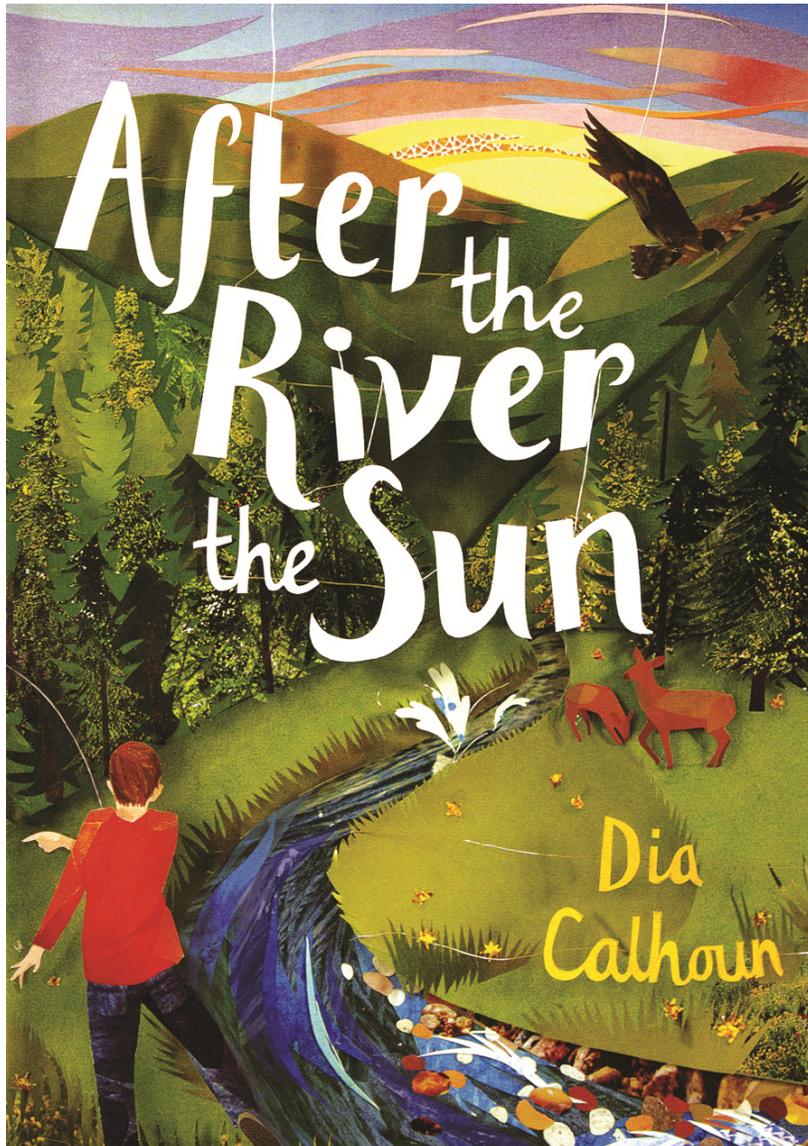




AFTER THE RIVER THE SUN

by Dia Calhoun

CLASSROOM GUIDE / READING GROUP GUIDE





INTRODUCTION

A quest and an adventure tale combine with a story of friendship, family, and loss in *After the River the Sun* by Dia Calhoun.

When Eckhart Lyon's parents are killed in a river-rafting accident, the twelve-year-old's world suddenly disappears. Everyone he loved is gone, along with everything that was good and joyful in his life—replaced by grief, fear, and uncertainty. He holds tight to a few objects—symbols of how things used to be: his mother's violin, his Nintendo 3DS, his favorite game *The Green Knight*, and his well-worn copy of *The Boy's King Arthur*.

Since the accident, Eckhart has been in foster homes in the city, but none of them were right. Now his uncle, who lives on an orchard in the country, offers to take Eckhart in on a trial basis. But Eckhart doesn't know his uncle Al—only some stories his mother told him. And what kind of trial does Uncle Al have in mind? The knights whom Eckhart so admires face tests and trials all the time, but they know exactly what they have to accomplish. Eckhart's in the dark and alone. And longing for a real home.

Told lyrically, in blank verse, the novel offers a wide range of learning opportunities for fourth through eighth graders. Further, because it explores several themes, it provides opportunities for your students to respond personally and benefit from discussions with their peers. To take full advantage of both, this guide is in two parts: the first is a classroom tool for teachers to use with *After the River the Sun* to extend curriculum in Language Arts, Reading, Writing, Oral Performance, Music, and Art; the second is a reading group guide to enable students to hold their own discussions of ideas and themes presented in the novel. Of course, you should feel free to mix these up as best fits your class.

In addition to curriculum tie-ins, we have provided connections to Common Core State Standards for the activities included here. These are noted with each activity or discussion starter, and they are fully defined at the end of the guide.

CLASSROOM GUIDE

Reading

[Page 6]

We first meet Eckhart while he is on a Greyhound bus on his way to his uncle Albert's orchard. Eckhart remembers the social worker telling him: "*Your uncle is only taking you on trial. So behave, be polite, and do what he says. Otherwise you'll be right back in foster care.*"



This warning, coming early in the novel, raises questions for readers. Have your students develop a list of these questions. (Some might want to guess at the answers.) Then, as they are reading, they should collect the bits and pieces of the background story as the author reveals them, and build their full understanding of the whole picture. Students' lists should be specific, including the details for each "clue" they include.

RL 6.4; SL 6.1; W 6.1, 6.3

Language Arts; Reading

Each student should contribute to a classroom chart (like the one below) of descriptors for the three main characters in the novel: Eckhart, Eva, and Uncle Al. (You might want to include Lily, too.)

Characterizations in *After the River the Sun*

Name	Character Trait	Specific Actions or Descriptions	Importance
Eckhart			
Eva			
Uncle Al			
(Lily)			

RL 6.3

Reading

[Page 19]

"Eckhart had read/that turtles liked to bask in the sun./This one might die from the cold ... /A knight would rescue it." Eckhart looks at challenges that come his way through the lens of the



knights he wishes to emulate, especially Sir Gawain. Like those knights, he is on several different quests throughout the novel.

Discuss with the class Eckhart's many quests. For each one, have students identify the goal, his method for achieving it, and the ultimate resolution. Be sure to include the following and go as far beyond this list as your class takes you:

- The quest for home
- The quest to win the game of *The Green Knight*
- The quest for courage
- The task of clearing, then replanting, the orchard
- The quest to atone for his parents' deaths

Which other characters have quests (or goals)? Have the class name them and talk about how they go about achieving their goals.

RL 6.1, 6.2, 6.3; SL 6.1

Language Arts: Writing

[Page 32]

When Eckhart first arrives at Sunrise Orchard, "... *the first thing he saw/was yet another river.../It looked cold,/surging over boulders,/the water swirling and eddying,/relentless in its rush/to some other place.*"

Your students will find many references to and descriptions of rivers in *After the River the Sun*. When seen or heard through Eckhart, rivers are hostile, dangerous, hateful. But most of us think of rivers as beautiful and wonderful sources of recreation. Ask each student to write a one-page description of a river they know (or have read about or seen in a movie or on television). You can specify a format or allow each student to select his or her own. The students should read their pieces aloud, and you can display them on the wall of your classroom or in the hallway, along a river your students create.

RL 6.4; SL 6.1; W 6.1, 6.3

Language Arts: Poetry

Explore the beauty in the telling of *After the River the Sun* with your class. Start by asking why your class thinks Dia Calhoun decided to tell the story in blank verse rather than in prose. Pick sections and have the students read them as they are written and then as if they were written in straight prose. (One good example is the description of Eckhart climbing to Heaven's Gate Mountain, beginning on page 289.) How does the format enhance the meaning and the feeling of the words? You might also have the students change some of the text from blank verse to prose to see how that changes the meaning/impact of the text.



Students should identify poetic techniques in the text. Have them look for similes (page 93: “*she lifted her bow like a wand of light...*”); metaphors (page 169: *Golden sun daisies ... turned the wheat flat to a field of gold,*”); onomatopoeia (page 109: “*the ever present roar of the river...*”); alliteration (page 292: “*In a blur of hoof and hide and horn,/the three bucks sprang away*); descriptive language (page 108: “*... the stubborn stump wrenched/from the ground./The roots,/pulled from the darkness,/scrabbled in the air and light.*”); and symbols (page 243: “*Then a bird called,/and he looked up.*”).

Have each student pick an aspect of nature—a tree, the rain, a field of flowers, a bird, etc.—and then describe it using each of the poetry conventions listed above. Have them talk about how changing the technique changes the description of the object or phenomenon.

In addition to the metaphors and symbols used in the language of the text, there are others used in broader contexts. For example, discuss what the crate and Lily’s chair represent beyond a place for Eckhart to sit; talk about the meaning of the pearls—those Lily gave to Eva, those Eckhart discovers in his game, and the one Eva gives to Eckhart; what is the larger implication when Eckhart picks up the hatchet and chops out a piece of kindling? Find other symbols and discuss them.

RL 6.4, 6.5, 6.7; W 6.1

Music

[Page 94]

Music was important to Eckhart’s mother, and it remains important to him. Several pieces of classical music are referred to in the novel. One is Bach’s Chaconne from his Partita in D minor. Eckhart likes “*the crashing chords,/the bright wildness,/the defiance/that made him feel/as though he would never be defeated.*” Play the Chaconne for your class. You can hear a performance of the Partita in D minor and the Chaconne by Itzhak Perlman on YouTube at: www.youtube.com/watch?v=KpYUaRq0aDw

Why do your students think Dia Calhoun selected the Chaconne for her book? What do they think of it? What emotions does it evoke? You might want to invite the music teacher at your school to the class to talk about the music and help your students hear what Eckhart hears in it.

RL 6.6; SL 6.1

Gaming; Performance

Just as gaming is an important part of many of your students’ lives, so too, is it for Eckhart. He often retreats to the world of his favorite game, *The Green Knight*. Divide the class into game-creating teams of three or four students. Dia Calhoun provides enough details about the game for them to pick up those threads and create their own versions as a board game or in a live-action role-playing skit. Each team has the freedom to add details as they wish, but they must



be true to the facts of the game provided in the novel. The teams should present their take on *The Green Knight* to the full class.

RL 6.7

Language Arts: Oral Performance; Reading; Poetry

Have a group of your students (nine would work well here) read aloud chapters of the novel and explore the rhythms, language, poetic conventions, and meaning in their stanzas. Two chapters that work well are Chapter 22 and Chapter 26. Individual students should prepare one stanza, and when the entire group puts it together, all should read the single-line stanzas aloud in unison. When the students are ready, they should perform their chapters for the full class and be ready to answer questions other students may ask about the form and the content.

Art

Your artistic students should work together to create replicas of the Chapel Perilous and/or the Tower of Troth. They should study the descriptions Dia Calhoun provides and base their structures on those. The group should reveal their work to the full class and discuss their architectural choices.

RL 6.4; SL 6.1

READING GROUP GUIDE

After the River the Sun explores many themes that invite discussion, and your reading group is a great place to talk about them and understand more about the book, about its ideas, and about your own lives. The questions here are meant to jump-starts your discussions.

FRIENDSHIP

Dia Calhoun offers us many ways to think about and talk about friendship.

[Page 103]

When Eckhart and Eva first meet, he tells her: *“I’ve read everything/I can find about the Round Table.”* *“Me, too!” [Eva] cried.* Eckhart and Eva have many things in common, and these form the foundation of their friendship. How about you and your friends? Talk about the things you have in common as well as your differences. Do you believe having things you share is the best way to build a friendship? Why or why not?

[Page 147] Eckhart confides in Eva: *“I want to prove . . .” he began./“I mean, I want to be courageous./To prove I’m not a coward.”* How does Eva respond to this? How does her



reaction make Eckhart feel? Discuss times in your own life when you trusted a friend with a secret. How did they respond? Did the response help you? How? How have you reacted when a friend trusted you with a secret?

[Page 148]

Eva advises Eckhart: “... *before you can set out, you must face your fears.*” Does this advice serve Eckhart well? Eva also suggests that Eckhart give his uncle a contract to guide their relationship. How did this turn out? Have you ever followed a friend’s advice? Did it turn out well or badly? Do you offer your friends advice? Talk about instances when you have.

There’s a perpetual discussion about whether or not males and females can truly be friends? Where do you stand on this question?

RL 6.2; SL 6.1, 6.3

HOME

Eckhart longs for a home. He tells us why all the places he’s lived since his parents’ deaths could never be “home.” Discuss what your group thinks Eckhart is looking for in a home. Then talk about what “home” means to you.

RL 6.2; SL 6.1, 6.3

LOSS, GRIEF, GUILT

Both Eckhart and Uncle Al have lost the people they loved most, and both of them feel that they should have—could have—prevented the deaths. Does your group think they really could have done anything to change the outcomes? Have any of the members of your book group lost someone close to them? Can they talk about their feelings? Have you read other books where people die? How true to the experience do you think Eckhart’s and Al’s responses are? What have you learned about ways to comfort people when they suffer such loss?

RL 6.2; SL 6.1, 6.3

MEMORIES

Memories play a large part in the story and in understanding the characters in the novel. Sometimes the memories are sad, sometimes happy, often a mix. Each member of your book group should share a memory. In addition to telling about the event or person, they should explain why the memory is important to them, how it has helped to define them as a person.

RL 6.2, 6.7; SL 6.1



AFTER THE RIVER THE SUN

The group should discuss the title of the book. What do you think it means? Does it offer a hopeful or bleak message? What do the members of your book group think about the novel? Would they recommend it to friends? Why or why not?

RL 6.1, 6.3; SL 6.1, 6.3, 6.4

This guide was created by Clifford Wohl, Educational Consultant

Grade 6 Common Core State Standards

Key: RL – Reading Literature; SL – Speaking and Listening; W - Writing

RL 6.1: Cite textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.

RL 6.2: Determine a theme or central idea of a text and how it is conveyed through particular details; provide a summary of the text distinct from personal opinions or judgments.

RL 6.3: Describe how a particular story's or drama's plot unfolds in a series of episodes as well as how the characters respond or change as the plot moves toward a resolution.

RL 6.4: Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the impact of a specific word choice on meaning and tone

RL 6.5: Analyze how a particular sentence, chapter, scene, or stanza fits into the overall structure of a text and contributes to the development of the theme, setting, or plot.

RI 6.7: Integrate information presented in different media or formats (e.g., visually, quantitatively) as well as in words to develop a coherent understanding of a topic or issue.

RL 6.9: Compare and contrast texts in different forms or genres (e.g., stories and poems; historical novels and fantasy stories) in terms of their approaches to similar themes and topics.

SL6.1: Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grade 6 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly.

SL6.3: Delineate a speaker's argument and specific claims, distinguishing claims that are supported by reasons and evidence from claims that are not.



W 6.1: Write arguments to support claims with clear reasons and relevant evidence.

W 6.3: Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, relevant descriptive details, and well-structured event sequences.