

NIGERIA JONES



educators' guide

about the book

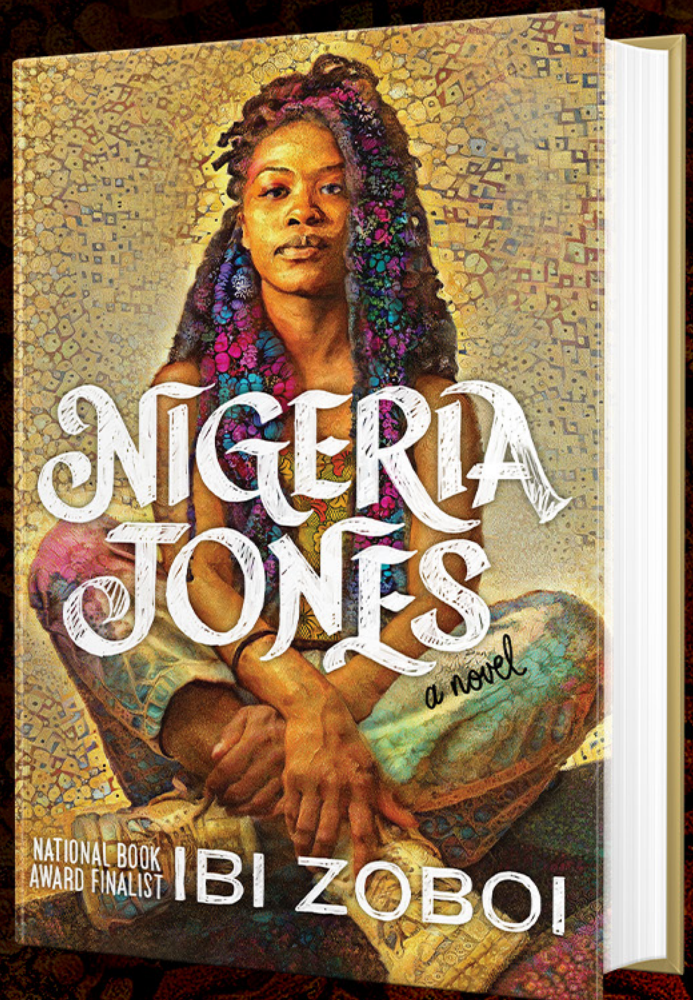
WARRIOR PRINCESS.

That's what Nigeria Jones's father calls her. He has raised her as part of the Movement, a Black separatist group

based in Philadelphia. Nigeria is homeschooled and vegan and participates in traditional rituals to connect her and other kids from the group to their ancestors. But when her mother—the perfect matriarch of their Movement—disappears, Nigeria's world is upended. She finds herself taking care of her baby brother and stepping into a role she doesn't want.

Nigeria's mother had secrets. She wished for a different life for her children, which includes sending her daughter to a private Quaker school outside of their strict group. Despite her father's disapproval, Nigeria attends the school with her cousin, Kamau, and Sage, who used to be a friend. There, she begins to flourish and expand her universe.

As Nigeria searches for her mother, she starts to uncover a shocking truth. One that will lead her to question everything she thought she knew about her life and her family.



discussion questions

- 1) A constitution is a body of principles or established precedents according to which a state or other organization is acknowledged to be governed. Preview the Contents Page and consider the structure of this book. Notice that the chapters and sections are organized like a constitution. Read and discuss the PREAMBLE and Article I INDEPENDENCE DAY. What insights do they provide about the main character, Nigeria Jones? What questions do they raise?
- 2) Names are a significant part of our identity. Nigeria reflects on the word Sankofa. “It means to go back and fetch, or the way forward is to return to the past” (p. 7). What is the significance of the word Sankofa—both as a verb and as a noun? What are the implications of this word as an action? As a name? What can you notice about the ways the names of the characters in this novel provide them with a sense of who they are, the communities to which they belong, and their place and purpose in the world?
- 3) Nigeria’s father rejects the word “minority” and instead helps her understand that she is part of the “global majority.” Nigeria says “... I remember all those times my father told me that we as Black people are not a minority in the world. We are the global majority. He tells his followers not to believe those lies about us, that even if we find ourselves in spaces that are as white as Scandinavia, we have an army of brothers and sisters from Harlem, New York, to Nairobi, Kenya, taking up space on this planet” (p. 139). We are always learning something about race—at home, at school, in the media, in books. What are some of the explicit and implicit messages Nigeria learns about race from the people and places closest to her? What are the distinctions and intersections of these lessons? How does Nigeria apply these lessons in her life and in her relationships? How have these teachings prepared her to transgress the boundaries of her life?
- 4) Nigeria observes “Philly Friends is like a whole college campus, with sprawling green lawns and school buildings that look like churches. My father calls places like this the bowels of white supremacy. It’s where oppressive ideas are born and incubated to maintain white male dominance all over the world, and the portrait of William Penn staring down at me like that reminds me of everything my father says, everything the Movement wants to destroy” (p. 118). Schools teach more than just content; they teach ways of thinking. What is white supremacy and how does it show up in schools and curricula? In what ways does Nigeria both fit in and also resist at this school?
- 5) Sage confronts Nigeria about her feelings toward white people. She asks, “Nigeria, do you really hate white people that much?” Nigeria responds, “I think white people hate us way more than we could ever hate them” and adds “Don’t confuse the noble actions of one person for the atrocities of an entire people” (pp. 129-130). How does a focus on individuals take attention away from the longevity and damage of institutional, systemic, and structural racism? Discuss the meaning of reconciliation—the process of making amends and repairing a relationship that has been damaged. What will it mean for the United States to truly reconcile with its past? What are important steps involved in racial reconciliation? Consider and discuss the following: What has the United States done to acknowledge and apologize for the harm that racism has and continues to cause Black people? How can the country prevent continued racism?
- 6) When Nigeria attends math class at the Philadelphia Friends School, she and the teacher are the only Black people in the classroom. Why do you think the teacher, Mr. Egwu, “insists on not being called by his first name” (p. 136) at this school, while the other teachers, including Henry, the teacher of the elective course, *The Constitution and You*, go by their first name? How might race and racism be a factor in Mr. Egwu’s decision? What does Mr. Egwu’s curiosity reveal about the intention and significance of Nigeria’s name? What insights does this provide about why she invites her friends to call her Gigi or Geri instead of Nigeria?
- 7) Nigeria notes the ways Kamau navigates between his home life and school. “I can’t believe how Kamau eases from the super-Black world of the Movement to this private school in East Falls like it’s nothing” (p. 145). Kamau and Nigeria have different responses to this mostly white school. In what ways has years in the Movement prepared Kamau, and to some extent Nigeria, for this environment? In what ways have years in the Movement, including her relationship with her father, made Nigeria unprepared?



discussion questions (continued)

- 8) Besides KD, Nigeria has had few interactions with white people in her life. “Conversations with white people are going to be work. I don’t know how to do it with ease. Why after only a minute of talking to this boy do I bring up racism? I can’t separate the two - whiteness and racism, whiteness and oppression, whiteness and history. I blame my father and his Movement” (p. 149). Whiteness, as defined by Smithsonian’s National Museum of African American History & Culture, refers to “the way that white people, their customs, culture, and beliefs operate as the standard by which all other groups are compared.” But it isn’t only her father and the Movement that influences Nigeria’s world view. What social, economic, and political factors, conditions, and observations does she draw upon to make sense of her difficulties separating whiteness from racism, oppression, and history?
- 9) Because the institution of education in the United States was never built for or with Black children in mind, Nigeria’s father, Kofi, sees schools run by white people as spaces of harm rather than spaces of freedom. He also sees Nigeria as his to own and control. Kofi argues, “No matter what they say about diversity and inclusion, these schools were built for kids like that white boy you were talking to. He probably has parents paying for tutors, a trust fund, and all these privileges that’ll secure his spot at the top of the food chain. But you know what? All the money in the world won’t make him anywhere near as brilliant as you. He can’t even begin to touch your intelligence and the amount of things that I’ve taught you. That’s why they want you in there, so they can take credit for my work. My work, Nigeria. I made you! Your ancestors made you! Your genius is inherited. They do not deserve you!” (p. 151). What is the purpose of school? What might Kofi believe are the differences between well-schooled and well-educated? In what ways have educational institutions harmed Black children? How do they continue to cause harm today? In what ways is Kofi an institution that causes Nigeria harm?
- 10) Discuss the meaning of the word *grievance*. What wrongs and struggles does Nigeria experience? How do they impact her mentally, emotionally, academically? What is Nigeria grieving?
- 11) What do Chris, who is Black and an ardent follower of King Kofi and believer in the movement, and Liam, who is white and self-assured, each represent in Nigeria’s life? In what ways do they lift the heaviness from Nigeria’s life and help her move forward on her journey of self-discovery? How do they complicate this journey?
- 12) When discussing Kofi’s book *Black Families Matter*, with its emphasis on “Man, woman, and child” (p. 189), Kamau reveals how his experiences in the Movement felt like an affront to part of his identity and points out his Uncle’s hypocrisy. “I wish he would just come out and say it—that he doesn’t want his nephew being gay. It’s okay for everyone else, but not for his own blood? I mean, my mother got tired of him telling her that she needs a man in the house, and him steady trying to hook her up with one of the uncles because he thinks it’ll set me straight. Literally. My daddy is just fine, and he loves me the way I am. He even said I could come stay with him down in Atlanta” (p. 190). Consider the defining and (re)defining of the word liberation across this novel. What does liberation mean? Who is it for? Can liberation occur if it is steeped in homophobia, sexism, gender binarism, or any oppression and is without love for all humanity? What examples of hypocrisy can you observe not in Kofi, but in society from those who profess freedom and equality with strings attached? In what ways has the country not lived up to its ideals?
- 13) Words matter. During a conversation about slavery, Nigeria remarks, “Enslaved. Our ancestors were not slaves, they were *enslaved*. Huge difference” (p. 193). Henry, responds, “You’re absolutely right, Nigeria.” “Did you all know that the word ‘slavery’ does not appear in the Constitution? Yet, it is an institution that is foundational to all the ills and turmoil in this country” (p. 193). In what ways is the Constitution of the United States, therefore, an example of erasure and denial of the truth of this nation? How does this provide context and connect to the movement to ban books in schools?
- 14) The debate topic in Nigeria’s Constitution and You course is: When in conflict, community standards are of greater value than individual liberty (p. 142). Nigeria and Liam make several points for their debate. Consider the merits and limitations of their arguments. Which points feel particularly valid to you? What might you add? How does this resolution apply directly to Nigeria’s life?
- 15) Discuss the titles of each section in Article V: Indigenous Peoples’ Day that begin with the words “My Body”. In what ways are the titles of these sections resolutions that move Nigeria closer to liberation of herself?



discussion questions (continued)

- 16) In Part Three: The R(E)volution of Nigeria Jones, what and who does Nigeria declare independence from? What and who does she declare dependence to? An amendment is a revision or change, for the better, to a legal document such as a contract or constitution. The U.S. Constitution, for example, has been amended 27 times. What might you title each of the six amendments of Part 3? What are the revisions and changes Nigeria is making to better her life? How do these changes lead her toward healing?
- 17) Nigeria quickly learns, thanks to her father, how to navigate whiteness at the Philadelphia Friends School. She observes, “The white kids here are the endless sea, and their salty mix of microaggressions and guilt, apologies and audacities are oppressive, like atmospheric pressure. Still, I’ve learned to breathe underwater” (p. 309). What race-based assumptions and liberties does Nigeria navigate from peers and teachers at Philadelphia Friends School? What race-based assumptions does Nigeria make about white people, including Liam?
- 18) Readers learn that Nigeria’s mother was reluctant to have another baby as well as the circumstances around her death, including Kofi’s detainment by the police outside of Sage’s house. How does this provide context for understanding Nigeria’s father—his intimidation and his rage? In what ways is he also grieving and how does his grief show up in his work and threaten his daughter’s well-being? In what ways can he atone for their fractured relationship?
- 19) Throughout the novel, Nigeria speaks about her mother as having left and she waits for her return. Discuss the significance and symbolism of Nigeria’s vision of Mama in close proximity to the portrait of Thomas Jefferson and inscription: “We hold these truths to be self-evident...,” “Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happyness,” the Washington Monument inscription: FREEDOM IS A LIGHT FOR WHICH MANY MEN HAVE DIED IN DARKNESS” (pp. 324-325), and her mother’s words that to Nigeria seem to echo: “History lives and breathes and so do our ancestors” (p. 325). Then, reread the following sentences from Section 1: “My father says that some African souls return over and over again to make things right, to heal generational wounds, and to fight for our liberation. We choose our parents, our families, and the lives we want to live before we are even born” (p. 5). What new layers of meaning about Nigeria, her father, her mother, and this novel do these sentences provide? How does Mama’s return create opportunities for Nigeria to heal?
- 20) The significance of names is demonstrated across the novel. Nigeria decides to rename herself Enitan which in Yoruba means “one with a history” (p. 350). How is (re) naming an essential part of Nigeria’s emancipation? What connection can you make to the meaning of the word Sankofa discussed at the beginning of the novel: “to go back and fetch, or the way forward is to return to the past” (p. 7)?
- 21) Revisit the Contents Page and reconsider the structure of this book, organized like a constitution. Across the novel you’ve learned about the body of principles and established precedents governing Nigeria’s life, the grievances she’s expressed and the resolutions she’s making to address the issues in her life. In what ways might you see your life as a constitution? What are the articles, sections, grievances, amendments, and resolutions you might declare for your own emancipation from oppressive forces that make you feel caged?

extension activities



BLACK NATIONAL ANTHEM AND THE NATIONAL ANTHEM

National anthems are more than just songs. They are mechanisms that can socialize a nation's citizens, and those seeking citizenship, into the ideologies that shape beliefs and actions. Research and read the verses of "Lift Every Voice and Sing" (also known as the Black National Anthem) by James Weldon Johnson and the "Star Spangled Banner" (the United States of America's National Anthem) by Francis Scott Key. What are the stories and the ideologies passed on to citizens of the United States through the songs "Lift Every Voice and Sing" and the "Star Spangled Banner"? What can be learned when you explore the history of these songs and their creators? How does this research help you to better understand why many Black people celebrate the Black National Anthem and find the National Anthem and its creator problematic?

THE HAITIAN REVOLUTION

Nigeria reflects on her identity as well as teachings from her mother. "Mama is Haitian, so she insisted that I know about the Haitian Revolution the way white kids know about the American Revolution and the Civil War" (p. 30). Research an article or book you can read to learn more about the Haitian Revolution. How does the Haitian Revolution including its leader, Toussaint Louverture, inform the vision and work of Kofi Sankofa and the Movement? What have you learned about the Haitian Revolution in school? If you haven't learned about this, why do you think this history has been omitted from curriculum and the history books you've had access to? Why is it important for all students to learn about this? What difference does it make for Black people in particular to know this history?

QUAKER PARADOX

Kamau tells his cousin, Nigeria, that "Quakers were the first abolitionists" and on a tour of the school they are told that the Philadelphia Friends School is "part of a long legacy of Quakers, or the Religious Society of Friends, who were prohibited from owning slaves and were the country's first abolitionists, many of whom were essential to the Underground Railroad" (p.116). Nigeria's father tells his sister, "Quakers owned slaves, too, you know" (p. 117). Two or more things can be true. Quakers are known as the first religious movement to condemn slavery. However, Quakers were among the most prominent traders of enslaved people during the early days of the country. Learn about this paradox of Quakers fully participating in slavery and being among the first to denounce it. How did Quakers become hailed as heroes when it comes to opposing slavery considering their history of rejecting antislavery? Who and what benefits when only part of the story about Quakers and slavery are known and other parts are erased?

AFROCENTRISM

Nigeria describes her father, Kofi Sankofa, as a "Black nationalist, revolutionary freedom fighter, and founder of the Movement, whose mission is to divest from oppressive systems and create an all-Black utopia" (p. 5). Subsequently, Nigeria was raised to "divest, decolonize, and indigenize." She explains, "My people are finding ways to separate ourselves from the white supremacist agenda" (p. 147). Learn more about Afrocentrism, an approach to studying history from the experiences and perspectives of people of recent African descent. In what ways is Afrocentrism a response to Eurocentric attitudes and perspectives about Black people and their contributions across history? What does it mean to divest, decolonize, and indigenize in American society? In what ways is Afrocentrism a stance that is essential to Nigeria's father and the Movement and their vision of liberation?

REDLINING

Redlining is a discriminatory practice resulting in disinvestment of services and resources in Black and Brown neighborhoods. Research the policy and practice of redlining across cities in the United States. Nigeria notices housing discrimination and disinvestment in neighborhoods where Black people live as she drives to the Philadelphia Friends School. "Whenever we drive through one of these narrow blocks lined with dilapidated row houses, people break their necks trying to see who all is in here. The thing about Philly is that its neighborhoods have borders. They're not invisible. You see where poverty ends and where opportunities begin. It's like driving down a smooth road and, when it gets bumpy all of a sudden, you know it's the hood. Someone drew that line in the exact spot where things like smooth roads stop being free. This is what my parents and everyone else in the Movement forced me to see. And it wasn't just about seeing the difference; it was about understanding why it's that way" (p. 177). What is the difference between just seeing inequities and understanding why they exist? Why is it especially important for Black people and their self-esteem and sense of self-worth to know the difference? Why is it important for white people to know the difference?

extension activities (continued)



THE PEOPLE COULD FLY AND “CAGED BIRD”

The People Could Fly by Virginia Hamilton is a folktale that Nigeria’s mother read to her repeatedly and it has become deeply important to Nigeria as demonstrated across the novel. In *Nigeria Jones* Zobo writes, “I hear my father loud and clear, but I’m not listening to him. In my heart, I’m still going to school. But how do I move this body to somewhere I’m not supposed to be? How do I break free from these invisible chains to fly toward the sky? How am I supposed to soar when even home feels like a cage?” (p. 165). And, “I was taught that poor, Black neighborhoods can be like cages, and as a member of the Movement, I’m supposed to spend the rest of my life making everyone else see the metal bars and locked doors for what they really are. Except I don’t have the key to let us all out. My father thinks he does, but he’s still in here” (pp. 177-178). Maya Angelou also uses cages, birds, and flying as important symbols in her work. Read the poem “Caged Bird” by Maya Angelou and *The People Could Fly* by Virginia Hamilton. In all three texts, the physical freedom of the main character is inextricably linked to their spiritual well-being. Who or what does the caged bird represent? Who or what does the free bird represent? What does the cage itself represent?

further resources for teachers

White Rage: The Unspoken Truth of Our Racial Divide
by Carol Anderson

Caste: The Origins of Our Discontent
by Isabel Wilkerson

The Sum of Us: What Racism Costs Everyone and How We Can Prosper Together
by Heather McGhee



about the author

IBI ZOBOI

is the *New York Times* bestselling author of *American Street*, a National Book Award finalist; *Pride; My Life as an Ice Cream Sandwich; Star Child; Okoye to the People*; the Walter

Award-winning *Punching the Air*, cowritten with Exonerated Five member Yusef Salaam; and the Coretta Scott King Honor-winning picture book *The People Remember*. She is also the editor of the anthology *Black Enough*. Born in Haiti and raised in New York City, she now lives in New Jersey with her family. You can find her online at ibizoboi.net.

Guide prepared by Dr. Sonja Cherry-Paul. Dr. Sonja Cherry-Paul is the adapter of the #1 *New York Times* bestseller *Stamped (For Kids)* and the author of several books for educators to support reading and writing instruction. An educator with more than twenty years of classroom experience, she is currently the founder of Red Clay Educators, co-founder of the Institute for Racial Equity in Literacy, and co-founder of the Teach Black History All Year Institute. She is the executive producer and host of The Black Creators Series, an education-focused platform that highlights the work of Black authors and illustrators. Sonja provides professional development for schools and organizations on advancing the work of antiracism.

further resources for students

Caged Bird by Maya Angelou

The People Could Fly
by Virginia Hamilton

Lift Every Voice and Sing
by James Weldon Johnson

Freewater
by Amina Luqman-Dawson

Revolution In Our Time: The Black Panther Party’s Promise to the People
by Kekla Magoon
“The (Re)volution of Nigeria Jones”
by Ibi Zobo in *Black Enough: Stories of Being Young & Black in America*
edited by Ibi Zobo

[How did the Haitian Revolution change the world? - Choices Program](#)

<https://www.choices.edu/video/haitian-revolution-change-the-world/>

[Pierre Toussaint-L’Ouverture Leads a Slave Revolt in Haiti - Teaching with Primary Sources](#)

<https://ny.pbslearningmedia.org/resource/843acc2d-cbfl-4176-b891-0476b9e4474e/pierre-toussaint-louverture-leads-a-slave-revolt-in-haiti/>



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