

A DISCUSSION GUIDE TO

IMAGINE A WORLD WHERE WATER IS FOR EVERYONE...

THIRST



A 2022 GLOBAL
READ ALOUD
SELECTION

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THE AUTHOR
OF COUNT ME IN
VARSHA
BAJAJ



BOOK OVERVIEW

A 2022 GLOBAL READ ALOUD SELECTION!

Minni lives in the poorest part of Mumbai, where access to water is limited and she often spends hours at the communal taps. Lately, though, even that access is threatened by water shortages and thieves who are stealing this precious commodity—an act that Minni accidentally witnesses one night. Meanwhile, in the high-rise building where she just started to work, she discovers that water streams out of every faucet and there’s even a rooftop swimming pool. Then one day, Minni encounters the water mafia boss and faces her biggest dilemma yet—should she expose him even if it means risking her job . . . and maybe her life? How did her future get so complicated?



ABOUT THE AUTHOR OF *THIRST*



VARSHA BAJAJ was born and raised in Mumbai and immigrated to the United States for graduate education in educational psychology in her early 20s. As a young college graduate, she worked in neighborhoods similar to Minni’s through a community health clinic. She returned before writing *Thirst* and realized that water was more of a concern than it had been 30 years ago. At the same time, information pipelines via cellphones had made it into the hands of all people, because no matter class or social status, everyone knows someone with a cellphone. Excited to see that activism had increased, Varsha started drafting Minni’s story.

ABOUT THE CREATOR OF THE GUIDE

NAWAL QAROONI is an educator and writer who works in education spaces to support a holistic model of literacy instruction. She and her team of coaches at **NQC Literacy** work with teachers and school leaders to grow a love of reading and composition in ways that exalt the whole child, their cultural capital and their intrinsic curiosities. She is the proud daughter of immigrants, and mothering her four young kids shapes her understanding of teaching and learning. Nawal’s first book about family literacy with Heinemann is forthcoming in 2023.

BEFORE YOU READ

Thirst takes place in Mumbai, formerly known as Bombay, on the Indian West Coast. As author Varsha Bajaj says, it is a city of overwhelming contrasts, of “haves and have nots.” It is the commercial capital of India and the heart of Bollywood music and film and glamor and therefore attracts people from all over India in search of jobs and opportunity. Situate Mumbai on a map for readers. You might show students what the city’s stark differences in wealth—high rises and shanty towns—look like visually via images, such as these **photographs**¹. It is important to avoid poverty tourism when sharing this text with students, so be sure to elevate Minni and the other characters in the book as the whole and nuanced characters they are.

UNDERSTANDING THE WATER CRISIS

Research the water crisis to provide context on Minni’s situation with students. Could you imagine a world where you couldn’t easily drink clean water? Or a world where you worried about bathing, making a cup of tea, or swimming? Water is critically important to live, but not everyone in the world has access to clean water.

World Water Day (March 22) was established by the United Nations in 1993 as an international day to highlight the importance of safe water and bring awareness to the world water crisis.

Visit these websites and support students in the gathering of their thinking, potentially in a **KWL chart**², tracking what the students know, what they’re wondering, and learn after reading.

[water.org/our-impact/water-crisis](https://www.water.org/our-impact/water-crisis)

[un.org/en/global-issues/water](https://www.un.org/en/global-issues/water)

[unicef.org/india/what-we-do/clean-drinking-water](https://www.unicef.org/india/what-we-do/clean-drinking-water)

What I KNOW	What I WONDER	What I LEARNED

1. <https://scroll.in/magazine/893888/mumbais-staggering-inequality-comes-into-clear-focus-in-an-american-photographers-drone-images>

2. <https://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/printouts/chart-0>

READING AND EXPLORING THIRST BY THEME

It is author Varsha Bajaj’s hope that the book will open readers’ eyes to the inequities in the world, and the resilience, bravery, and power kids like Minni each have to make change. “Every book I write is an attempt to have a conversation with kids and readers. A lot of the time we think of privilege as existing among the rich and famous, but to somebody, each and every one of us has privilege. There are kids, like Minni, who are struggling with the bare necessities of life.”

STRENGTH OF FAMILY AND FRIENDSHIPS

- How does Minni’s friend Faiza show up for her throughout the text? PP. 17, 103
- In what ways does Shanti’s storytelling teach her students? P. 17-19
- What kind of relationship does Minni have with Pinky? How does it differ from her relationship with Faiza? How does it affect her relationship with Faiza? PP. 97, 101
- What is the significance of Minni’s Ma teaching her to make rotis? P. 53
- How does Minni maintain and grow her strength despite the consistent challenges she faces? P. 61
- In what ways do the neighborhood people support each other? P. 76
- Minni is incredibly close to her mother and brother. Choose one, either Ma or Sanjay, and tab across four lines in the text where their tight bonds are evident. *Teachers, these bits of evidence from the text could be turned into a thematic writing composition or discussion.*
- Positive relationships in Minni’s life, as with her teacher Shanti and brother, support her resilience and growth enormously. The empathetic camaraderie, kindness, and collective strength of those who surround her help Minni remain hopeful. Use a thinking organizer to jot moments across the text when Minni is lifted up by her community, her family, her teacher, or her friends.

Support	Community	Family	Teacher	Friends
Evidence from the Text				
Evidence from the Text				

SOCIETAL STRATIFICATION

- How are class differences starkly evident in the text? Find three examples to share. P. 19
- Why does Minni’s Baba fear they will be considered “uneducated slum dwellers”? P. 33
- What does it mean when Minni says that her brain “churns like the sea during a storm”? What is she worrying about? P. 39
- What do you learn about young girls in Mumbai’s poor neighborhoods and what they potentially have to sacrifice through the conversation between Latika and Minni? P. 121
- In the text, the author writes, “Technology gives us power.” In what ways does technology give Minni and her friends power? In what ways does it change the way we live? P. 144 *For a nonfiction pairing with this question, learn from reading **this piece**¹ from The Guardian, “Girls Learn App Coding to Navigate Their Way Out of Their Mumbai Slum,” which Varsha Bajaj used in her storytelling research.*
- On page 160, we learn the diagnosis of Minni’s mother’s illness. How do class differences show up again in the text, this time in healthcare? P. 160
- What does Sanjay mean when he tells his sister they are both “thirsty”? P. 170

INTERSECTIONALITY

No social issue stands alone. As we see in *Thirst*, inequities are exacerbated by an onslaught of perpetual issues around class, access to education, clean water supply and cycles of poverty. Minni’s mother is unable to work without access to proper healthcare, triggering Minni’s need to take over, leading to Minni’s inability to stay consistent at school. In 1989, scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term *intersectionality* to describe how social issues overlap. Depending on the age of your students, you can share more with them via **this Vox video**,² perhaps prompting them to create a Venn diagram of overlapping challenges Minni faces.

Questions to prompt discussions on intersectionality:

- What do you learn about water privilege and inequity in the text? How do Minni and her community members get clean water, how do those living in the high rises get clean water, and how do these stark differences affect their everyday lives?
- How is Minni’s life different on a daily basis from Pinky’s? How do you imagine Pinky’s life will continue to be different as she grows up, and why?
- In what ways does access to healthcare affect quality of life? How do healthcare inequities show up in the text?
- How does education and access to information potentially cause positive changes in the lives of people and the characters in *Thirst*?

1. <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2016/aug/30/girls-india-learn-app-coding-navigate-way-out-mumbai-slum>

2. <https://www.vox.com/the-highlight/2019/5/20/18542843/intersectionality-conservatism-law-race-gender-discrimination>

WRITING EXTENSIONS

SHARING THE WRITING PROCESS WITH READERS

Varsha’s characters emerge when she writes skeletal stories that often don’t make it to the final rendering of the story. “A writer grows in the process of writing books because it is such an act of faith. You have no guarantees. You really don’t know when you start if something viable is going to be the result,” she said. For other writers she has a bit of advice: “Be patient with yourself.”

PLAY WITH THE WORD “THIRST”

What are all the connotations of the word *thirsty*? As Varsha Bajaj says, “Water is life.” Generate your own composition using the word *thirst*. It can be visual. It can be poetry. It can be a recording. It can be an essay. Use the word *thirst* in more than one context.

PLAY WITH CATHARTIC REFLECTION

Sometimes all we need is the blank page to dump our thoughts and process the world around us. Set a timer for students and let them draw or write their feelings—reflecting, like Minni, on any aspect of their lives. Teachers might say, “I invite you to reflect on any part of your life that’s bothering you or feels good, for me to read and chat with you about or for your eyes alone. You can draw pictures, write words, or do both.”

PLAY WITH POETRY

Minni often writes in her journal or responds to life through poetry. Journaling is cathartic, providing an outlet or a release for emotion. She writes about what she learns in school. Use her example as your own mentor for releasing emotion.

Strong emotion I experienced	Moment I felt that way	My writing as a result (stream of consciousness, poetry, list)
Mentor: Minni’s excitement	When she learned about creating apps to address problems in the world.	<i>This brand-new language has fascinating words. Apps and algorithms, bits and bytes, cookies and clips, data and disks, windows, rooms, and firewalls, home pages, mirrors, monitors and mouse. Where will it take me? To college? To a computer job? This brand-new language Has new words for all my new dreams.</i> P. 93 (Additional examples: P. 114; P. 161)

NONFICTION RESEARCH ABOUT THE WATER CRISIS

Thirst is a fictional story about characters in Mumbai, but the author visited neighborhoods similar to where Minni lives and conducted a lot of research to be sure she was accurately portraying the book's issues. Below is a list of articles Varsha Bajaj read as part of her writing process. You might jigsaw the articles with students and have them share additional facts they learned to provide further context for the book. Highlight too, as you read, which parts of the story are fictionalized and which factual truths overlap with Bajaj's research.

Article	Facts I Learned <i>What additional facts did you learn from the nonfiction article?</i>	Fictional Connections <i>How did characters in the text experience what you learned about in the article?</i>
Well Owners-Tanker Mafia Depleting Ground Water¹ , from the <i>Mumbai Mirror</i> ¹		
The Water Story²		
City Slums Get Colourful Facelift³ , The Hindu		

1. <https://mumbaimirror.indiatimes.com/mumbai/civic/well-owners-tanker-mafia-depleting-ground-water/articleshow/68787208.cms>
2. <https://thewaterstory.com.au/2019/11/03/the-water-mafia-of-mumbai/>
3. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/mumbai/city-slums-get-colourful-facelift/article24612259.ece>



PRAISE FOR
THIRST
BY VARSHA BAJAJ

★ **“A POWERFUL** LOOK AT THE IMPORTANCE OF FREE WATER AND HOW THE INEQUALITIES SURROUNDING ITS DISTRIBUTION IMPACTS COMMUNITIES.”

—SCHOOL LIBRARY CONNECTION, STARRED REVIEW

“A POWERHOUSE OF A MIDDLE GRADE BOOK . . . A MUST READ.”

—PERNILLE RIPP, EDUCATOR AND GRA FOUNDER

“AN ENGAGING LITERARY MYSTERY.”

—PUBLISHERS WEEKLY

“WOW.

THIS IS SO GOOD!”

—COLBY SHARP, CO-FOUNDER OF NERDY BOOK CLUB AND EDUCATOR

“IN THIS POIGNANT, RELATABLE WORK, BAJAJ EXPERTLY DEPICTS CLASS AND WEALTH DIFFERENCES . . .

A VALIANT CALL FOR JUSTICE.”

—KIRKUS REVIEWS

