



The Good Braider by Terry Farish: Discussion Guide with Questions

The Good Braider is a novel set in South Sudan and Portland, Maine. The story of a teen and her family's experience of flight from war in Juba, Sudan, travel to Cairo, and finally to Portland will help students and book club members to understand more about Sudan's long war, the experience of contemporary refugees, and the resilience of the human spirit. *The Good Braider* is a young adult novel that has received critical acclaim and named an *SLJ* Best Book of 2012. It has also been adopted by college classes and book clubs. The questions below were created by Cathy Eaton's Contemporary Fiction class at the New Hampshire Technical Institute and members of the Main Street Congregational Church book club in Amesbury, MA.

Characters in the novel:

Viola, a seventeen-year old Sudanese American
Tereza, her mother
Francis, Viola's little brother
Habuba, Viola's grandmother
Gwendolyn, friend and neighbor in Juba
Lokolumbe, Viola's friend in Cairo
Jackie, Viola's cousin who she meets again in Portland
Poni, Viola's friend in Portland
Lado, A South Sudanese friend who works at a Portland African restaurant
Mrs. Mejía, Viola's ELL teacher
Andrew, Viola's fisherman friend who teaches her to drive

Historical note:

The novel opens in Juba, in southern Sudan in 1999 during the decades-long war between the north and south of the country. The story is fiction, but set in the political context of the war. Viola and her family are southern Sudanese. People of southern Sudan identify with African cultures and practice tribal faiths and Christianity. The people of northern Sudan are predominantly Muslim and identify with Arab cultures. These two regions of Sudan have been at war for more than fifty years. Two million people of the South were killed in the wars that the International Criminal Court identifies as genocide. The ICC issued a warrant of arrest for President of Sudan Omar al-Bashir for atrocities against the people of southern Sudan and the western region of Darfur. In 2005, al-Bashir and southern Sudanese rebel leader, John Garang, signed the Comprehensive Peace Accord bringing an end to direct conflict in the south. In 2011, South Sudan became an independent nation with Juba as the capital city. *The Good Braider* concludes in Portland, before the Peace Accord of 2005 is signed.

Discussion Questions about *The Good Braider*

1. Why is the novel called *The Good Braider*?
2. "All men in Sudan will want to marry you," Viola's mother tells her in Part I of the novel. "You are a girl from Juba." (p. 19) What do these lines tell you about Viola? How would you describe her relationship with her mother while they live in Sudan?
3. *The Good Braider* is written in free verse. How does the choice of this style affect you and your understanding of Viola's story?
4. Why are the chapters broken up like journal entries or tiny chapters? What do you think the author's intention is?
5. Elephants are mentioned frequently throughout the story. They are also used to divide the book into three parts. What is the significance of elephants to the story?
6. What does Viola mean when she says in Cairo that her hair is broken? (p. 81)
7. The poet Naomi Shihab Nye wrote about the main character, Viola: "You will never again encounter a refugee from anywhere without remembering Viola and her family." Do you see similarities across cultures and time periods in a refugee's journey to make a new country their home?
8. How do you interpret the mother's act of punishment when she and Viola live in Portland?
9. Do you see parallels between Viola's relationship with her mother and U.S. teens with their parents?
10. Why did the author write from Viola's point of view? Would it have worked if she had written from third person or from the mother's point of view?
11. Why would Viola's mother allow her to spend so much time with Lokolumbe but not Andrew?
12. Did you get a sense of the role that food plays in Sudanese culture?
13. What surprised you about Viola's experience once she comes to Portland?
14. How can readers reach out and connect with the refugee community? Are there volunteer or job opportunities for students and community members working with refugees?
15. How do you see the role of women in Sudan, and later of South Sudanese women in Portland? Do you think Viola's life as a woman would be different in the U.S than it would have been in South Sudan?

16. Some scholars such as Eric Reeves of Smith College and journalists such as Nicholas Kristoff of the *New York Times* build a strong case for the responsibility of the U.S. to intervene to protect the people Sudan and South Sudan from continuing aerial bombardments and atrocities from the Sudan Armed Forces. How do you see the U.S. role in Sudan?
17. The novel refers to a poem by Ho Xuan Huong, a Vietnamese Buddhist, with the lines, "Nirvana is here nine times out of ten." Do you have an idea about why Mrs. Mejía gives Viola the poem and later Andrew reminds her once more of the lines of the poem?

Current situation in the Sudans:

Even though South Sudan exists as an independent nation, Sudan Armed Forces atrocities continue against civilians and humanitarian workers. Eric Reeves, a professor at Smith College, has documented the wars in Sudan since 2002 on his site, Sudanreeves.org. Reeves writes in 2012, "The Sudan Armed Forces have continued their aerial onslaught against civilians in Darfur and various border regions of northern Sudan at the direction of the National Islamic Front/National Congress Party regime in Khartoum [capital of Sudan]."

Reeves describes the current bombing in states near the South Sudan/Sudan border. These states include Blue Nile and Kordofan.

He writes, "Those fleeing the bombing attacks in Blue Nile and South Kordofan are now arriving in [refugee camps in] Upper Nile and Unity State at a rate of 4,000 per day, according to Doctors Without Borders/Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) (BBC, June 2, 2012). <http://www.sudanreeves.org>

Selected Resources for learning about Sudan:

<http://goodbraider.com/researching-south-sudan/>

<http://www.internal-displacement.org/countries/sudan>



The Shadow of the Sun by Ryszard Kapuscinski, tr. by Klara Glowczewska, Vintage Books, 2001.

Hungry Planet: What the World Eats by Peter Menzel and Faith D'Aluisia, Material World Books, 2007.

Hair in African Art and Culture, ed. by Roy Seiber, Niangi Batulukisi, and Frank Herreman, The Museum of African Art, 2000.

Me Against My Brother by Scott Peterson, Routledge, 2001.

