

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

IBI ZOBOI



SO KIN

EDUCATOR'S GUIDE



ABOUT THE BOOK

Fifteen-year-old Marisol and seventeen-year-old Genevieve have never met and have no way of knowing it, but they are opposites in every conceivable way. One younger, one older. One light-skinned, one dark-skinned. One poor immigrant, one wealthy citizen. One motherless, one fatherless. But despite these differences, the two also unknowingly share secrets. The secret of their struggles with the ways others see them. The secret of what happens to their skin under the new moon. The secret of impossible dreams. And the secret kept from them that may destroy everything they each hold dear if it comes to light.

And then the two of them meet . . .

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Ibi Zoboi is the *New York Times* bestselling author of *American Street*, a National Book Award finalist; *Nigeria Jones*, a Coretta Scott King Award winner; *Pride*; *My Life as an Ice Cream Sandwich*; *Okoye to the People: A Black Panther Novel for Marvel*; and the Walter Award and *LA Times* Book Prize-winning *Punching the Air*, cowritten with Exonerated Five member Yusef Salaam. She is also a two-time Coretta Scott King Honor Award winner for her picture book *The People Remember* and her middle grade biography of Octavia Butler, *Star Child*. She is 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.

PRE-READING ACTIVITIES

- Give students ten minutes to reflect on a story, a legend, or a personal history that has been passed down in their family. This can be a memory, a family “myth,” or even a distinct family trait. Have them write down what this story means to them and how it shapes their understanding of their own heritage. After students have reflected, lead a discussion about the ways that family stories might shape characters in a novel.
- In groups, give students short, powerful poems that focus on identity (e.g., Maya Angelou, Langston Hughes, Lucille Clifton, Derek Walcott, Lorna Goodison, Grace Nichols, or Kamau Brathwaite). Have each group read and annotate their assigned poem together, identifying phrases or lines that resonate with them. Groups will share out their poem and conversation. Next, lead a discussion about why an author might choose verse to tell a story, and how poetry as a medium connects to identity and experience.
- In small groups, have students brainstorm cultural beliefs or stories they know of that mix natural and supernatural elements (like ghosts, folklore, or miracles). Ask each group to discuss and jot down ideas about what these stories reveal about the culture they come from. Discuss as a class the ways that fantasy connects to reality when it is tied to a community’s history or worldview.
- Ask students to create a “supernatural self-portrait” that represents a magical power—one they imagine having or inheriting. They can use symbols, colors, or images to represent these powers and explain the significance to themselves or their communities. Discuss how magic can represent aspects of identity that we often keep hidden or that aren’t understood by others/outsideers.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Instead of asking why the author chose to write in verse, let's discuss how the verse makes us, readers, partners in meaning-making throughout the novel. Find a moment in the novel where the verse leaves a gap or slips between more than one possible meaning. How does the possibility of multiple meanings shape this story and your understanding of the characters and narrative?
2. When describing her mother's mortar, Marisol says that its drawings "document our truth: / We exist and we are real" [58]. Discuss the connection Marisol is making between stories and existence. Where else do you see this connection in the novel?
3. The book Marisol reads over and over again—*The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison—comes up multiple times in this story. If you haven't read it, take some time to look up its details and themes. What connections can you make between *(S)Kin* and *The Bluest Eye*? What do these connections tell you about Marisol?
4. Duality plays a big role in this novel—not just in its narrative content but also in its story structure. Find some examples of the novel's structural duality (e.g., narration, organization, etc.). In a novel that centers magic, identity, race, vengeance, family, and more, why might duality be an effective structural device for storytelling?
5. What do you make of the alternation between Marisol and Genevieve's perspectives? The space separating their narrations gets smaller and smaller as the story goes on—like a braid getting tighter as it reaches its end. How does the novel's intertwining structure connect to the two girls' experiences in the story?
6. For her Black History Month dance solo, Genevieve chooses "Pretty Hurts" by Beyoncé. Discuss her choice and some of the reasons she gives for it. How does this song for this particular dance relate to the issues of colorism, pretty privilege, and self-image throughout the novel? Support your answer with examples from the text.
7. Define freedom in the context of this novel. It's a concept invoked by several characters—do they all envision freedom in the same way? Do different characters' ideas of freedom have anything in common? What about yourself—what does freedom mean or look like to you?
8. Near the end of the novel, Marisol says "there is no better mirror than seeing / your own skin worn over / someone else's soul" [370]. What does she mean? If "skin" is used metaphorically as well as literally, how does the meaning change? For instance, how is Lourdes' metaphorical skin being worn by her daughters and holding a mirror up to her?
9. Discuss this statement: "The stories we tell ourselves can be / just as powerful as the truth" [73]. Do you agree with it? Why or why not? How does this statement play out in Marisol and Genevieve's narrative?
10. After following this novel's expansive symbolism around the literal and metaphorical idea of skin and the ways it invokes identity (whether culturally rooted, internally developed, or externally imposed), what do you make of this book's title? In what ways do the complexities of skin and kinship collide or overlap in the novel? Use the text to support your answer.

READ-ALIKE SUGGESTIONS

NOVELS IN VERSE

- *Bright Red Fruit* by Safia Elhillo
- *Clap When You Land* by Elizabeth Acevedo
- *Me (Moth)* by Amber McBride
- *Nothing Burns As Bright As You* by Ashley Woodfolk
- *Salt the Water* by Candice Iloh

CARIBBEAN-INSPIRED FANTASY

- *It Waits in the Forest* by Sarah Dass
- *The Jumbies* by Tracie Baptiste
- *King of Dead Things* by Nevin Holness
- *Root Magic* by Eden Royce
- *Shadowshaper* by Daniel José Older

EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

A CHORUS OF VERSES

Using key themes from Zoboï's novel (e.g., family, identity, freedom, transformation, power, stories, and more), have students create found poems by selecting phrases and lines of verse from the novel. The poem should dig into the theme and what it means to a specific character in the novel or to the student. Enhance this activity and give students more words to work with by having them include phrases from companion nonfiction texts about Caribbean folklore and Black Diaspora oral traditions.

KRIK? KRAK! I HEARD THAT!

As a class, explore professional storytelling and/or spoken word performances by watching performances and reading about these oral traditions in the Caribbean. Afterward, break students into groups and assign each group a passage or passages from *(S)Kin* to close read together. Groups should pay especial attention to the rhythms, sound patterns, and musicality of Zoboï's verse and how they connect with the words' meanings—reading passages out loud is a great way to start. Each group will then write a reflection on how Zoboï uses these elements to echo oral traditions in Black culture and how these echoes enhance the narrative.

WHAT DO MONSTERS SEE IN THE MIRROR?

Have students choose any description of one of the novel's soucouyants (their whole selves, their fiery natures, their precious skins, etc.) and then bring that description to life. Students should all produce their art on the same size canvas (physical or digital), and they can choose whatever mix of media and fill the canvas to whatever extent they feel best suits the moment they are illustrating. Each student will write an artist statement—at least 600 words—to explain how their illustration brings their chosen passage to life, to describe their methodology (why these colors, shapes, sizes, media/materials, perspective, etc.), and to reflect on what they've learned about their creative process. If you have willing colleagues at hand, this is a great activity for collaboration with art classes.

This guide was prepared by Anastasia Collins, MA, MLIS, librarian, youth literature scholar, and anti-oppression educator. Follow them at @DarkLiterata.

"ALL GEOGRAPHY IS WITHIN ME." (EDWIDGE DANTICAT, 2018)

Have students individually or in groups research the history of Caribbean migration to the U.S. Where possible, students should include details and experiences from local Caribbean American communities. This could be through first-person interviews, consulting with local or national cultural organizations, or exploring oral histories or archival collections. Students can create a timeline, make a map, or write up a traditional report to present what they find (with sources cited!) and discuss the connection they see between migration, cultural identity, and the experiences of Marisol and her mother in the novel.

GETTING UNDER A STORY'S SKIN

For this activity, have students choose one of the following options:

- Create a monstrous playlist. Music and sound are such strong anchors for both Marisol and Genevieve. Create a playlist of no fewer than ten songs for one of the girls. The playlist should connect to Marisol or Genevieve's character, her story, and her transformation(s). Write a brief reflection (300–400 words) to accompany your playlist to explain your choices. Traditional and contemporary Afro Caribbean music are great places to start.
- Write a new scene for the story. So much is said and unsaid in this verse novel, so here is your chance to fill in the blanks. Craft a new, unwritten scene for the narrative. It can be a moment that precedes the story, happens during the story, or comes after the story's conclusion. To feel like it belongs in the same story, your scene should be informed by the characterizations and events in the novel, and it should be written in verse. At the same time, your scene should show readers something new about the characters—their senses of self, their joys and struggles, their motivations, etc.