that story in particular that you find comfort in?
- 11) How do you believe Jupiter's stories will help Pip understand his role on Raftworld? How are they helping the reader understand Pip's role in the story?
- 12) In Jupiter's next part of the story we learn that, "[Venus] knew something they did not: there was no safe place in the world to which they could return." (p. 111) Explain why this would be the case.
- 13) How does Venus ultimately make the decision to travel through the portal? Did she make it alone or with help? What is the portal?
- 14) Describe a time when you, or someone you know well, made a very difficult decision that may have had an impact on others. How was the process similar or different to how Venus made her decision?
- 15) What is the significance of Venus' name? Use evidence from the story.

Chapters 6-10

- 1) Where did the group arrive? Draw a picture that answers the questions: What is the new setting to the story? Who are the significant characters in the picture?
- 2) What did Swimmer learn from the kracken? What role does the kracken play in the story?
- 3) Where is Venus most at peace and why? Where is a place where you are most comfortable in your mind and body?
- 4) Would you have been able to leave the island at this point? Where will they go on the rafts? How do you know?
- 5) Have you ever been in a leadership position and chosen to hand it over to someone else? Why or why not? Was it the right thing to do?
- 6) Where does this story leave Pip and the reader? What is Jupiter suggesting Pip consider? Do you agree with this approach?
- 7) Who is Amelia, and why was it important to share her story with Pip prior to him meeting with the Raft King next? What kind of an impact did Amelia's decision have on the Raft King? How do you imagine it may still be impacting him? Use specific quotes from the chapter to explain your thinking.
- 8) How is the Raft King planning to solve the population problem, and why does this worry Pip and Jupiter? Why would he need to bring others along?
- 9) How did Pip respond to the Raft King's request? What does this reveal about Pip at this moment in the story? Does this represent a shift from earlier? Add any new character traits to your Pip page, using evidence from the story to illustrate your point.
- 10) Have you ever stood up to someone or something in a way that surprised you? How did it make you feel?
- 11) What allowed Pip to arrive at his strategy to involve others in the decision-making process? How was his process similar or different to the choice Venus made?

Discussion Questions: Part 3

Chapters 1-3

- 1) What is your experience as a reader when you read that we are about to go on an "enormous detour"? Where are we going, and what parallels can you draw to other parts of the story just from the cover page?
- 2) Who is the character or characters that this section is going to be primarily focused on? Enter the name(s) of the character(s) on a trait chart and include at least three pieces of evidence to support your claim.

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- 3) On page 146, Thanh tells the reader that he is, “no good at anything except telling stories to himself—which is not a job anyone could make a living at.” Do you agree or disagree with this statement? Make a prediction about how his storytelling might become integral to the larger narrative. What is the irony of this statement in the middle of this book?
- 4) Based on your background knowledge of Vietnam in 1978, where are Thanh, Sang, and the others headed and why? How does the setting impact the story at this moment? Could Sang have cared for her brother alone, given the situation, or did she require Uncle Truc’s help?
- 5) If you were forced to leave everything behind suddenly, but were told that you could bring three books from home or school with you to a “new life,” which books would you choose and why?
- 6) On the day of their departure, Thanh struggles to do two things. What are they? How hard would they be for you in his situation? Was what he did instead important?
- 7) Another picture appears in this section. How does it help to further our understanding of the story? Can you draw any comparisons between the placement of this image in the story and other pictures that have appeared? Explain.
- 8) What happened to Thanh at school, and how did his father react? Would he receive the same treatment today for his actions? Why or why not?
- 9) Why is Sang’s appearance a concern to Uncle Hung? What do they want her to do about it and why? Would you make the changes they want her to make? Why or why not?
- 10) Leaving Vietnam is heartbreaking for them all. How are they all taking a big risk and what does it help you understand about the situation for them in Vietnam? What evidence do you have that it was not safe for them to stay? What evidence do you have that they would not be able to live a full and prosperous life if they remained in Vietnam?
- 11) Imagine that you are huddling in this boat during a bad storm. Describe from your own perspective what you are feeling physically and emotionally about the experience of the storm and the journey itself.
- 12) In chapter three, what does Sang reveal to Thanh that he had never considered before? Describe a time when a sibling or a friend revealed something that was difficult for them that took you completely by surprise. Who do you relate to more in this moment—Thanh or Sang? Why?
- 13) Describe the captain’s interactions in your own words. What was most important about what he shared or did? How does the captain see Sang? How do you feel about this man?
- 14) How does Thanh’s value shift at this moment? Does Thanh see his importance differently now?

Chapters 4-9

- 1) Describe the relationship between Mai and Thanh. Is it a static or shifting one?

- 2) What part of the pirates' attack will have the largest impact on the story of this group? Explain.
- 3) What was it that ultimately caused the pirates to stop when they did? What does this reveal about the larger human experience even in desperately dangerous and violent times?
- 4) Have you ever completely given up in a situation that was desperately hard? Can you relate to Thanh in this moment, or understand why he acted the way he did? What would you have said to him if you were his sister? Did this make Thanh a terrible person?
- 5) In chapter 7, who helps Thanh feel forgiven and able to return to himself? What wisdom does the character share, and do you practice the same thing in your own life?
- 6) Thanh tells a story to the group at a very critical moment in their journey. Why is his choice of story particularly relevant, and what does he learn about himself in the telling? Describe the impact this story had on the others.
- 7) What comparisons can you draw between this extended family's journey and what happens to Venus and her brother? Be specific.
- 8) What is a vortex? What happens when the boat enters it? Explain in your own words how they survive and where they end up.
- 9) Describe Mai's role in this transformative moment. What gift does she discover, and how might it become crucial to the larger story?
- 10) Why does the Kracken appear now? What are you coming to understand about the role of the Kracken? Is it a metaphor for something larger?

Discussion Questions: Part 4

Chapters 1-4

- 1) How has the author captured our attention at the end of chapter 1?
- 2) Do the krackens have a consistent or varied role in the story? Explain with evidence from the story. What character trait would you assign to this one? Why?
- 3) How is this journey like/unlike other journeys central to the story? How is the larger story starting to come together? Or is it?
- 4) What is Kinchen afraid of at the end of chapter 2? What would you do if you were her? Why? Would you trust Caesar?
- 5) Why is Kinchen reluctant to help the Raft King? How is Caesar's perspective different from hers?
- 6) On page 256, we learn more about Caesar's previous family history on Raftworld. Why is Kinchen surprised to learn this about Caesar? Are you? Why or why not? What choice do you think Caesar will make about her next "family"? What will it look like?

- 7) Explain how the residents of Raftworld react to the king's proposal. How does the king react to their decision?
- 8) How is the king's leadership shifting in this section of the story? Is this the sign of a strong or weak leader? Why?

Discussion Questions: Part 5

- 1) Why does this part of the story get its own section entirely?
- 2) Summarize in your own words what the Raft King is seeking and how he might eventually arrive where he is hoping to go. What does his consideration not to force others to join him reveal about his character?
- 3) How did the loss of his adoptive mother impact him overall?

Discussion Questions: Part 6

- 1) Describe the narratorial voice in this story. What is unique about the tone and/or insertion of the narrator in the opening paragraph on page 269? Would you consider the narrator to be a character in the story? Explain.
- 2) How is this part of the book organized differently than all the other parts? What function do the stories within the story have on your overall experience as a reader?
- 3) On page 271, two guards explore with Jupiter the possibility that looking for Africa is both a metaphor and real. Does this idea echo larger metaphors of "the journey" in the story as a whole?
- 4) Pip struggles to find an opportunity to speak, but when he does, what he says is critical to the story and to the people of Raftworld. What did he reveal that might allow for "everything to come together"?
- 5) Pip and Kinchen's relationship reaches a new understanding in chapter 1. How did it come about, and which of the two characters do you relate to more? Are they both evolving into a new understanding of themselves and each other?
- 6) What is Pip worried the Raft King might do with this new knowledge? Do you share his fear? Why or why not?
- 7) In your own words, tell us what happens in chapters 2 and 3.
- 8) Why is Thanh's telling of Amelia Earhart's story as important to the Raft King as it is to Thanh himself?
- 9) Jupiter takes on a critical role to Thanh in chapter 4. What is it, and how does it connect to other characters in the story? How does Jupiter facilitate Thanh's fuller arrival into his own gifts? How is Sang also on a personal journey of self discovery in this chapter? Which of the two characters do you relate to more?

- 10) How would you summarize Putnam's character and his thinking about his own journey at the end of chapter 5? Why is he referred to as Putnam and not "Raft King" in the chapter's title?
- 11) What is Mai worried about at the end of chapter 6? How is the encounter forcing the characters to see each other and themselves differently? Can you recall an event when you were called to push yourself to try something difficult for you, and it was worth it?
- 12) As the action speeds up toward the end of the story, the characters make many important discoveries, and connections are made between characters. Pick either Mai or Caesar to explore at this moment, in terms of how they have changed since you first encountered them.
- 13) By the end of Part 6, has the narrator's suggestion that "Everything Comes Together, We Hope" been realized? What has or has not come together? What prediction can you make for the remaining parts of the book? Use evidence to support your thinking.

Discussion Questions: Part 7

- 1) Both Thanh and the Kracken have to choose who they will stay with and what world they will remain in. Can you relate to either Thanh or the Kracken's experience of loss at this moment? Have you ever had to say goodbye to a dear friend for what you thought would be forever? Explain.
- 2) Talk about the Kracken's position between the two worlds as a metaphor. What is the role that the Kracken plays in this story at this moment?
- 3) Find the passages on page 326 and 331 where Pip makes two significant discoveries about himself, and put into your own words how Pip sees himself differently now. How can you connect to his thinking about "needing" to hide? Is there any part of yourself that you used to hide from others until you realized it was an important part of you, too?
- 4) How does the Raft King make it clear in chapter 2 that he, too, has indeed changed? At what moment does he make that clear to us? Explain.
- 5) Jupiter disagrees with Kinchen about her lack of a magical special gift. What does she claim that she has instead? Do you see yourself as more like Pip, Jupiter, or Kinchen? Explain.
- 6) What is the significance of the Kracken's name she gave herself? What could her new name mean for the future of Raftworld?

Discussion Questions: Part 8

- 1) What is the intention of the narrator saying, "this is all her story"? Could Venus be considered the ancestor of everyone in the second world (even though she is not biologically related to each of them)? How far can you go back in your biological or adopted family to identify the one person who affected where and how you live?

Discussion Questions: Part 9

- 1) Why is it important to the novel to close with Venus's story?
- 2) What does Venus fear will happen if she stops moving? If she stands still? Can you relate to this? Are you someone who is always on the go? Always trying to do the right thing? The next thing?
- 3) Consider the time in which this part of the story takes place. Why is the ceremony of the exchange necessary for Venus to participate in? Does the language of the ceremony still seem important or necessary today? Why or why not?
- 4) What is significant about the leadership configuration on the island? What does it make Venus question about herself? Does working on a project with someone whose style is very different from our own make it harder or easier or both? Explain.
- 5) Explain the importance of the statue in Venus' later life, and the importance of her in the statue's life. Did the statue's identity take you by surprise? How does it bring part of the story full circle? What does it mean that Venus has "forgiven" him? Does this amount to one being forgiven for participating in the slave trade? Is that possible?
- 6) How is the depiction of Venus's death significant to the story? What does it reveal about the relationship of the Kracken to the story?

Discussion Questions: Afterword and Beyond

- 1) What does the afterword reveal about the author's writing process? About her choice to write this book?
- 2) How is the *Zong* slave ship central to the story from her point of view? Why did she choose to incorporate such a complicated and horrific story into her own? Why is the telling of this story today so important and necessary according to her? Do you agree?
- 3) Now that you know that the *Zong* incident was real, how do you feel about the author offering a "friendly portal" to escort the victims into "another world"? Do you think the author offering an escape for the *Zong* victims in her fiction makes you feel more deeply for the victims of the real incident? Or does it let you feel more comfortable about that loss? Are there ethical considerations for using the deaths of real people to tell a fictional story?
- 4) Did reading this book make you experience the slave trade differently? Do you want to know more? As an American, do you have a responsibility to learn more about the 12.5 million people who were enslaved? Is their history a part of your history? Why or why not?

- 5) Had you heard of the Vietnamese “Boat People” before you started to study this book? Are you curious to know real stories of why families left everything behind and risked their lives at sea for a better future?
- 6) Can you make connections between the story of Thanh and his extended family and the news reports about refugees that have been crossing the Mediterranean Sea from Syria and other countries in the past few years? Do you have a better feeling for what it must be like to be in one of those boats? If you could give those families “a crack in the sea,” would you? Or do you feel like we should be able to help them here in the “first world”?
- 7) Where does the intersection of real history and fantasy occur most prominently in the larger story? In your own words, why does the author claim she struggled with this blending of the two? Look back at page 50. How does Ren’s assertion that, “just because it’s a story doesn’t mean it isn’t real” connect here?
- 8) What is the purpose of fantasy as a genre according to Bouwman? Do you agree? Are there other genres and art forms that address the same need? Explain.
- 9) Does the Afterword impact your thinking about the whole story? What would you say is the most important message the author would like you to take away from the story? Is there only one?
- 10) What is an allegory and how does it play a role in this story?
- 11) How many different ways is leadership depicted in this story? Pick one or two to discuss. What message is the author trying to convey about leadership styles?
- 12) Do the sibling pairs in the story remind you of each other? How?
- 13) Is the depiction of the harmonious multiracial community in the second world a believable one? Could you ever see our world being that way? Why or why not? What would need to happen for us to move toward a world like that?
- 14) Is there a dominant configuration of a “family” in this book? How is it similar or dissimilar to your own understanding of family? What roles do adoption and chosen family play in all of the character’s stories?
- 15) Pick a character to describe in terms of a shift or journey, and create a visual representation to depict the journey like a timeline or map.
- 16) The Kracken describes Thanh’s loss as “deep” and empathizes with him. Talk about the theme of loss in the story, and how it may or may not relate to water.
- 17) Draw a map of the two worlds and how they relate to each other. Place the various characters on the map in a way that illustrates their travels between the worlds. Be sure to include the krakens, the portals, and as many details that complete the setting as you know.
- 18) Consider the final two paragraphs of the Author’s Note (p. 356). If there is no “crack in the sea” for the people forced to take the Middle Passage or for refugees lost at sea, what is our responsibility as readers and global citizens to make this world better? What do you want to change? How can you start to make that happen?

About This Guide

This guide was co-produced by educator Catherine Maryse Anderson and Kirsten Cappy of Curious City. Find more guides like this at CuriousCityDPW.com.

Catherine Maryse Anderson has an extensive 15-year background as a public school literacy and humanities teacher in Portland, Maine. She spent two years as a literacy coach for Portland Public Schools and led statewide symposiums on building educator capacity for cross-cultural competency in the classroom from early childcare through college. She was a runner up for the *Teaching Tolerance Educator of the Year*. Catherine has been involved in ongoing performing arts projects for twenty years and is a published poet and essayist.

Kirsten Cappy is the owner of Curious City, a company that creates tools that invite readers to engage more deeply with the books they read through play, conversation, and social action. Those tools are available free to literacy professionals at CuriousCityDPW.com. Using her degree in Anthropology and her 25-year career of using books in early childhood, library, bookstore, and school settings, Kirsten believes deeply in using children's literature to create a more curious and empathetic culture. She is also the co-founder of I'm Your Neighbor, a website (www.ImYourNeighborBooks.org) and movement to connect long-term citizens with the immigrant community through immigrant fiction, and The Empathy Drive (www.EmpathyDrive.org), a project to draw attention to the power of diverse children's books and to fundraise for diverse book collections in national schools.