



CHLORINE

SKY

A NOVEL

MAHOGANY L. BROWNE

"A story about heart and backbone, and one only Mahogany L. Browne could bring forth." — **JASON REYNOLDS**, #1 New York Times bestselling author of *LONG WAY DOWN*

DISCUSSION GUIDE

## About the Book

**A novel-in-verse about a young girl coming of age and stepping out of the shadow of her former best friend.**

SHE LOOKS ME HARD IN MY EYES  
& my knees lock into tree trunks  
My eyes don't dance like my heartbeat racing  
They stare straight back hot daggers.  
I remember things will never be the same.  
I remember things.

With gritty, heartbreaking honesty, Mahogany L. Browne delivers a novel-in-verse about broken promises, fast rumors, and when growing up means growing apart from your best friend.



Mahogany L. Browne

HC: 978-0-593-17639-9

GLB: 978-0-593-17640-5

EL: 978-0-593-17641-2

Ages: 14 and up

## About the Author



Mahogany L. Browne is a California-born, Brooklyn-based writer, educator, activist, mentor, and curator. She has published several books of poetry, and she is an Urban Word NYC artistic director (as seen on HBO's *Brave New Voices*), a founder of Women Writers of Color Reading Room, and director of BLM@Pratt programming. Mahogany facilitates performance poetry and writing workshops throughout the country. Her poetry picture books include *Black Girl Magic* and *Woke Baby*. Learn more about Mahogany Browne at [mobrowne.com](http://mobrowne.com) or on Twitter at [@mobrowne](https://twitter.com/mobrowne).

# Chlorine Sky Pre-Reading Questions

1. Consider the cover. What do you imagine the young woman could be thinking, feeling, doing, or gazing at? What feelings or thoughts do the colors—orange, yellow, black, purple, and blue—evoke in you? Consider the title. What images, ideas, feelings, memories, and thoughts do you associate with the word *chlorine*? What images, ideas, feelings, memories, and thoughts do you associate with the word *sky*?
2. Values are a person's standards of acceptable behavior and their judgment of what is important in life. What are two or three of your most important values? How or from whom did you learn each value? How do you practice each value (give a real example for each from your own life)? When has it been difficult or complicated to live by your values? How do your values compare and contrast to the values you see exhibited by your family and your friends?
3. Write a letter to your younger self that begins with "You deserve, you deserve, you deserve . . ." You can write to yourself at any age—five years or five weeks ago. What positive moments does your younger self deserve? What do you hope for your younger self to learn or realize?
4. A theme is an idea that appears over and over in a book. In *Chlorine Sky*, one major theme is friendship. What do you think makes a friendship strong? When, if ever, is it okay to let go of a friend? What qualities do you bring to your friendships? What qualities do you seek in others?
5. What different communities are you part of? Pick one that is important to you and describe your role within it. How are you different from and similar to other people within this community?

# Chlorine Sky Discussion and Writing Questions

1. Writers use repetition to emphasize important ideas. In the first poem, "ME & LAY LI AIN'T TALKING," Sky explains that she and Lay Li are having friendship trouble "cause she think she cute / cause she think I ain't." (p. 1) In the second poem, "& THIS IS WHY I THINK," Sky says, "She must think she cute! / Must think I ain't!" (p. 2) and in the third poem, "& LAY LI STRILL GRINNING," she says, "She must think she cute / But she ain't just cute / Lay Li pretty." (p. 4) What do you learn about Sky over these three poems? What were her most dominant feelings when *Chlorine Sky* begins? What and who is important to her?
2. We meet Curtis, who is cruel to Sky. How does Sky respond to Curtis in her poems? Do you believe that Lay Li has a responsibility to defend Sky? Colorism is the unjust and damaging practice of favoring lighter brown skin (and lighter brown-skinned people) and denigrating browner skin (and browner-skinned people). It has its roots in white supremacy. Lateral violence is a type of violence that is misdirected at one's peers instead of one's adversaries, and it arises from deeply rooted forms of oppression. Please explain what roles colorism and lateral violence play in *Chlorine Sky*'s opening poems.
3. In "HAVE YOU EVER STARTED A RUMOR?" (p. 74) Sky describes what it feels like to be on either side of a rumor: what it feels like to talk about someone and what it feels like to be talked about by other people. What images does Sky use to describe how both of these experiences feel? What sensory (sight, smell, touch, taste, sound) details could you add from your own experiences of rumors?

4. In "THE ASPHALT IS HOT ON MY SNEAKERS," (p. 82) Sky says, "with all my tough talk, I still don't talk about nobody's mama / Cause Tyrone's mama reminds me of my uncle / Sick on that stuff / & I don't talk about his daddy neither / Cause his daddy gone just like mines. / Instead / I say "Your handles is trash!" / & really, that's only a fact." (p. 83) What value does Sky demonstrate here? Why do you believe this is important to her? What are Sky's other values? At what moments in the book do you see her values challenged by other characters?
5. Reflect on and respond to the following quotes. You may choose to analyze the quote (What is its context? What is its purpose? What do you notice about this quote—what does it make you think or feel? What other specific quotes in the book does this quote connect to, and why?), or use it as a creative writing prompt (either by using it as a line in a story or a poem you write or as a theme or topic to explore in your own poem or story).
  - "& the argument has grown teeth / Buried its fangs into our friendship / & won't let go." (p. 30)
  - "I bop across the grass & / As soon as my ten toes touch asphalt / all the boys groan" (p. 79)
  - "Don't write about it Don't write about it? / Nah, don't leave evidence of the sads. / & never ever let it take you somewhere you can't come back from." (p. 94)
  - "Shoot, stories can change your whole world." (p. 101)
  - "Because here I am with a chance to do different / & instead of being loyal to myself / I rather be loyal to Lay Li." (p. 109)
  - "Everybody wants to be a hero, but most of us / are just misunderstood villains." (p. 144)
  - "She can't be crying for me . . ." (p. 161)
6. "Once you figure out what you gaming for / Then you can play honest & with integrity / If you show up & show the world your real self / You don't have to wait for others to claim you / You don't have to wait for others to pick you / You pick yourself, I mean / Really choose yourself every day" (p. 172)
7. In "THE RULES ARE EASY," (p. 47) Sky lists all the rules in her home. Indented and in parentheses, we are told the questions Sky's mother asks when she does not follow the rules. Write a poem about the rules of your home, using the same structure as this poem: rules of your home up against the margin, and then an adult's voice in parentheses asking questions of you when those rules aren't followed. What does Sky communicate about her home life that is similar to or different from yours? What does Sky think about the rules? Are they easy for her to follow? Why or why not? Are your rules easy for you? Why or why not?
8. "Now I realize being a girl is heavy business," Sky says. (p. 152) What is heavy about the business of being a girl, according to Sky? How does Sky's statement reflect a new understanding of her relationship with Lay Li? How does Sky's new understanding of being a girl relate to her experiences with Clifton, Tyrone, and Curtis? In *Chlorine Sky*, how is being a girl "heavy business"? Do you think being a girl is "heavy business"? Why or why not?
9. Every poem in *Chlorine Sky* tells a story. Every poem is connected to the one that came before and the one that comes after. The titles of the poems are also the first lines. Why do you think the author made the decision to write her book this way? What value does the interconnection between poems add to the book for you? Write three poems that detail three connected events in your life. Follow the same format as *Chlorine Sky*: the title of each poem is also its first line, and the last line connects to the next poem.
10. Sky has important relationships with Essa, Lay Li, Inga, and Kiyana. How does she feel about each of these characters throughout the book? Does it change? What lessons does each person teach her? What do you imagine she might teach each of them? How does Sky grow in each of these relationships?

11. Inga instructs Sky in "INGA SAYS": "Being a Black girl & a Black girl baller is a whole set of rules / you never see coming / Know the rules / So you know which ones you need to break" (p. 172). Contrast this with Coach Willie's earlier instruction to Sky: "He say I ain't supposed to say them things. / Not with my girl mouth / & I was almost surprised / Cause I ain't said nothing that they haven't already said to me." (p. 83) By the end of *Chlorine Sky*, what rules has Sky decided to break? What advice from others, including Inga and Coach Willie, does she accept? What advice does she reject?
12. We learn Sky's name in the last two lines of the book. Reflect on Sky's feelings about herself over the course of the novel. What parts of herself has Sky learned to accept by the end of *Chlorine Sky*, that she did not in the beginning?

## Praise for *Chlorine Sky*

★ "Celebrated poet Browne brings serious poetry chops to her writing but keeps it pared down and immediate for teen readers; HER OBSERVATIONS ABOUT THE INTENSITY OF PEER SCRUTINY AND THE ABILITY OF A RUMOR TO WRECK A YOUNG LIFE ARE PENETRATING."

—*The Bulletin*,  
starred review

"Readers will find the changing friendships relatable. . . . A CONTEMPORARY LOOK AT CHANGING TEENAGE FRIENDSHIPS AND FINDING WAYS TO ACCEPT YOURSELF."

—*School Library Journal*

"A PROFOUND REMINDER THAT SOMETIMES THE MOST REVOLUTIONARY THING A GIRL CAN BE IS HERSELF."

—Nic Stone,  
*New York Times* bestselling author of *Dear Martin*

"Writing in free verse, Browne explores concepts that will resonate with readers navigating toxic friendships and budding relationships and growing into themselves. . . . A COMING-OF-AGE NOVEL FOR BLACK GIRLS WHO HAVE BEEN TOLD THEY'RE TOO MUCH AND YET NEVER ENOUGH."

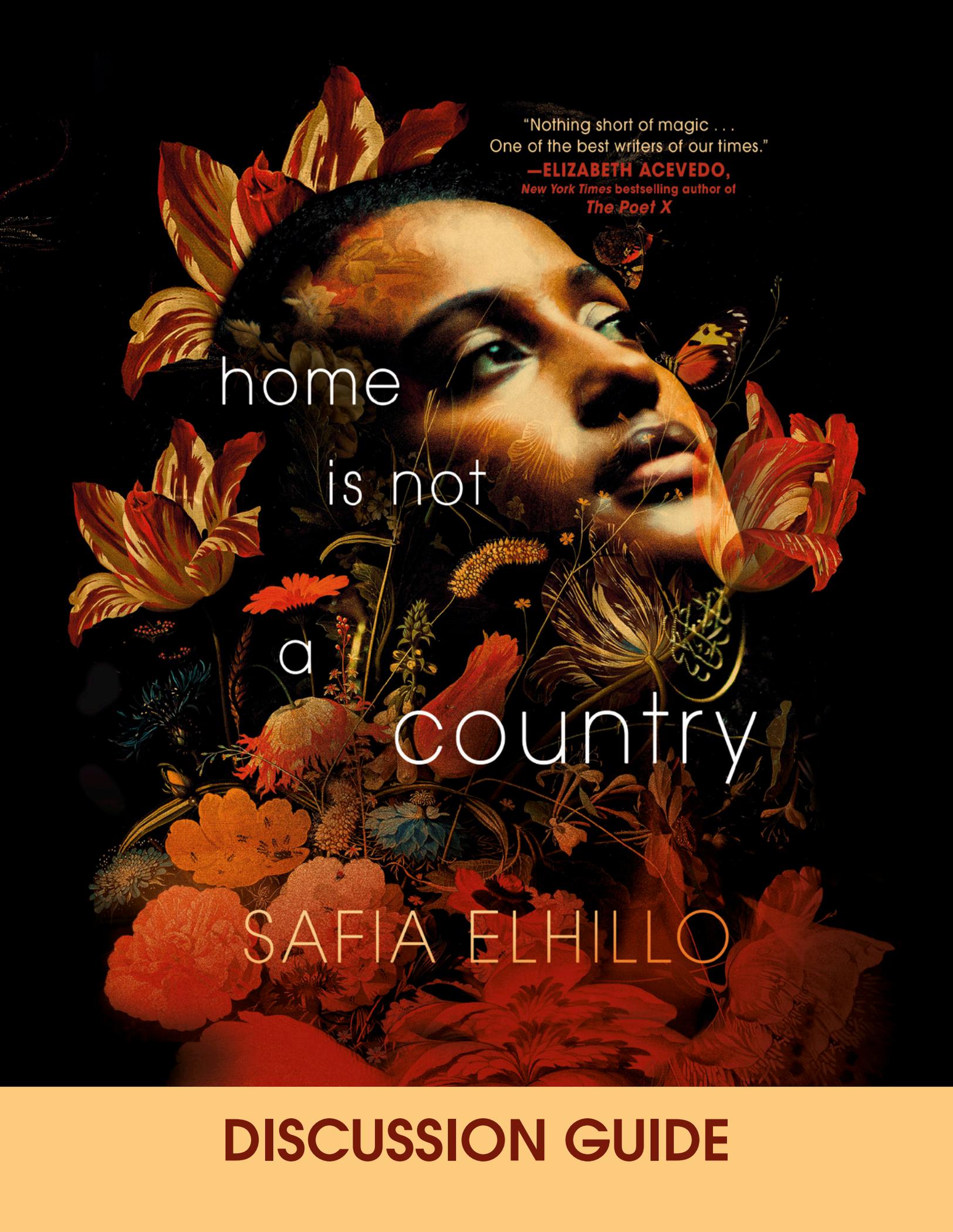
—*Kirkus Reviews*

"A STORY ABOUT HEART AND BACKBONE, AND ONE ONLY MAHOGANY L. BROWNE COULD BRING FORTH."

—Jason Reynolds,  
*New York Times* bestselling author of *Long Way Down*

"BROWNE'S POIGNANT WRITING WILL UNDOUBTEDLY BRING READERS BACK TO HER STORIES AGAIN AND AGAIN."

—Renée Watson,  
*New York Times* bestselling author



"Nothing short of magic . . .  
One of the best writers of our times."

—ELIZABETH ACEVEDO,  
New York Times bestselling author of  
*The Poet X*

home

is not

a

country

SAFIA ELHILLO

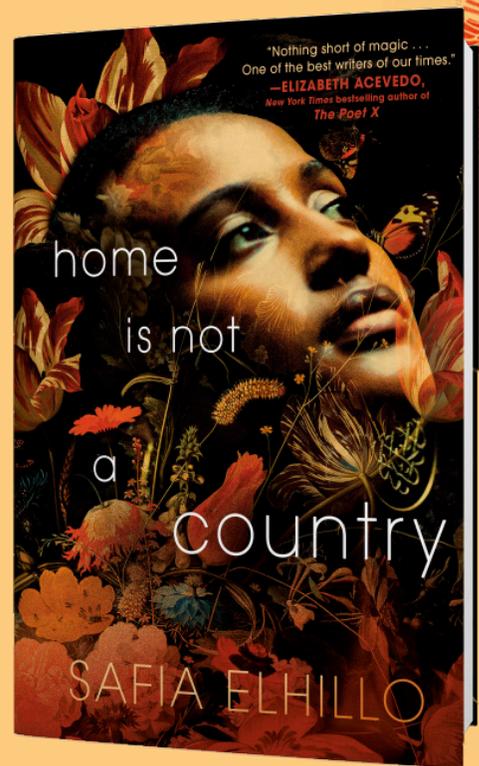
DISCUSSION GUIDE

## About the Book

**A mesmerizing novel-in-verse about family, identity, and finding yourself in the most unexpected places.**

Nima doesn't feel understood. Not by her mother, who grew up far away in a different land. Not by her suburban town, which makes her feel too much like an outsider to fit in and not enough like an outsider to feel like she belongs somewhere else. At least she has her childhood friend Haitham, with whom she can let her guard down and be herself. Until she doesn't.

As the ground is pulled out from under her, Nima must grapple with the phantom of a life not chosen, the name her parents didn't give her at birth: Yasmeen. But that other name, that other girl, might just be more real than Nima knows. And more hungry. And the life Nima has, the one she keeps wishing were someone else's . . . she might have to fight for it with a fierceness she never knew she had.



**Safia Elhillo**

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**Ages: 12 and up**

## About the Author



Photo © 2021 by Artis Theodorakis

Safia Elhillo is the author of the poetry collection *The January Children*, which received the Sillerman First Book Prize for African Poetry and an Arab American Book Award. Sudanese by way of Washington, D.C., she holds an MFA from The New School, a Cave Canem Fellowship, and a Ruth Lilly and Dorothy Sargent Rosenberg Fellowship from the Poetry Foundation. Safia is a Pushcart Prize nominee, co-winner of the Brunel International African Poetry Prize, and was listed in *Forbes Africa's* "30 Under 30." She is a 2019–2021 Stegner Fellow at Stanford University. Learn more about Safia at [safia-mafia.com](http://safia-mafia.com) or on Twitter at [@mafiasafia](https://twitter.com/mafiasafia).

# Home Is Not a Country Pre-Reading Questions

1. Define *home*. Define *country*. Think about the phrase “Home is not a country.” What do you notice, remember, and imagine as you analyze the title?
2. What does family mean to you? Who do you choose to include in your family? What has your family taught you?
3. Describe a time when someone has shown you empathy (an understanding of your feelings). Why was this moment important for you? Describe a moment when you have shown empathy toward someone else. Why do you imagine this might have been important for the other person?
4. What can a country do to be comfortable for and welcoming to all the people who live there? If you live in America or have family that does, what laws, values, and social practices make it easy or difficult or both to consider America home?
5. Do you think your older relatives’ experiences get passed down to you? How? In what ways do we live with our family’s losses inside of us, even if we don’t fully understand them or haven’t lived them ourselves? Draw a map of these joys and losses.

# Home Is Not a Country Discussion and Writing Questions

1. In the opening poems of *Home Is Not a Country*, our narrator describes family photographs. What clues are provided about the family by the photographs? What can we infer has changed between the time the photographs were taken and present day? What details are meaningful to the narrator? What do you believe the narrator is feeling as she describes the photographs?
2. Nima says that Haitham “has never / made me feel that there is anything wrong with me at all” (p. 27). Compare and contrast Haitham’s and Nima’s personalities. What perspective does Haitham give Nima? How do they support one another?
3. What evidence does Nima give us to show that despite her mother’s warning, “i will never / be ashamed of where i come from / i will never let you be ashamed / of who we are”? Do you think Nima feels shame? Why? What is Nima’s reasoning for lying to her mother about who hurt her and why? How do you imagine Nima’s mother might respond if Nima told her the whole story? How does Nima’s experience in her high school compare with her experience in Arabic school, where “hierarchy puts those who have successfully / americanized at the top”?
4. In the opening lines of “My Name,” Nima says: “nima well really it’s نعمة ni’ma / mispronounced at school to sound like the middle of the word animal or stretched / into a whining neema no letter in english / for the snarling sound that centers my name / its little growl غ / nima meaning grace it would be funny / if it weren’t cruel” (p. 15). What do you learn about Nima’s relationship to her name in this poem? Compare and contrast this poem with “Yasmeen”: Nima says, “i imagine her yasmeen this other girl bright & alive / mouth full and dripping with language easy in her charm / & in essence she looks like me but of course / better” (p. 12). List the ways that Yasmeen is different from Nima. Why do you think is it important to Nima that her other self—this imagined self named Yasmeen—is “better” than her?

5. Reflect upon and respond to these quotes.

- “while she recites a stream of indiscernible / language i let my eyes blur & can / see it pouring from her mouth like smoke / & absorbing into his body”
- “i cannot stand to hear the rest / of the story my eyes are hot & my whole body is ringing / & i can’t stand to be so near her open hurting”
- “i have maybe just saved my own life by being / unnoticeable i want to figure out what / makes me disappear what brings me back”
- “i peer into each face & feel for the first time / that I belong to other people my face just a collage / of all of their faces & beyond the gray of the photos / i swear i see my exact shade of brown my exact / eyes each exact coil of my hair inherited / from the bodies in these photographs”
- “to know that mama was always enough”
- “i want a body that is mine actually mine / a body i feel fluent in”
- “& something in me bristles at hearing / yasmeen described like that like some sort of monster / hearing someone who doesn’t even know her just decide / what she is what she’s like”
- “so busy looking / at my one empty hand i almost missed everything / filling the other”

6. What clues does the writer give that all may not be as it appears in “Home” (p. 141)? What do you think Nima wants to believe? What do you as the reader think may not be true? In the following poem, “Haitham” (p. 200), why do you think Hala “slinks off into the dancing crowd / shame twisting itself in her face”?

7. Define *nostalgia*. Haitham calls Nima a “nostalgia monster,” and her grandmother tells Nima that “nostalgia is an illness” (p. 28). In “Mama,” (p. 38) we learn that Nima “always tried to make her smile / it’s why i learned the songs why i learned all / their words why i learned to love them.” What strengths does Nima’s nostalgia give her? In what moments or ways does Nima’s nostalgia hurt her? What is Nima’s relationship to nostalgia at the end of *Home Is Not a Country*? Use evidence from the text to support your arguments.

8. Nima’s family—in the past and in the present—teach Nima many lessons. What does Nima learn from the older members of her family—especially her mother, her father, Mama Fatheya, and Khaltu Hala—about herself and how to make sense of the world? What pieces of advice does she decide not to take?

9. What does Yasmeen want in “A Life” (p. 169)? What is surprising about her list? Write your own list: What would make you feel more alive, more “fluent in your body”?

10. Nima makes a series of difficult choices toward the end of the book. Why does she decide to save Yasmeen in the river? When Nima saves Yasmeen, how does this add to our understanding of both characters and the story? Why are they tied together? Nima makes a decision to help Yasmeen fulfill her truest desire. Why does Nima make this choice? Why does Nima teach Yasmeen how to dance?



11. Sayed Khalifa's lyrics appear near the beginning and the end of the book ("وين الحلوين وين راحوا / where are the beautiful ones where did they go"). What significance does this song have to Nima? What significance do these lyrics have in the story as a whole?
12. What new information does Nima learn about her family's homeland? And about her father? And about Haitham and his mother? If home is not a country, what is home? Where is home for Nima? Use evidence to support your argument. How do you define and locate your own home?

## Praise for *Home is Not a Country*

★ "The vivid imagery creates a profound sensory experience, evoking intense emotions in **A STORY THAT WILL RESONATE WITH READERS FROM MANY BACKGROUNDS.**"

—*Kirkus Reviews*,  
starred review

"Safia's verse is awe-inspiring and the world she's built is **LUSH AND WONDEROUS.**"

—*Elizabeth Acevado*,  
*New York Times* bestselling  
author of *The Poet X*

# Chlorine Sky and Home Is Not a Country

## Discussion and Writing Questions



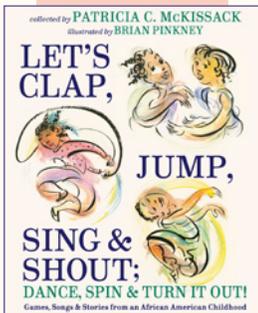
1. In coming-of-age novels, protagonists often face challenges that are internal (misguided ideas about the self) and external (challenges arising from other people, events, or situations), and experience personal growth as they courageously meet and ultimately defeat their challenges. What internal and external challenges did Nima and Sky face on their journeys? By the end of the novels, what ideas has each character accepted and rejected about herself? How does each girl show that she is taking responsibility for herself, and has therefore come of age? If you were to tell your own coming-of-age story, where would you begin?
2. Both *Chlorine Sky* and *Home Is Not a Country* are written in verse. Many of the poems use line breaks to convey meaning. A line break is exactly that—a break in the line. Poets will break a line in a particular spot to give an idea, image, or feeling some room to breathe, while giving the reader room to really think and feel. Line breaks add emphasis to whatever is at the end of the line; it takes your mind a moment to move to the next thing. While it's moving, it's still lingering over the last bit of information. Here are two activities you can do with line breaks.
  - A. Pick a poem from each book. Write the poem out as one or more long sentences, as if it is prose. You may add punctuation if you choose. Now break the poem back out, but break each line in a different place from where it was broken originally. Read the original and your reworked versions side by side. What is emphasized differently? Did the different line breaks change the meaning? Did your added punctuation change the meaning?
  - B. Write a true short story about yourself—two to three sentences. Now get rid of your punctuation, and break up your sentences into lines. Play with your line breaks. Try them out in different places. Add sensory details (details that rely on the senses: touch, sound, sight, taste, smell). If you like, repeat this exercise with other short stories about yourself that feel connected to your first one. (You may have just started your own novel-in-verse!)
3. Names are an important theme in both books. How are our protagonists' journeys toward self-acceptance reflected in their relationship to their names? How do Nima's and Sky's communities understand their names or nicknames? How do Nima and Sky reject and accept their names? Why? How are their true selves reflected in their names? What is your relationship to your name? Does it feel like yours? What do other people—family, or those in your community—tell you about what your name means or doesn't mean? How was it chosen?
4. Identity is a key theme that links both books. Both Sky and Nima learn about and draw strength and courage from their identities. Merriam-Webster defines *intersectionality* as “the complex, cumulative way in which the effects of multiple forms of discrimination (such as racism, sexism, and classism) combine, overlap, or intersect especially in the experiences of marginalized individuals or groups.” What are Nima's intersecting identities? What are Sky's intersecting identities? What negative and positive messages do Nima and Sky receive from others in their communities about their identities? How are Nima and Sky defined by others? How, at the end of each novel, do the characters define themselves? What strengths does each find in her own identity? What are your identities? What messages do you receive from other people (your family, your communities) about your identities, and what do you think or feel about those different messages? What strength do you draw from your identities?
5. In both books, the girls' relationships with their families are complex. How do their families help Nima and Sky understand who they are and where they belong? How do their families make things more confusing for Nima and Sky? What does family mean to you, and how do you relate (or not) to Nima and Sky's relationships with their families?



# Further Reading

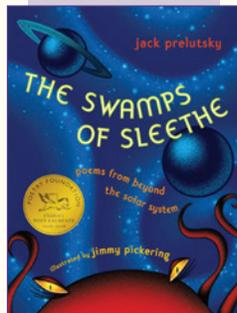
More poetry, novels-in-verse, and books featuring elements of poetry.

## ELEMENTS OF POETRY



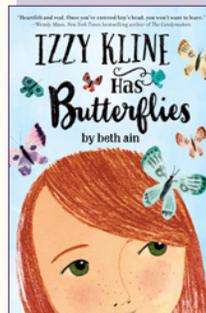
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## POETRY



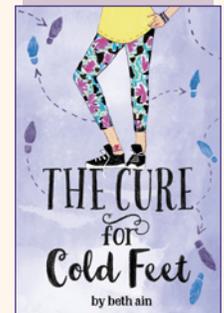
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## POETRY



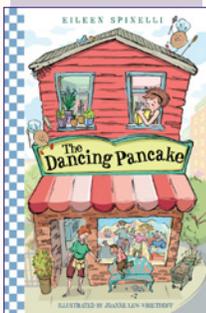
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## POETRY



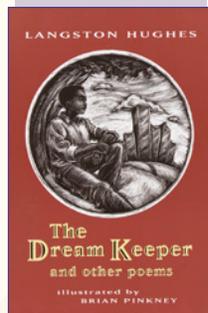
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## POETRY



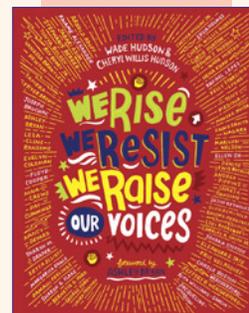
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## ELEMENTS OF POETRY



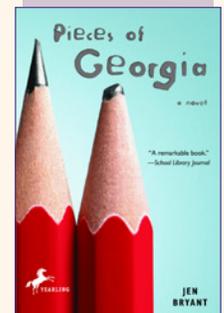
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## ELEMENTS OF POETRY



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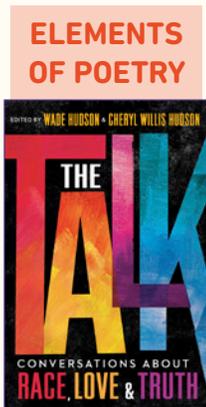
## POETRY



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 Jen Bryant  
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 Grade 5 & Up

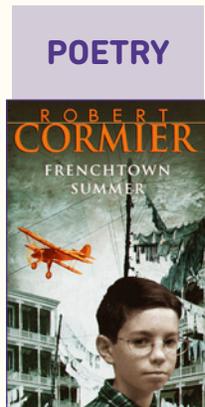
# Further Reading

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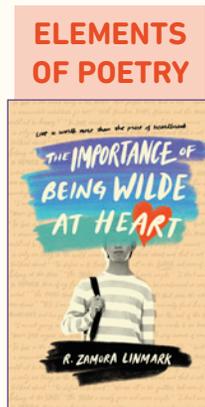
## The Talk

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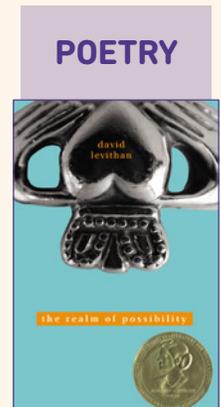
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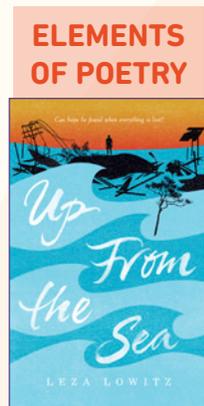
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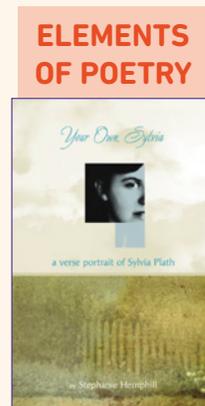
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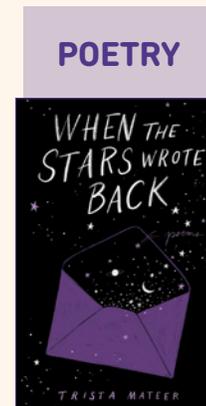
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