Reflections:

A Student Response Journal for…

The Skin I’m In

by Sharon Flake
Pre-Reading

1. Consider the title of Sharon Flake's novel, *The Skin I'm In*. What feelings or expectations does it conjure up for you? How comfortable are you in your own skin? Are you proud of your skin? Ashamed of it? Both? Write a descriptive paragraph or poem titled “The Skin I'm In” in which you explore how you feel about your skin—which is, after all, a large part of the image you present to the world.
Chapter 1

2. While first impressions are often wrong, it remains that we sometimes have gut reactions about people the first time we see them. Of Miss Saunders, Maleeka says, “The first time I seen her, I got a bad feeling inside...like she was somebody I should steer clear of.” Choose a teacher from your past that you had a strong feeling about at first sight. (The strong feeling doesn’t have to be bad, like Maleeka’s—it could be excitement, among others.) Describe your first encounter with the teacher, your feelings then, and how they did or didn’t change over time.


4. Since second grade, John-John McIntyre has been teasing Maleeka about a quality he himself possesses: very dark skin. Pretend you are a child psychologist. Write a short evaluation of John-John in which you attempt to explain what he gets out of teasing Maleeka about their shared skin color.

5. Maleeka says, “I’m like Superman when I get Charlese’s clothes on.” Sometimes just wearing a certain outfit or favorite piece of clothing can make us feel more self-confident—ready to take on the world. Describe a set or piece of clothing that you own (or have borrowed) that makes you feel powerful every time you put it on. When do you tend to wear it?

6. Maleeka’s classmates base their assessment of her on her looks and clothes. As Maleeka puts it, “The don’t say nothing about the fact that I’m a math whiz...or that I got a good memory and never forget one single, solitary thing I read.” Do you find that this is the case with students at your school? Explain your answer, giving at least two examples from your experience.

7. Do you think adults in general are as focused on and judgmental about the appearances of their peers as teenagers are? Why or why not?

8. Write a paragraph from Char’s point of view, describing what’s going through “your” mind when you demand that Maleeka take off the clothes she’s borrowed from you.
Chapter 2

9. Miss Saunders explains her sudden appearance at Maleeka’s school by saying that she wants to “give something back.” Unimpressed, Charlese replies, “Good. You can start by giving me them designer shoes and that three-hundred dollar watch you got on.”

Charlese has a point. Is it hypocritical to say one wants to help those less fortunate while wearing such expensive clothing—the price of which could have bought new school equipment if it had been donated rather than spent on luxury items?

Tai shows up at that moment, and Miss Saunders doesn’t get to reply to Charlese. Imagine that Miss Saunders and Charlese do continue their conversation. Write the page of dialogue that might ensue, beginning with Miss Saunders’s response to Charlese’s comment. How does she explain her expensive clothes and jewelry? You decide.

10. Maleeka describes Tai as a “strange chick,” the weirdest teacher she’s ever had. In a detailed paragraph, describe a teacher you’ve had that seemed strange or eccentric to you. What was distinctive about the teacher? Did the “strangeness” affect the way you viewed the class or the teacher’s authority? Do you think strangeness—or somehow falling outside the norm—is a negative or positive quality in a teacher? Explain.

11. Maleeka’s mother has taken to sewing clothes as a means of coping with her husband’s death. Describe an activity that always makes you feel better when you’re experiencing painful emotions. What is it about the activity that eases your mind?
Chapter 3

12. The principal at McClenton Middle has ordered all of the doors removed from bathroom stalls as a means of trying to curtail student smoking and graffiti. Maleeka scoffs at his solution: “Like that’s gonna stop [us].” Brainstorm and write down three different solutions or actions that you think would more effectively accomplish the principal’s goal.

13. Maleeka says, “You got to go along with Char if you want to get along with her. You can’t be all sensitive.” Describe someone you know who people have to go along with to get along with. It doesn’t have to be a peer; it could be a parent or other adult. Do you “go along” with the person? If so, is it worth it? Explain. If not, what do you lose or gain by not “going along”?

14. We’re often told that people who make fun of others do so because their own self esteem is low. That’s an easy answer and a reassuring idea—but it doesn’t always seem true or satisfying. Why do you think we make fun of others? What is entertaining about it? Do you think that it’s “natural” to do so?

15. As Caleb, write a journal entry covering what happened on the bus back from Washington. Are you ashamed of yourself? Relieved? Depressed?

16. What do you think of the plan Maleeka came up with after the bus trip? Was it effective? Is there anything wrong with it? Would you have done things differently?
Chapter 4

17. In a detailed paragraph or, if you prefer, a poem, complete Miss Saunders’ writing assignment. What does your face say to the world?

18. After saying that Malcolm is “fine,” Maleeka adds, “He’s half and half—got a white dad and a black momma. He’s lucky. He looks more like his dad than his mom.”

Maleeka believes that light skin is more attractive and valuable than dark skin. How do you think she came to this conclusion? In what ways does our society support or encourage this belief?

19. Miss Saunders invites the class to comment on her own face. Imagine, for a moment, that you are a teacher. Every day you stand before a class of frequently judgmental teenagers, all with their eyes on you, many not wanting to be there in the first place. How does it feel? Why do you do it?