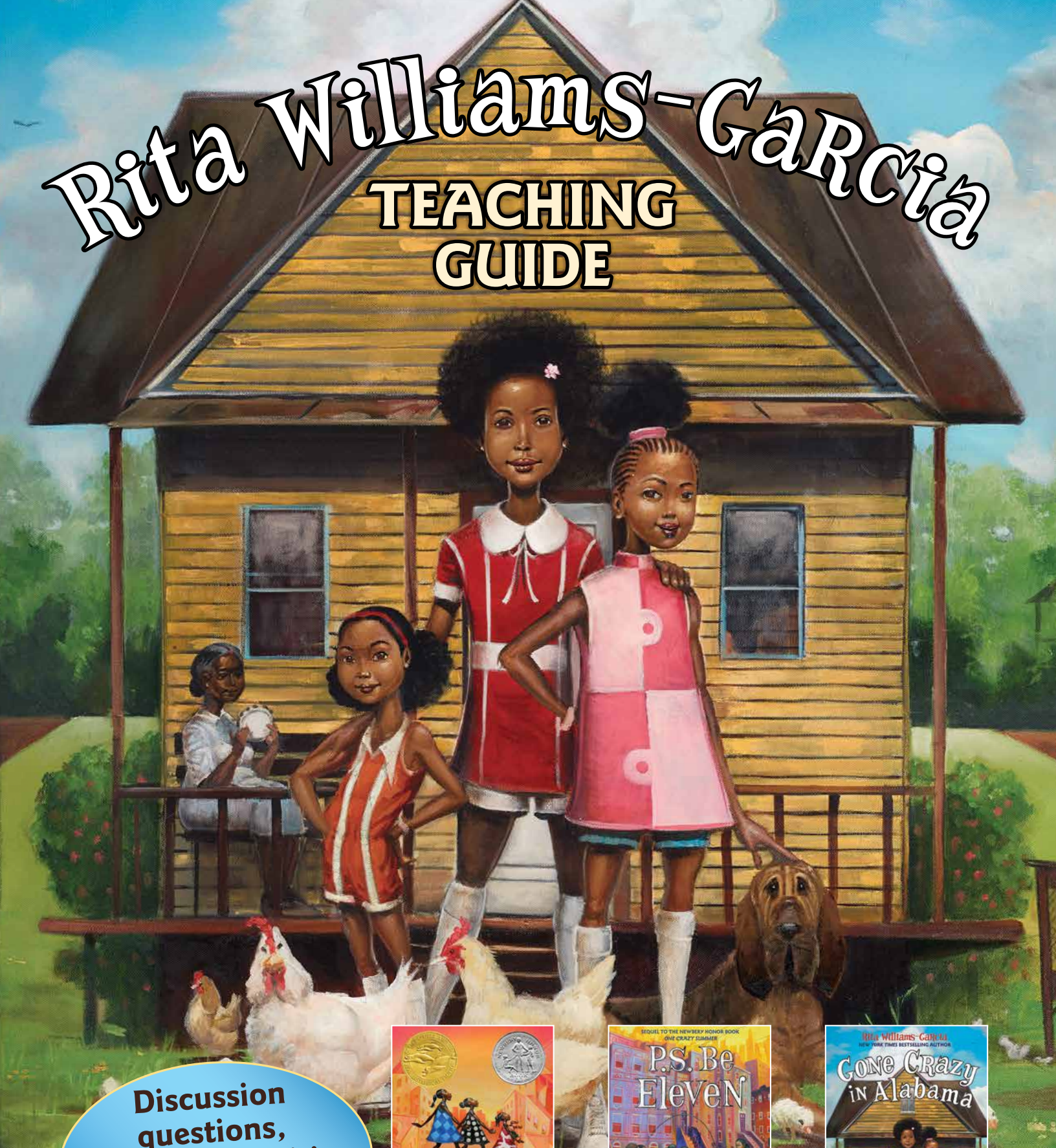
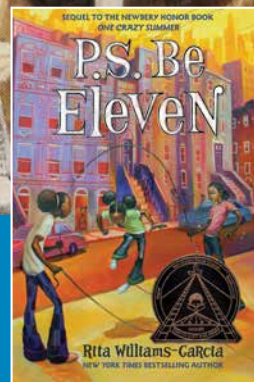
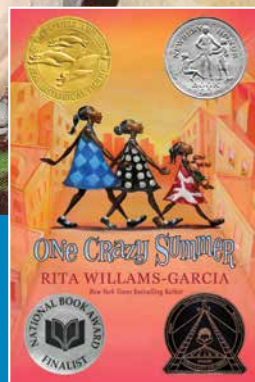


Rita Williams-García

TEACHING GUIDE



Discussion questions, classroom activities, and lesson ideas for:



Aligns with Common Core State Standards for Grades 3–7

About the Author



Photo by Jason Berger

Twice a National Book Award Finalist, **RITA WILLIAMS-GARCIA** is the author of nine distinguished novels for young adults: *Gone Crazy in Alabama*, *P.S. Be Eleven*, *One Crazy Summer*, *Blue Tights*, *Every Time a Rainbow Dies*, *Fast Talk on a Slow Track*, *Like Sisters on the Homefront*, *No Laughter Here*, and *Jumped*. *Like Sisters on the Homefront* was named a Coretta Scott King Honor Book and a best book of the year by ALA Booklist, *School Library Journal*, *The Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books*, and *Publishers Weekly*. *No Laughter Here* and *Jumped* are among Rita's ALA Best Books for Young Adults. *Jumped* and *One Crazy Summer* were both National Book Award Finalists. Additionally, *One Crazy Summer* was a Newbery Honor Book, a Coretta Scott King Award winner, the recipient of the Scott O'Dell Award for Historical Fiction, and a *New York Times* bestseller.

Rita Williams-Garcia is currently a faculty member at Vermont College for the MFA in Writing for Children and Young Adults Program. She has two daughters, Michelle and Stephanie, and lives in Jamaica, New York. You can visit her online at www.ritawg.com.

A Note from Rita Williams-Garcia

Writing *Gone Crazy in Alabama* gave me an opportunity to share little-known nineteenth-century American history and also to create a small picture of the iconic summer of 1969 for young readers. I perused my childhood diary to select a few key events that had captivated both children and adults. On one memorable night people on planet Earth had united to watch humans walk on the moon. I was living in Georgia at the time and remembered the electric storm that coincided with the Apollo 11 astronauts' reentry to Earth. I worried for the returning astronauts and for myself. Electric storms could be devastating.

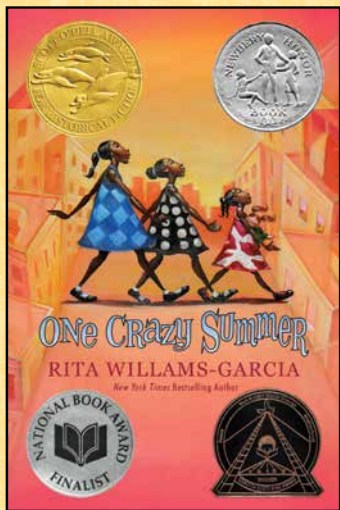
The Southeast, particularly Alabama, was an ideal setting to construct a family tree with intertwined African, European, and Native American branches. I delved into the complex relationships between African Americans called freedmen and their host Native American tribes, who served in various roles as protectors, slave owners, fellow citizens, and family. Many of the freedmen had also made the inhumane journey known as the Trail of Tears with their host Nations to settle in the Oklahoma Indian Territory. Notable Creek freedmen include Cow Tom, a leader among the Creek Nation; his grandson Jake Simmons, a successful oilman; and Sarah Rector, the first black child millionaire. For oral histories from freedmen descendants, I recommend Sam Ford's "Black Slaves, Red Masters, Part I," on YouTube.

I hope to inspire readers to record their own personal histories and to take interest in discovering their connections to past history.



ONE CRAZY SUMMER

Guide
Reading
Level W



About the Book

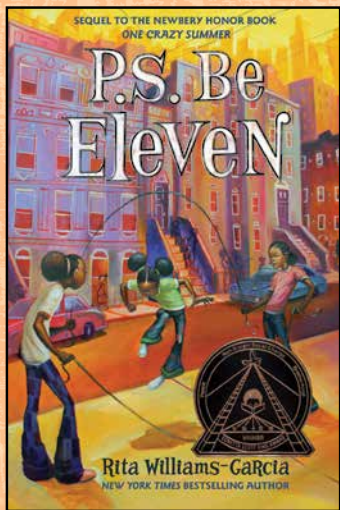
Eleven-year-old Delphine has it together. Even though her mother, Cecile, abandoned her and her younger sisters, Vonetta and Fern, seven years ago. Even though her father and Big Ma will send them from Brooklyn to Oakland, California, to stay with Cecile for the summer. And even though Delphine will have to take care of her sisters, as usual, and learn the truth about the missing pieces of the past.

When the girls arrive in Oakland in the summer of 1968, Cecile wants nothing to do with them. She makes them eat Chinese takeout dinners, forbids them to enter her kitchen, and never explains the strange visitors with Afros and black berets who knock on her door. Rather than spend time with them, Cecile sends Delphine, Vonetta, and Fern to a summer camp sponsored by a revolutionary group, the Black Panthers, where the girls get a radical new education about the world, their mother, and themselves.



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How would you describe Delphine's relationship with her sisters? How is it like your relationship with your sibling(s) or like the relationships of siblings you know? How is it different? What does Delphine mean when she says she enjoys her role as Vonetta and Fern's "enemy and big sister"? [RL.4-7.1](#); [RL.5.3](#)
2. What does Delphine expect from Cecile? Do her expectations differ from Vonetta's and Fern's expectations? Why? What word or words would you use to describe Cecile? [RL.4-7.1](#); [RL.4-6.3](#)
3. What does Delphine decide about Oakland on her first night there? If you were in her place, would you have come to a similar conclusion? Have you ever felt similarly about a place you've visited? Did you discover anything that changed your mind? [RL.4-7.1](#)
4. Are Cecile and Delphine at all alike? How? How are they different? What does Cecile mean when she tells Delphine that it wouldn't kill her to be selfish (p. 110)? [RL.4-7.1](#); [RL.5.3](#)
5. What elements in the story give you clues about the characters' personalities? Some of the characters have objects that are closely associated with them, like Delphine and her Timex, Cecile and her printing press, and Hirohito and his go-kart. What do these objects say about the characters? Can you find more examples of characters with close associations to symbolic objects in the story? [RL.4-7.1](#); [RL.4.3](#)
6. Names play an important role in the book. How does Cecile feel about names? How does she explain the name she gave herself, Nzila? Why is Delphine upset when she finds her name in the dictionary? Why does Cecile call Fern "Little Girl" for most of the book, and what finally causes her to call Fern "Fern"? Why does Delphine tell Fern her Cecile-given name, even though Cecile hadn't planned to tell her? [RL.4-7.1](#)
7. Are the Black Panthers Delphine observes at breakfast her first few mornings in Oakland like she expected them to be? How do Sister Mukumbu and Sister Pat differ from Delphine's expectations? What do you think she means when she says that "beating eggs never makes the evening news" (p. 64)? [RL.4-7.1](#)
8. What kind of image does Crazy Kelvin project? Is it possible to judge the whole Black Panther group based on Crazy Kelvin's actions? Do you think groups can be distinguished negatively or positively by the actions of individual members? [RL.4-7.2](#); [RL.4.3](#)
9. What does the stool in the kitchen mean to Delphine? Does her relationship with Cecile change the evening the stool appears? How? [RL.4-7.1](#); [RL.4.3](#)
10. How does Delphine feel about the messages of the Black Panthers? Why does she want to stop taking her sisters to the People's Center and skip the rally? Do her beliefs about the Black Panthers and their messages change throughout the story? How would you have felt in her place? [RL.4-7.2](#); [RL.4.3](#)
11. *One Crazy Summer* is full of metaphors. Look up the definition of the word *metaphor* (if you don't already know what it means). Do you think Delphine's ride on the go-kart is a metaphor? What might the go-kart ride symbolize? What other metaphors can you find in the story? [RL.4-7.4](#)
12. Do you feel any sympathy for Cecile throughout the book? Does hearing Cecile's story at the end make you more sympathetic toward her? How does Delphine react to learning her mother's side of the story she's been hearing for years? How do you think you would have felt in her place? [RL.4.3](#)
13. Do the sisters find what they were looking for on their trip to Oakland? Why, or why not? [RL.4-7.1.2](#); [RL.6.3](#)



P.S. Be Eleven

Guide
Reading
Level W

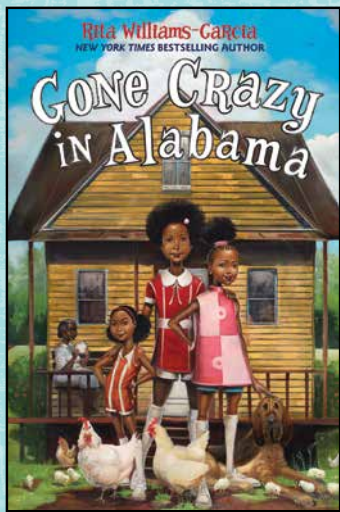
About the Book

Eleven-year-old Delphine and her sisters are back in Brooklyn, which feels different after a summer at Black Panther camp. Delphine now finds her grandmother's old-fashioned views on race oppressive. She's shocked to learn her father's in love and bewildered when her uncle returns from Vietnam so changed. Even the sisters she's always looked after are getting more independent. With her first dance and a Jackson Five concert on the horizon, Delphine's on her way to growing up, ready or not, in this vivid novel steeped in the music and politics of the late 1960s.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Delphine's mother ends letters to her, "P.S. Be Eleven," even after Delphine turns twelve. Discuss what Cecile means. Why is the phrase used as the title? In what ways do Big Ma and Pa expect Delphine to act older than she is? How do they treat her as if she's younger? In what ways would Delphine like to grow up sooner?
RL.4-7.2; RL.4.3
- Change is at the heart of this book. How does Delphine change at home? What are the big changes in her family? Find examples and discuss how Delphine also changes at school and how her friends there change.
RL.4-7.2; RL.4.3; RL.6-7.3
- Society was changing rapidly in 1968, as shown in the book's many references to music, popular culture, and politics. How does Shirley Chisholm symbolize change? What do the Jackson Five and their concert represent that's new in society? Consider the phrase "black infinity" (p. 68) when answering this question. What role does the Jackson Five play in Delphine's life?
RL.4-7.1.2
- The first chapter is titled "A Grand Negro Spectacle," a phrase Big Ma uses. The term is also used on pages 10, 21, 63, 233, and 270. What does it mean? Why does Big Ma worry about how the girls act in public? What examples of racial prejudice can you find in the first two chapters?
RL.4-7.1.4; RL.7.6
- At the book's end, Delphine listens to Michael Jackson sing "Who's Lovin' You" and thinks, "What did Michael Jackson know about life without the ones you loved the most, when each of them moved farther and farther away until they were voices you heard and pictures that flashed before you" (p. 272). Discuss the theme of loss in the girls' lives, using specific examples. What has Delphine learned about dealing with loss?
RL.4-7.1.2
- Delphine, Vonetta, and Fern must save half of \$24.00 for Jackson Five concert tickets, public transportation, and refreshments. What do the prices say about the times in which the characters live? Calculate how much money is needed for concert tickets, transportation, and refreshments to see your favorite group perform.
RL.4-7.1; Math MD.4.A.2
- Compare Vonetta and Fern. How are they alike? How are they different? How are their relationships with Delphine similar and different? Why does Cecile write to Delphine, "Look after Vonetta. Fern can take care of herself" (p.266)?
RL.5.3
- Delphine reacts differently than her sisters do to the news that Pa is dating and then to meeting Marva. Give details that show Delphine's attitude and that of her sisters. Why are Vonetta and Fern more welcoming to Marva? What does Marva do to change Delphine's view of her?
RL.4-7.1.3; RL.7.6
- Cecile is far away, but her letters reveal her point of view about the girls and what's happening to them. Quote from the letters to explain Cecile's views.
RL.4-7.1; RL.7.6
- What role does Darnell play in the plot? Find examples of foreshadowing that hint at his drug problem. How do different people—Delphine, Vonetta, Pa, Big Ma—react to Darnell and his actions? What does the package from Walter Reed, described on pages 267–268, tell you about Darnell?
RL.4-7.1; RL.4.3; RL.6.3; RL.7.6
- Delphine uses a lot of similes and metaphors in her narration. As you read this book, keep a list of such language with page numbers. How does each example of figurative language add another dimension to what she's saying? For example, she uses the metaphor of spinning straw into gold (pp. 80–81). What does that refer to and why do you think she used it?
RL.4-7.4; RL.5.6
- Mr. Mwila has a formal style of speaking, using words such as *decorum* and *redemption*. As you read the book, write down unfamiliar words that he and other characters use. Try to figure out their meaning from the context. If that doesn't work, look up the words in a dictionary and jot down their meaning.
RL.4-7.4





GONE CRAZY in Alabama

Guide
Reading
Level X

About the Book

It's the summer of 1969, and Delphine, Vonetta, and Fern are off to Alabama to visit Big Ma and her eighty-two-year-old mother, Ma Charles. Pa can't remind them enough that the South's not like Brooklyn and that you can't get more southern than Alabama.

Across the field, through the pines, and over the creek is the Trotter home, where Ma Charles's half sister, Miss Trotter, lives. The two half sisters haven't spoken in years, each determined to hold on to her version of the truth. Dramatic Vonetta plays middleman to the two warring, elderly sisters, while Delphine struggles against her to bring the family together. As Delphine hears about family history that she never knew existed, she learns of a hurt that happened many years ago—which maybe can't be mended. But when a tragedy comes to the farm in Alabama, Delphine discovers that the bonds of family run deeper than she ever knew possible.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Describe the setting of this story once the girls have reached Alabama. How important is the setting? What difference would it make if it had taken place in a city? Find descriptive passages and analyze how the author paints pictures using words that appeal to the reader's senses. *RL.3-6.1.4*
- Food appears in most chapters, starting with the trip to the candy store, and meals are central to many scenes. What are some of the foods the family eats in Alabama? How does food highlight differences between Brooklyn and the South? Give examples of key scenes that take place during meals. *RL.3-6.1*
- Relationships among sisters play a big role in the story. Describe how Ma Charles and Miss Trotter are related and why they don't speak to each other. Find places in the text where they show interest in each other. Explain why they reconcile near the end, giving examples that illustrate their new relationship. How do Delphine and her sisters resemble Ma Charles and Miss Trotter? *RL.3-6.3*
- Mother-daughter relationships are also a significant theme. How do Big Ma and Ma Charles interact with each other? Compare and contrast their characters. Describe Cecile's relationship with her daughters as shown by her words and actions. Why isn't Cecile as affectionate with Delphine as she is with Fern? *RL.3-6.3*
- Why does JimmyTrotter have both names joined together? Describe his life and the tragedy in his past. How does he treat his great-grandmother and his cousins? What does that tell you about his character? Discuss his disagreement with Delphine about oppression. *RL.3-6.2.3*
- Discuss the responsibilities Delphine has, such as being in charge on the bus trip. What circumstances have put her in the position of being responsible? How well does she handle things for a twelve-year-old? Discuss ways in which she's good at looking after her sisters and ways in which she might not be. *RL.3-6.3*
- The family, including JimmyTrotter, watches the Apollo 11 launch and moon landing together. Discuss what different meanings it holds for Delphine, JimmyTrotter, Big Ma, and Ma Charles. Why do they cheer when they see a black person in the crowd? Why does Delphine say the moon landing makes them *earthlings*? What is the significance of her thought about the third astronaut "holding everything together" (p. 175)? *RL.3-6.2*
- The pace of the story escalates with the first signs of the tornado. Reread passages about the tornado appearing and analyze how the author builds suspense. She then adds another layer of tension with Vonetta's disappearance. Find words, phrases, and passages that heighten the reader's tension about Vonetta and even hint that she might be dead. *RL.3-6.4; RL.5-6.5*
- The family pulls together in their worry about Vonetta and the tornado. What has Vonetta done, and why? Describe her relationships with different people, including Delphine, Fern, Ma Trotter, and Uncle Darnell. What do those relationships reveal about her character? Talk about her strengths and about what she wants in life. *RL.3-6.3*
- Delphine is shocked by the familiarity between the sheriff and her family, especially in the scene starting on p. 124. Why is she so surprised? What did she expect instead? Discuss how the sheriff treats her family, how they treat him, and why. How do these interactions relate to the title of the book? *RL.3-6.2.3*
- Delphine is reading a famous novel called *Things Fall Apart*. The title expresses how she feels about her family, which she sees as "scattering, piece by piece" (p. 23). Discuss whether or not her family is falling apart, and if that changes during the story. How does her family's history as shown by the family tree reflect the idea of things falling apart? *RL.3-6.2*
- Reread Cecile's letter to Delphine on p. 280 and analyze what she is saying to her daughter. How does the letter relate to Cecile's actions in Alabama and earlier? What advice is she giving Delphine? Talk about her use of a storm as a metaphor. *RL.3-6.3.4*



Classroom Activities

ONE CRAZY SUMMER

1. **Be a Journalist.** Have students research the Black Panther movement. What aspects of the organization were covered most prominently in the media? Does their public image match Delphine's experience with them? Ask students to write a magazine or newspaper article (or a letter to the editor) about the Black Panthers from Delphine's perspective. *W.4-7.2; 7*
2. **Living History.** Encourage students to read about what was happening in the civil rights movement in 1968. Then have each of them interview someone who was old enough in 1968 to remember what was going on to get a firsthand perspective on history. *W.4-7.7*
3. **Civil Rights Today.** Prompt students to look through current newspapers and magazines or do some online research about what civil rights issues are most prominent in the news today. In groups or individually, have students choose one issue to learn about and present to the class. *W.4-7.7; SL.4-7.4*
4. **Day Tripping.** Ask students to put themselves in Delphine's place and plan a day trip for two younger siblings. Have them choose a city, find a map, and then plan out all the places they'll take their siblings and how much money they'll need for each item on the agenda. *W.4-7.7*
5. **Be a Poet.** Have students take a cue from Cecile and Fern and write a poem that sheds light on a topic or makes people see something in a different way. Collect all the poems to create a classroom poetry anthology. *W.4-7.10*

P.S. Be Eleven

1. **Dear Big Ma.** Write three letters to Big Ma, one from each sister's point of view at the close of the book. For inspiration, see Vonetta's and Fern's letters to Cecile on pages 54–55 and Delphine's letters throughout the book. The letters can discuss what has happened since Big Ma left and how each girl feels about it. Use formal letter format with a date, salutation, and closing. *RL.4-7.1; RL.4.6; RL.7.6*
2. **The Great Debate.** Delphine and her classmates have a debate with the two sides taking turns of two minutes per speaker. Each speaker has notes and uses the two minutes to make his or her strongest points. Have students come up with two-sided topics related to their lives such as whether a school should sell sodas and candy or whether ads should be banned on children's television. Have them prepare notes and then hold short debates. *SL.4-7.4*
3. **Women in Power.** In 1968, women held few political offices. Have students research how things stand now. Assign states to students to find out if the state has or has had a female governor. Have some students find out how many women are in the US House of Representatives and in the Senate. Have students discuss why women don't hold more offices, and what steps could be taken to improve the numbers. *W.4-7.7; SL.4-7.1*



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GONE CRAZY IN ALABAMA

1. **And Our Next Guest Is . . .** Have students work in pairs to create a talk show interview to present to the class. One student will be the television host and the other will be a character from the book, who's now twenty-five years older. The interview topic is how important the summer of 1969 was in that character's life. Students should decide why the character is now famous, and come up with questions and answers grounded in the novel. *RL.3-6.3; SL.3-6.5*
2. **A Blast from the Past.** The novel makes many references to history and especially to the 1960s. As a class, brainstorm a list of historical topics from the book such as Apollo 11, freedom riders, Creek freedmen, Black Power, the KKK, and so on. Have students research a topic, using at least one print and one internet source, and present a short oral report to the class with a multimedia component if possible. *W.3-6.7; SL.3-6.5*
3. **Similar? Different? OR Both?** Using graphic organizers, have students analyze the similarities and differences between two characters in several areas, such as their appearance, personality, history, likes and dislikes, or behavior. Post the graphic organizers on a "Character Contrast" bulletin board. *RL.3-6.3*
4. **ENVISIONING VONETTA'S VERSION.** The story shows Vonetta's disappearance from Delphine's perspective. Have students write a chapter from Vonetta's point of view that covers what happened to her during the tornado and in the hospital, and how she felt about it. In small groups, have students share what they wrote, noting similarities and differences. *RL.3-6.3; W.3-6.3*

Discussion guide prepared by Kathleen Odean, librarian, author, and Common Core workshop presenter.
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