

A Curriculum Guide to

The Milk of Birds

By Sylvia Whitman

About the Book

Nawra and K. C. come from two different worlds. Oceans apart and from two very different cultures, the girls find themselves helping one another overcome their individual struggles. Nawra lives in an IDP (Internally Displaced Persons/People) camp in Sudan while K. C. lives in the suburbs of Richmond, Virginia. Despite their very different upbringings, they are similar in many ways. These similarities weave together a story of two courageous girls learning that sisterhood can be a powerful tool in healing the wounds of even the most harrowing of pasts. They also discover that even in today's tech-savvy world, the power of letters can still bring knowledge, friendship, and love into people's hearts miles away.

Prereading Activities

1. Have students research Sudan and/or Darfur with a partner. The author mentions some great organizations and websites for research in the back of the book (see: A Note from the Author) that students can use for reference. Have students write a short objective summary about the conflict in Sudan and/or Darfur. What caused the conflict? Who are the parties involved and why are they fighting? What is the international community doing to help resolve the conflict? Have students also create a map of where Sudan is located in Africa. Students should then present their findings to the class.
2. Educators, show students a short video clip on the conflict in Sudan and/or Darfur (UNICEF, CNN, and Enough Project all have great video clips on their websites) in order to increase the students' knowledge before reading the novel. Then hold a class discussion so students can express their own ideas or summarize what they observed. Students can also generate their own questions and do Internet research to find the answers.
3. If there is time for a longer video, try watching the following documentaries to increase background knowledge: *The Devil Came on Horseback* (2007), directed by Ricki Stern and Anne Sundberg and/or *Sand and Sorrow* (2007), directed by Paul Freedman. Please make sure you view them yourself before showing them in class to make sure they are age-appropriate and pertinent to your lesson plan.

Discussion Questions & Activities

The following questions contained in this section particularly address the Common Core State Standards: RL.11-12.1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7

1. Who is Nawra? Who is K. C.? Where does each girl live? Explain how each girl's living situation informs her personality. How do the setting and environment shape these characters?

2. How much time passes between Nawra's first letter to K. C. and the first letter she receives in response? How does the passing of time affect Nawra? How does it affect K. C.?
3. K. C. and Nawra both have strong personalities. Describe how each girl is strong-minded in the story. Explore different aspects of their personalities. What else do they have in common? How do they differ? Use examples from the text to support your description.
4. How is Adeeba's relationship with Nawra similar to Emily's relationship with K. C.? Explain a situation that happens between Nawra and Adeeba that parallels a situation between K. C. and Emily.
5. Analyze what is important to Nawra versus what is important to K. C. Construct a list of Nawra's daily activities based on what you have read in the story. Try to rank them from most important to least important. How much time does she spend doing each activity? Construct a similar list for K. C. with her daily activities.
6. Examine how the book is organized. Why do you think the author chose to structure the text this way? How does the text structure contribute to the story?
7. At the beginning of the story, Nawra only hints at what happened to her mother and the rest of the family. What effect does this have on the novel? Why do you think the author chose to leave out the details until later?
8. What sign does K. C. choose to end her letters with? Why does she choose this sign? How is the sign symbolic of K. C.? Use quotations from the text to support your answer.
9. What role does religion play in the novel? What religion is Nawra? How does religion affect her life? How does religion affect K. C.'s life?
10. What is the meaning of the following words: *saida*, *khawaja*, *Janjaweed*, *haboob*, *assida*, and the *Qur'an*? What words or phrases helped you to figure out the meaning of each word?
11. Consider female circumcision from Nawra's point of view. Why do females get circumcised? How do tradition and customs help shape her family's view of female circumcision? How does Adeeba's family view circumcision? How do K. C. and her American friends react to Nawra's circumcision?
12. Throughout the novel, marriage is explored by two different cultures. Compare and contrast how marriage is viewed in Nawra's culture, and in American culture. How do some men from the village, IDP camp, and Sudan view women?
13. Who are Zeinab and Hassan? What is their relationship to Nawra? What is their relationship with Adeeba? How do family values and women's roles (both in society and in the home) contribute to the themes of the novel?

14. Death is present throughout the novel. Reviewing the text, identify three children who passed away and explain the cause of death for each. What is the tone of the story? How does the loss of children contribute to this tone?

15. Women play an important role in the novel, especially mothers. Explain the relationship between K. C., Nawra, Adeeba, and Emily and their mothers. How does the author use the mothers' interactions with their daughters to add drama to the story?

16. K. C. mentions that the "handwriting is such a pain to read" in the letters she receives. What does Adeeba have to go through to read and write her letters? What does K. C. have to do to write her letters?

17. Nawra uses figurative language when she says, "There is no tree that is not moved by the wind." What figurative language device is she using? What does she mean? Which words and/or phrases help the reader to figure it out?

18. Examine the author's use of words for each character, especially Nawra's use of proverbs/sayings. How does the author lend authenticity to the voices of Nawra and K. C. throughout the letters? How does their writing in the letters differ? Why does the author choose to change the style of the writing for each girl?

19. How does the author develop K. C.'s character throughout the novel? How does her relationship with Nawra help to propel her character?

20. In October 2008, Emily and K. C. get into a fight. What is the fight about? What does this say about Emily's friendship with K. C.? One of Nawra's sayings is "Listen to the advice of someone whose advice makes you cry, not to the one whose advice makes you laugh." How is Nawra's saying representative of Emily and K. C.'s fight?

21. What is Muhammad's nickname? What does this nickname mean? Who gives him the nickname? How is the nickname symbolic for Nawra's mom and her struggles to heal the wounds of her past?

22. Nawra writes, "There will be scars no one can see." Interpret what she means by this. What "scars" is she alluding to? Besides physical scars caused by wounds, what other scars may form?

23. In October, Adeeba and Zeinab are late for dinner one night. Why were they late? What happened to Zeinab's butterfly hair ties?

24. Adeeba asks the doctors in the IDP camp about the wasting disease. What is the wasting disease? What do some people think will cure the wasting disease? How is the power of knowledge incorporated into the novel, especially in this scene of Adeeba and Zeinab at the doctors' tent/station/office?

25. Why does Nawra finally tell Adeeba the story of her past? How does Nawra's story help to heal Adeeba? What does the interaction between the two girls say about their friendship? How does this scene support a theme in the novel?
26. The author tells Nawra's whole story in small portions. Why does the author do this? Connect the portions of the story together to create a time line of the events of Nawra's life.
27. How does K. C.'s character mature over the course of the novel? How do the other characters in the novel help to advance her maturity and growth? What makes K. C. a more likable character toward the end of the story?
28. What do K. C. and the Darfur Club decide to do after they have found out about Nawra's struggles? How do their actions advance the plot toward a resolution for the story?
29. Explore two or more universal themes that appear throughout the novel. What aspects of the novel help to develop these themes? Which characters, scenes, settings, and/or word choices best support the themes?
30. What does the title, *The Milk of Birds*, mean? Why did the author choose this title? How does the title contribute to the central idea of the novel?
31. Compare and contrast the tragedy Nawra's family and village endured to the masterpiece painting by Peter Paul Rubens, *The Massacre of the Innocents*. What is emphasized in the painting? What is absent from the painting that occurred in Nawra's tragedy? Use specific examples from the novel and the painting to support your analysis.

Postreading Activities

1. In groups of three to four, have the students craft letters from K. C.'s and Nawra's perspectives. Imagine ten years have passed and Nawra and K. C. have stayed in touch through the years via letters. What would the letters say? What became of the rest of the characters in the book? Have students try to make the character voices come through the writing in the most authentic way possible.
2. Have students work with a partner to construct a kite as the Darfur Club built in the novel. Have students pick their favorite saying from the book and write it on the kite.
3. Have students read the author's note to find an organization they would like to support. Have students research the organization.

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