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Reflections: A Student Response Journal



The Poisonwood Bible
Barbara Kingsolver



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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.

To the Teacher

Barbara Kingsolver's *The Poisonwood Bible* deals with several mature topics, including child prostitution, the destructive diamond trade in Africa, sexuality, death of children, nudity, obscenity, racism, and violence against women and animals. Instructors should also be prepared to discuss the complex political events that act as a backdrop to Kingsolver's story of the Price family. In addition, Kingsolver has a decided message in this book, which is that America and Europe destroyed the Congo. Kingsolver does not deal with these issues gratuitously; they are fairly essential to her story.

Pre-Reading

1. Books, movies, television shows, magazines, comic books, video games, and even commercials can take us to different places, times, realities, and worlds. Through various stories we can learn about distant peoples and places. Sometimes, these books and movies can tell us true things about a place and the people who live there, but books and movies can also misrepresent a different country, the people who live there, and the customs that those people practice in their homeland. There are many different movies and books about Africa, and there are many different versions of Africa in movies, books, and television shows.

Think back to movies you have seen or books you have read about Africa. What do you know about this continent? What kind of assumptions do you make about Africa and the history of the countries there? Write a journal entry describing how Africa is depicted in a story that you have either read, seen, or been told about. Be sure to include details about how people were portrayed, what you learned about the environment there, and any details you might have learned about customs.

Book One: Genesis

Leah Price

3. Traveling far from home can be difficult, especially when you are leaving behind everyday items. The Price family must leave Georgia and all of the luxuries of their home. Going to Africa means that the girls and Mrs. Price must choose carefully what items they can bring and what items they cannot bring. Selecting what to take becomes even more difficult because of the weight limits on the plane. In the end, the Price family brings a strange combination of household items to Africa. Leah details several of those items: "In addition to the cake mixes, she piled up a dozen cans of Underwood deviled ham; Rachel's ivory plastic hand mirror with powdered-wig ladies on the back; a stainless-steel thimble; a good pair of scissors; a dozen number-2 pencils; a world of Band-Aids, Anacin, Absorbine Jr.; and a fever thermometer."

If you were to leave home for a year and could pack only ten items, what would you bring and why? Make a list of these items, explaining briefly why you would bring each one.

Rachel Price

4. The Price girls have very different personalities. Because this novel is told in the first person from each character's perspective, we really get to know each girl. We become familiar with the Price girls' voices, their misspellings, their desires, their dislikes, and their motivations. Through each chapter, we learn how what kind of personalities the girls have. For example, Rachel talks a great deal about her clothing and her hair, while Leah spends very little time describing herself and more time describing the circumstances leading to the Price family's arriving in Kilanga. Each girl's personality affects how she talks about what happens in the Congo.

Book Two: The Revelation

Orleanna Price (Sanderling Island, Georgia)

15. Orleanna reflects on a scene at the market in which she and Leah anger a local woman by acting outside of the customs: “Until that moment I’d thought I could have it both ways: to be one of them, and also my husband’s wife. What conceit! I was his instrument, his animal. Nothing more. How we wives and mothers do perish at the hands of our own righteousness. I was just one more of those women who clamp their mouths shut and wave the flag as their nation rolls off to conquer another in war. Guilty or innocent, they have everything to lose.”

Pretend that you are Orleanna. Referring to the above passage, write a letter to a newspaper advice columnist, explaining how you feel about your husband, Reverend Price. Explain how you feel about your marriage. Be sure to include whether you have a happy marriage, what makes you happy in your marriage, and what you need to work on in your marriage. Ask the advice columnist what you should do. Your letter should be written in a conversational tone. Do not add any information that does not appear in the book. Include only examples and instances that you see in the story.

Leah Price

16. Not everyone sees objects the same way. While some people may look at a paper box and see a box for storing old clothing or books, little children may look at the same box and see a potential dollhouse or fort. Often, people view things based on their perspectives. In Kilanga, the villagers view objects very differently from the way the Price family views things. Leah reflects on the odd dressing habits of her neighbors: “On cool mornings Tata Boanda also wears a light green sweater with a white border on the placket—he’s quite a sight, with his muscular chest as manly as all get-out framed by the V-neck of a ladies’-wear sweater! But if you think about it, how would he or anyone here ever know it’s a lady’s sweater?”

Book Three: The Judges

26. Near the end of Book Two, Mrs. Price begins to become lethargic and takes to her bed. The Reverend cannot make his wife get out of bed. The girls seem lost without their mother. Though her family needs her, Mrs. Price either cannot or will not get out of bed to take care of her family and the household. Think back over the course of Book Two. Many strange and terrible things have happened to the Price family and to the political status of the Congo. The Price family lives in a country that is politically unstable, and their source of money and food has just been cut off. Mrs. Price is very upset about this.

Imagine that you have a friend who, like Mrs. Price, has just found out some very upsetting news. Though your friend must act on this the news, he or she will not get out of bed. Write a speech in which you urge your friend to get out of bed. Your speech must address three things: why your friend is upset, what your friend can do to feel better, and why your friend must get out of bed. Your speech should be at least one page long and include specific advice.

Leah

27. Leah discusses the new hardships of the Price family income: “Fifty dollars a month in Belgian francs might not sound like much, but in Kilanga it had made us richer than anybody. Now we are to get by on zero dollars a month in Belgian francs, and it doesn’t take long to figure out that story problem.”

Do you agree with the Mission League’s decision to stop funding the Prices after Independence? In the 1960s, fifty dollars a month was not a lot of money, but the economic position of the Congo at that time allowed foreigners using foreign currency to live very comfortably. Write a report on how much a family of six would need to live today. Approximate how much money they should spend on food, clothing, housing, water, heat, and other necessities. In the last paragraph of your report, reflect on how things have changed from the 1960s to today, and why people need more than fifty dollars to live.