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The Skin I'm In
Sharon Flake



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To The Student

Although we may read a novel, play, or work of non-fiction for enjoyment, each time we read one, we are building and practicing important basic reading skills. In our ever-more complex society, in which reading has become more and more crucial for success, this, in itself, is an important reason to spend time reading for enjoyment.

Some readers, however, are able to go beyond basic reading techniques and are able to practice higher thinking skills by reflecting on what they have read and how what they read affects them. It is this act of reflection—that is, stopping to think about what you are reading—that this journal is attempting to encourage.

To aid you, we have included writing prompts for each section; however, if you find something that you wish to respond to in the book more compelling than our prompts, you should write about that. We hope you enjoy reading this book and that the act of responding to what you have read increases this enjoyment.

After you read the indicated sections, choose the questions to which you will respond. Keep in mind that there are no right or wrong answers to these prompts, and there is no one direction in which you must go.

The Skin I'm In

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 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 5

20. Maleeka describes Desda as a “short, fat girl,” adding, “Desda’s gonna read on grade level when pigs fly.” Is this an honest or a cruel description given the way it’s phrased? Do you get the impression that Maleeka feels that she’s better than Desda? Write a quick note to Maleeka commenting on her description of Desda and its relevance to her own situation.
21. Rewrite the scene in which Maleeka and Desda work on their assignment from Desda’s point of view. What is Desda thinking and feeling as Maleeka works?

How does she think Maleeka feels about her?

22. What makes Maleeka’s “Akeelma” journal entry so refreshing is that she focuses on how, even in the squalor of the slave ship, Akeelma’s crush on Kinjari thrives and makes her worry about her looks. One might assume that, faced with the horror of being made a slave, Akeelma would have no energy or desire left to get excited about a crush. Maleeka shows us Akeelma’s humanity—even though she has been brutalized and forced into animal-like conditions, she’s still an ordinary teenage girl.

Try your hand at Miss Saunders’ assignment. Write a diary entry as a teenager from any century before the twentieth. Don’t copy Maleeka, but strive to write as freshly and surprisingly as she has.

Chapter 15

41. Of Miss Saunders, Miss Benson says, “I hate pushy people. Every day, she’s coming to me with some new idea she came up with. Questioning why things can’t be done differently.”

In some job situations, the ability to frequently come up with new ideas for improving the way things are done is highly valued. What would you do if you were in a job situation in which there was a real need for improvement and you had many ideas you were sure would help, but no one wanted to hear them?

42. One of the unusual things about *The Skin I'm In* is that it covers not only how McClenton *students* feel about the new teacher, Miss Saunders, but also how other teachers feel about her, too. How do you think the teachers at your school would react if Miss Saunders became a new teacher there tomorrow? (If you’re not familiar with many of the teachers, write about how you think just one of yours would react.) Write at least one detailed paragraph imagining what the teacher reaction might be.
43. Char speaks to Mr. Pajolli in a “sweet, baby voice” while sucking on her finger and showing off her “skintight” pants. Describe a time when you witnessed someone blatantly using his or her sexuality to try to manipulate another person. Do you feel it’s a fair tactic? Explain your answer.
44. Of Tai, Mr. Pajolli says, “Nobody can be bored in her class, unless they want to be.” List at least five ways that, as a teacher, you would attempt to engage a student like Char—one who seems to *want* to be bored. Then choose the one that you think would be the most effective and explain why you believe it would work.