

Well-Read Black Girl

Finding Our Stories, Discovering Ourselves

by Glory Edim

Ballantine Books

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

GLORY EDIM is the founder of Well-Read Black Girl, a Brooklyn-based book club and digital platform that celebrates the uniqueness of Black literature and sisterhood. In fall 2017 she organized the first-ever Well-Read Black Girl Festival. She has worked as a creative strategist for over ten years at startups and cultural institutions. Most recently, she was the Publishing Outreach Specialist at Kickstarter. She serves on the board of New York City's Housing Works Bookstore.

NOTE TO THE TEACHER

In her introduction to *Well-Read Black Girl*, Glory Edim tells the reader, "In this collection, twenty-one Black women who hold diverse backgrounds and experiences share intimate memories around discovering literary reflections of themselves. They reveal what influences their craft, drives their curiosity, and defines their legacy" (xxi). Each of these well-read Black women shares a transformational moment of self-discovery. Some write about their connection with other Black women writers, recognizing their common struggle and the value of seeing oneself represented in art and media. Other contributors highlight connections with the work of Black male writers who spoke truth to their lives, and still others note their appreciation for writers



NOTE TO THE TEACHER (CONTINUED)

of other races. Due of its intersectional approach, this anthology can be used as a resource to help students of all backgrounds connect to literature in a way they might never have before.

Supporting the national Common Core State Standards (CCSS) in Reading Informational Texts; Writing; and Speaking & Listening for high school curricula, *Well-Read Black Girl: Finding Our Stories, Discovering Ourselves* is an appropriate choice for 10th, 11th, and 12th grade Language Arts, Cultural Studies, and Social Studies classes. At the college level, this book is well-suited for use in Literature, Writing, African-American Studies, Diversity Studies, and Gender Studies courses, as well as Sociology courses on feminism and race.

In the following “Examining Content Using Common Core State Standards” section of this guide, activities and discussion prompts that encourage critical analysis of *Well-Read Black Girl: Finding Our Stories, Discovering Ourselves* have been provided for use in the classroom. They are organized according to the Common Core standards they primarily support. These classroom activities and discussion prompts are designed to encourage students’ thoughtful analysis of and interaction with the text.

For a complete listing of the Standards, go to: tiny.cc/CoreStandards.

PRE-READING ACTIVITIES

Divide students into small groups and ask them to select an excerpt or short written work by one of the authors named in the PBS article, “10 Black Authors that Everyone Should Read” (tiny.cc/10BlackWriters). Each student should first read the selection independently, then discuss the following questions with their group: What is unique about the writer’s perspective? What condition, situation, or event is the focus of the text? Can you see yourself or a member of your family in the text? If so, in what way? If not, how does the text differ from your own frame of reference and what might you gain from considering its distinct perspective? Each group should then present a brief synopsis of their text to the class along with a summary of the discussion that followed.

As the anthology unfolds, it addresses some of the racist, sexist, and homophobic ideas perpetuated via the regular omission of the written perspectives of Black people or other people of color from the dominant culture—and from the historical narrative of the dominant culture itself. Developing norms for the discussion of these topics is one way to create a positive and productive collaborative learning space. Norms are a collaboratively developed set of expectations, commitments, and agreements that help build trust and strengthen the group’s engagement and investment in learning experiences (e.g. “Invite multiple perspectives,” “Speak your truth as you know it,” and “Ask questions to avoid making assumptions”). Ask students to identify concerns and questions that would be helpful for framing and directing the conversation. As a class, develop a list of norms that meet those identified needs, and distribute a list for students to reference as they read and during classroom discussions.

Have students write personal reflections on their own experiences finding or not finding themselves in literature. They should address the importance of identifying with a character, setting, or plot points in a fictional work as well as the role literature has played in the development of their identity thus far. As they begin reading *Well-Read Black Girl*, ask students to consider how they can build a deeper understanding of and appreciation for diverse experiences that are often marginalized rather than centered within American culture.

EXAMINING CONTENT USING COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS

KEY IDEAS AND DETAILS

- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.9-10.1 Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.11-12.1 Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text, including determining where the text leaves matters uncertain.

The essays by Rebecca Walker, Jamia Wilson, and Kaitlyn Greenidge offer perspectives on how writing can help others.

What led Rebecca Walker to the realization that writing could be helpful to others? What explanation does Walker give for continuing to write? What evidence does Walker present that reveals her to be equal parts writer and activist? Why is it important to her that she use her writing as a form of activism?

What are some of the ways in which Jamia Wilson found solace in the works of Nikki Giovanni? How did *Spin a Soft Black Song* affirm her existence and place in the world?

What does Kaitlyn Greenidge say about the uniqueness of one's personal experiences and how does that help to explain why she reads? What advice does she offer the reader and why in such abundance? Why does Greenidge believe that the list she provides to the reader, in its entirety, is necessary? What implicit idea about womanhood might she be trying to convey to other women? What evidence is there to support this?

CLASSROOM ACTIVITY

- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.9-10.2 Determine a central idea of a text and analyze its development over the course of the text, including how it emerges and is shaped and refined by specific details; provide an objective summary of the text.
 - CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.11-12.2 Determine two or more central ideas of a text and analyze their development over the course of the text, including how they interact and build on one another to provide a complex analysis; provide an objective summary of the text.
1. Examine the essays by Walker, Wilson, and Greenidge, and discuss the following questions as a class: How do these writers collectively answer the question, "Is it better to use your writing to help others, or to be helped by what you read?" What beliefs do they espouse in support of their answer? Students should support their responses with evidence from the text. They may start by using a graphic organizer to identify comments by each writer that either explicitly or implicitly support or reveal their ideas about help.
 2. One of the recurrent themes in *Well-Read Black Girl* is invisibility. Mahogany Browne talks about this in her essay "Complex Citizen":

"The young black and brown women of *The Bluest Eye* spun me into myself, until I understood our interactions are all an ecosystem of trust and love and remorse and praise and shade and compliments and to be

CLASSROOM ACTIVITY (CONTINUED)

seen—my goodness, we all just want to be seen. Morrison allowed me to speak what it means to be witness and witnessed. What it means to be a house and a door. What it means to be your own self and still a part of the entire conversation. To be a black woman and more than a shadow smudging. To be a complex citizen. To be a spectacular consideration. To be honored with space for flawed growth. And like a good West Coast tradition, I learned to be fearful enough to swing on anything that dared to darken my own ideas of myself.” (163)

What exactly does Browne mean when she says, “we all just want to be seen”? What does she mean when she asks “. . . what it means to be witness and witnessed”? How is Browne consumed by her sense of invisibility, and how does she account for her journey from invisibility to visibility?

3. In “Dear Beloved,” Nicole Dennis-Benn speaks of “being erased.” How was she made “invisible”? In what ways were her early attempts to overcome this invisibility incomplete? How did her understanding of becoming visible evolve? What does she mean when she says, “it’s up to us to own our narratives that could someday counter the imaginations of those like Sister Francis, who cage us inside their ignorance” (108)?
4. Compare “The Need for Kisses” by Dhonielle Clayton and “Go Tell It” by Barbara Smith. Work in small groups to complete the following activity: Discuss how James Baldwin, Dhonielle Clayton, and Barbara Smith might be categorized. Are they “seen,” “invisible,” or somewhere in between? Consider the roles that visibility, invisibility, and being seen play in determining how they view themselves and how they are viewed by society.

CLASSROOM ACTIVITY

- **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.9-10.3** Analyze how the author unfolds an analysis or series of ideas or events, including the order in which the points are made, how they are introduced and developed, and the connections that are drawn between them.
- **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.11-12.3** Analyze a complex set of ideas or sequence of events and explain how specific individuals, ideas, or events interact and develop over the course of the text.

Examine the ideas of myth and mythology discussed in “Finding My Family” by Bsrat Mezghebe, “Putting Women Center Stage: A Conversation with Lynn Nottage,” and “Dreaming Awake” by N. K. Jemisin. Jemisin recognizes that the “[e]pic fantasy was certainly not black women doing . . . well anything” (118). Nottage states, “I think what happens in theater is that we collectively speak ourselves into being by creating a new mythology” (144), and Mezghebe tells the reader that she “needed [her] parents’ origin stories to make sense of [her] own” (152).

Analyze each writer’s description of mythology and origin stories. How does each use her words to reflect the necessity of the mythology or an origin story for black voices? What instances of figurative language in the descriptions further emphasize the significance of these? What value is placed on the mythology in comparison with black history? How do mythology and Black history contribute to the narrative of Black people in America?

CRAFT AND STRUCTURE

- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.9-10.4 Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative, connotative, and technical meanings; analyze the cumulative impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone (e.g., how the language of a court opinion differs from that of a newspaper).
 - CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.11-12.4 Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative, connotative, and technical meanings; analyze how an author uses and refines the meaning of a key term or terms over the course of a text (e.g., how Madison defines faction in Federalist No. 10).
1. In “Magic Mirrors” Jesmyn Ward writes, “I loved books with girl protagonists. It didn’t matter when or where the story was set; if it featured a girl on an adventure, I’d read it, savoring the experience as the heroine lived the kind of life I didn’t. Had the agency I didn’t” (3). What does Ward mean by “agency”? What about her lack of agency caused her discomfort after finishing a story? Ultimately, how does Ward gain the agency that she is seeking?
 2. In “Living a ‘Soft Black Song,’” what does Jamia Wilson mean when she calls *Spin a Soft Black Song* her “textual North Star” (172)? Create a collage that illustrates both literally and figuratively what a North Star is, what it signifies, and why the phrase has particular significance within the Black community.
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.9-10.6 Determine an author’s point of view or purpose in a text and analyze how an author uses rhetoric to advance that point of view or purpose.
 - CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.11-12.6 Determine an author’s point of view or purpose in a text in which the rhetoric is particularly effective, analyzing how style and content contribute to the power, persuasiveness or beauty of the text.
3. In “Her Own Best Thing” by Tayari Jones and “‘Putting Women Center Stage’: A Conversation with Lynn Nottage,” the writers reflect on books they have read more than once and contrast their perspectives upon completion of each subsequent reading. What is Jones’s purpose in sharing her experiences with *Tar Baby* by Toni Morrison? How does Nottage characterize her relationship with *A Raisin in the Sun* by Lorraine Hansberry? As each writer describes her experience with each text, what rhetorical or literary techniques do they employ in order to emphasize and clarify their ideas? How do they encourage readers to consider their own perspective in approaching a text for the first time or a subsequent read?
 4. Before any of the contributors to this book started to write, they developed their “why”; something in their experiences compelled them to put pen to paper and tell a story. Watch the following clip of Toni Morrison recounting the “why” that led her to write *The Bluest Eye*, her first novel: tiny.cc/TMorrisonMotive. Next, work with a partner to examine “Finding My Family” by Bsrat Mezghebe and “‘Legacy’: A Conversation with Rebecca Walker.” Mezghebe sees her family in the book *Boy* by Roald Dahl: “You can see how all of this sounded very familiar to me” (154). What, then, caused Mezghebe to write? How does she use Dahl’s rhetoric in combination with her own to make her ideas clear and relatable? In “Legacy,” how does Walker detail her “why”? How did her interpretations of her world inspire her to create activist literature, and how does her rhetoric compel the reader to consider taking up a pen?

INTEGRATION OF KNOWLEDGE AND IDEAS

- **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.9-10.7** Analyze various accounts of a subject told in different mediums (e.g., a person's life story in both print and multimedia), determining which details are emphasized in each account.
- **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.11-12.7** Integrate and evaluate multiple sources of information presented in different media or formats (e.g., visually, quantitatively) as well as in words in order to address a question or solve a problem.

As a class, examine the following quote and video and then discuss the questions below.

In the introduction to the book, Edim explains why she created this anthology:

"I created *Well-Read Black Girl* because I wanted to develop a creative space where Black women's voices could be centered. Storytelling is an extension of our sisterhood. From the beginning, I've dedicated WRBG to the phenomenal Black women on our bookshelves. Yet it is also a call to action for Black women to freely define their own narratives on their own terms. Like Morrison states in *Beloved*, 'Definitions belong to the definer, not the defined.' I wanted a place to build on the radical notion that Black women can read, write, and be whatever and whomever they desire." (xviii)

All of the women who contributed to this anthology profess their love for the written word, the comfort that reading brings, and the questions that each story allows them to explore. The experiences shared by each writer also contribute to and reveal their own personal narratives and provide insight into their understanding of how they fit into—or struggle to fit into—the story of America. Amma Asante espouses a similar belief in her TEDx Talk "The Power of Defining Yourself." Watch this talk at tiny.cc/AAsante and answer the following questions: How does Asante's TEDx Talk echo the message set forth in the introduction of *Well-Read Black Girl*? Why is it important to have the power to define yourself? How does that differ from finding a place among the voices in narratives that already exist? Why does Edim describe this anthology as "a call to action"? Why would Asante or Edim require this "action" of all people?

As an extension to this discussion, have students identify an artist, writer, actor, director, singer, or other professional of color who has positively influenced their identity. Tell them to create an infographic that illustrates how this professional person of color inspires them or influences who they are or want to be. They should include aspects of themselves in the infographic to demonstrate how they are alike or how they aspire to be like them.

RESEARCH TO PRESENT AND BUILD KNOWLEDGE

- **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.2, W.11-12.2** Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas, concepts, and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.

Glory Edim's anthology allows space for voices that often go unheard to be heard, and makes those who have often been made to feel "invisible" seen through acts of reading and writing about the experience of being a Black woman in America. Ask students to respond to this question and then complete the following activity:

Which of the anthology's contributors most sparked your interest in one of the books named in this anthology? Select any one of the many titles recommended throughout

RESEARCH TO PRESENT
AND BUILD KNOWLEDGE
(CONTINUED)

the anthology. Research both the author and the book, play, or article they wrote. What motivated the author to create this text? How was the text received when it was first published? Read recommended excerpts from the text or the entire book, play, or article. What aspects of their work might have resonated with the anthology's contributor? What effect, if any, did those same aspects have on *you* as a reader? What about the author's language, style, and voice stood out to you?

RESOURCES

"Ten Tips for Facilitating Classroom Discussions on Sensitive Topics" by Alicia L. Moore and Molly Deshaies (tiny.cc/TenTips): This article provides a framework for preparing students to discuss difficult topics.

"Sister Citizen: Shame, Stereotypes, and Black Women in America" by Melissa Harris Perry (tiny.cc/SisterCitizen): Perry explores the lens through which black women often see themselves versus the ways they are perceived in society.

"How Glory Edim's online book club provides community for 'invisible' black women" (tiny.cc/EdimPBS): Glory Edim, founder of the Well-Read Black Girl book club, talks about the development of her love of reading and her quest to share that love with other black women.

"Building on Windows and Mirrors: Encouraging the Disruption of Single Stories Through Children's Literature" (tiny.cc/MirrorWindow): This article in the *Journal of Children's Literature* provides a rationale for including diverse representations and multiple perspectives in text selections in order to disrupt the prevalence of single perspectives and single stories.

"Toward an Expanded Canon of Black Literature: How Some Black Writers Live and Some Die" by Mateo Askaripour (tiny.cc/BlackCanon): This article examines why some authors' legacies are solidly fixed while others slip away.

OTHER WORKS OF INTEREST

The Journey Back: Issues in Black Literature and Criticism, Houston A. Baker, Jr.
Black Voices: An Anthology of Afro-American Literature, Abraham Chapman, ed.
The Norton Anthology of African American Literature, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., ed.
The Black Poets, Dudley Randall, ed.

ABOUT THIS
GUIDE'S WRITER

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NOTES



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