

Writing to Understand

Inspired by Novels on Cultures in Conflict

terry farish



THINKING *The Good Braider*, a novel in verse, by Terry Farish and two questions to think about commonality

- Viola, from South Sudan, invites Andrew to her apartment in the US, and realizes that her house is very "African" (pages 130-132). Look around your home. Are there things that have been passed down or saved from your family or a former country?
- *"I am not doing well. I am not American. Or Sudanese. I am not in Sudan and not really in Maine. Or maybe I'm in both at the same time. I'm in some place I'm making up."* Viola is caught between two cultures and countries. She is pulled between her loyalty to her mother and South Sudan and her need to survive in her new home in the US. Have you ever felt pulled strongly in two different directions?

MIRROR WRITING

Write the next chapter of Viola's life, or write a new verse in response to a verse of your choice in the novel in order to enter the story in your own imagination.

READER'S THEATER

Another novel in verse, *Karma* by Cathy Ostlere, is set during a major crisis between Sikhs and Hindus in India. Maya is straddling two cultures in the midst of the bloodshed. Perform a reader's theatre with a boy and a girl, reading "Chai," one of the verses in the novel, as a way to better imagine the society, and Maya's entry to it.

JOURNALING

Walt Whitman: Words for America by Barbara Kerley and Brian Selznick
"Of every hue and cast am I..." Observing and writing our everyday world. Write in your journal for one week as a witness to a conflict or event. Collect specific details.

ART

In *The Red Pencil* by Andrea Davis Pinkney, set in Darfur, a child creates portraits of those she loves. Through her art she tries to make sense of her world. Make a drawing that shows a symbol or scene from one of your journal entries or responds to a scene you are reading.

WRITING IN VERSE OR PROSE

Write a poem, essay, or story drawing on writings and the journal you have kept about a conflict, social concern, or other subject you have brought into focus with your attention.

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Lines from Verse Novels Involving Cultures in Conflict

Inspirations for Thinking, Free Writes, Exploring

Verse novels offer “the weight of each word, the weight of the sentence, the weight of the line, the weight of white space, heightened attention to sound, and deep allegiance to silence.” Rita Dove

"Vamonos!"

Al perro!" Papi says
After *huevos con papas* breakfast
with tortillas as big as the moon.

Downtown Boy Juan Felipe Herrera, p. 85

Whoever invented English
should be bitten
by a snake.

Inside Out & Back Again, Thanhha Lai, p. 128

Mambí birdcalls, a stream, tall reeds, the song
of a waterfall, my own tumbling, exhausted,
singing wild hopes.

Surrender Tree by Margarita Engle

If you can't find a welcome mat
when you arrive,
put one out for yourself.

Something About America, Maria Testa p. 81

Sometimes, fear
is the most powerful
weapon.

Lightning Dreamers, Margarita Engle p.121

I can speak three languages.
English. Hindi. Punjabi.
(And sometimes French.)
But who am I?

Karma, Cathy Oslere, p. 390

"Did you sleep?" Habuba asks.
I nod yes.
"Did you dream?"
I still feel the rhythm. "I remember an elephant," I say.
"That is a good dream," she says.
"Who follows the elephant will have no problems.
They know how to make a path through the forest."

The Good Braider, Terry Farish p. 39

When the *Hindenburg* caught fire
and fell out of the sky,
I saw the pictures
in the paper.

Eddie's War, Carol Fisher Saller