

# Where the Crawdads Sing

By Delia Owens

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Reading Level: Grades 9-12 + AP/IB

## INTRODUCTION

*Where the Crawdads Sing* was released in 2018 to immediate and unprecedented acclaim. Several years and quite a few reprints later, it has broken numerous publishing records and garnered multiple literary awards. Reese Witherspoon and The Duchess of Cornwall promoted it in their book clubs. Hollywood is producing a movie. Even a global pandemic couldn't stop readers from devouring the book.

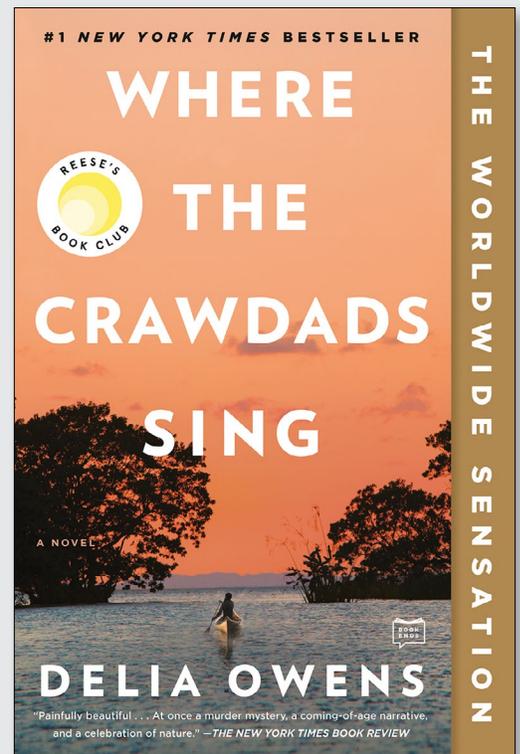
The phenomenal response can be explained by Delia Owens' compelling story and unique craft. Her debut novel is at once a mystery, a romance, a coming of age tale, a courtroom thriller, and a nature study. The book's action moves back and forth from past to present until the opening murder is finally solved in its final pages. Its *widespread* appeal makes the novel an excellent choice for today's classrooms. Students will be immersed in the novel's powerful story while challenged by its themes, imagery, and writer's craft.

The activities in this guide are framed around an overall line of inquiry: *How do Owens's stylistic choices support the text's overall purpose, themes, and aesthetic beauty?* A range of strategies and questions are included in order to generate possible answers to this line of inquiry while providing the critical reading, writing, and thinking required of today's students. Teachers may choose to assign any combination of these activities as their students dig deep into complex text and find themselves "way out yonder where the crawdads sing."

## Teacher's Guide

### INCLUDES:

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS,  
CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES,  
AND LINKS TO RESOURCES



**CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES****KEY IDEAS AND DETAILS**

The following activities focus on text analysis, summary, character, and theme.

**Themes Tracker**

College and career ready standards ask students, rather than teachers, to determine the themes and central ideas in a text and to analyze their development and interaction over time. Ask students to create a “Themes Tracker” for ideas and motifs they will uncover in *Where the Crawdads Sing*. As they begin noticing a theme develop, direct them to create a new entry in their tracker. For instance, students might determine that “isolation,” “female relationships,” “nature” and “prejudice” appear to be recurring themes in Owens’s text. They might also see significance in motifs such as birds and flight. Students can track these ideas digitally or in writing. Explain that students may need to backtrack and find evidence earlier in the novel as they realize a pattern is forming. Students might share their thinking with each other and add new entries for classmates’ ideas. If students need help getting started, choose one theme and model how to track its development from section to section. Alternatively, ask students to use different color highlighters to identify themes as they read. Margin notes can be used to analyze how the ideas are developing and interacting over time.

**Character Maps**

Graphic organizers such as flow maps and double bubble maps can help students analyze character. Ask students to create a box and arrow flow-chart for one of the main characters, such as Kya, Tate, or Chase. The first box is created when the character is introduced, and new boxes are added whenever a physical or emotional change occurs. Because Owens’ characterization is both direct and indirect, text evidence can come from dialogue, narration, or plot. Students might also create a double-bubble map to compare character foils such as Tate and Chase or Jumpin’ and Pa. Students write the two characters’ names in separate, large circles. Common character traits and motivation are posted in bubbles between the two circles. Traits and motivation that set the foils apart are posted in bubbles on the appropriate sides. Promote higher order thinking by asking students to provide specific text evidence with page numbers under each box or bubble. Students can display their maps online or on the whiteboard, sharing their thinking with classmates who mapped a different character. For more on flow maps and double-bubble maps, see <https://www.thinkingmaps.com/why-thinking-maps-2/>.

**Social Media Summaries**

Providing an objective summary of complex text is the first step to deeper analysis. Challenge students to write a “six-word story” or a hashtag summary for each chapter of *Where the Crawdads Sing*. A six-word story for chapter one might read “Ma leaves kids and swamp behind.” A hashtag for the prologue could be #marshmurdermystery. For longer summaries that include key details, students might write a tweet or compose a blog or “vlog” entry. Students can add these summaries to their interactive notebooks, share them via the whiteboard, or submit them to their online classroom. Video “vlog” entries can be posted to Flipgrid.com. When students read each other’s summaries, they can assess and add to their own thinking.

## CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

(CONTINUED)

## Text Dependent Questions

The following questions focus on specific excerpts and text-based evidence. They are designed to be answered individually in order to frame thinking during reading.

1. The novel's prologue opens with, "Marsh is not swamp. Marsh is a space of light . . ." Why does the author choose to begin the novel this way? Why does she say "marsh" rather than "*the* marsh?" Discuss figurative language here and its impact on character and setting.
2. What is the author's purpose in opening the novel with a dead body?
3. Kya's mother leaves home carrying a blue case, "the color so wrong for the woods." How does the blue suitcase serve to characterize Ma?
4. After Jodie leaves, "the marsh snuggled in closer with a low fog, and (Kya) slept" (14). How does the author deepen her characterization of the marsh in this scene? What is the marsh becoming to Kya?
5. Upon discovery of Chase Andrews's body, Sheriff Jackson notes the lack of footprints and wonders if "somebody covered 'em up" (36). How does this scene develop ideas from the prologue? How does it relate to Jodie's final words to "always cover yo' tracks" (13)?
6. During their first encounter, Tate calls Kya "Jodie's sister" (44). Why does Kya answer "I used ta be. He's gone?" How is Kya beginning to define herself?
7. Tate's widowed father, Scupper, encourages his son to appreciate poetry, saying the whole point of it is "to make ya feel something" (48). In what ways is Scupper similar to yet different from Kya's Pa?
8. As six year old Kya pretends to be an eagle, "her fingers became long feathers, splayed against the sky, gathering the wind beneath her. Then suddenly she was jerked back to Earth by Pa hollering" (54). Why might Kya dream of being a bird? How does this scene continue to develop her relationship with nature?
9. When Kya and Pa enjoy a rare restaurant dinner in town, Kya is called "dirty," "filthy," and "plumb nasty." She and her father are referred to as "them people" and are blamed for the stomach flu going around (66). What is the author's purpose here in regards to both characterization and plot? In what way might this scene serve as foreshadowing?
10. Chapter 10 centers around the water tower investigation and opens with "Sand keeps secrets better than mud" (71). How do imagery and diction in this scene contribute to Owens's portrayal of the marsh as a lead character?
11. When Kya visits Jumpin's store to barter for food, "it took all her might not to buy a Sugar Daddy instead of the candle" (76). In what way does the candy serve as a symbol of innocence? What does it mean when she later finds it hidden in her groceries?
12. As Kya observes the troop of girls giggling and playing on the sand, she recalls, "Ma had said women need one another more than they need men, but she never told her how to get inside the pride" (80). In what ways is Kya "distant" from the girls? What are some multiple motivations for her feelings of isolation in this scene?

**CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES**  
(CONTINUED)

13. Mabel and Jumpin provide Kya with food, clothing, and compassion. How is their relationship with Kya ironic? In what ways does it make sense?
14. In what ways is Tate's feather gift significant? What does it tell the reader about Tate? How does this gift connect to the chapter's opening paragraph, where Kya is portrayed as "no longer daydream(ing) of winging with eagles?" (86)
15. When Kya witnesses an injured turkey being attacked by its own flock, she recalls something Jodie told her. "If a bird becomes different from the others . . . it is more likely to attract a predator" (90). How does this detail contribute to ongoing characterization and plot? Why does Owens immediately follow with the scene of young boys taunting the "Marsh Girl?" (91)
16. The first sentence Kya reads in the almanac Tate brings is "There are some who can live without wild things, and some who cannot" (103). How does this line continue the development of character (both Kya and Tate) and advance broader themes in the novel? How does Tate's selection of nature texts impact Kya's feelings toward education?
17. Tate tells Kya they should escape social services by hiding "way out there where the crawdads sing . . . far in the bush where critters are wild" (111). In what ways is Kya one of those critters? In what ways is she more civilized than the townspeople?
18. Worried she will be taken away by social services, Kya stays hidden, "keeping her underbelly exposed" (114). Analyze diction and theme in this excerpt. Why does the author choose these specific words to describe Kya's fear?
19. Tate tells Kya, "the words in poems do more than say things" (114). In what ways has learning to read connected Kya to her family and to her past?
20. Moments before Kya and Tate's first kiss, the wind scatters autumn leaves around the dancing duo (124). Why does the author choose autumn for this moment? How does the first sentence on page 126 connect to this scene? Discuss how the imagery in these scenes connects to and supports significant themes.
21. For her fifteenth birthday, Tate gives Kya a magnifying glass, a seagull hair clasp, and a set of painting supplies (128–29). What do these gifts reveal about Tate and the nature of their relationship?
22. Directly after the sheriff and his deputy discuss how "the marsh chewed up and swallowed all the evidence" of Chase's murder (140), Kya realizes that female fireflies "got what they wanted . . . just by changing their signals" (142). What is the author's purpose in including these scenes back to back? How does her juxtaposition of investigation and marsh scenes support tone and theme here and throughout the novel?
23. Once she realizes Tate is not coming back to her, Kya feels "a strong pull out from under her. A tide she knew well" (144). Discuss how diction and imagery support meaning and theme here.
24. When Chase takes Kya to the fire tower for the first time, "all the pieces lay beneath her, and she saw her friend's full face for the first time" (165). What does this scene reveal about the nature of Chase and Kya's relationship? What does it provide Kya in regards to perspective?

## CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

(CONTINUED)

25. Disappointed when Chase, like Tate, fails to show, Kya finds strength “in the real remote” where “not waiting for the sounds of someone was a release” (181). Who must Kya rely on in the marsh? Why might the author choose this point for Kya to find a long-sought feather? How does this scene recall the book’s title?
26. What is the significance of the neon palm tree at the Asheville motel (193)? In what way is it similar to Kya?
27. How does Chase’s deception and betrayal help Kya understand her mother’s choices? How accurate is her comparison between Chase and “a buck deer in rut?” (212) How has Kya’s isolation helped her become an expert in human behavior?
28. In what ways is Kya’s first published book on seashells “a family album?” (217) What is the significance of her signing Tate’s copy “from the Marsh Girl?” (221) How does Kya feel about this label now?
29. When Kya hangs her mother’s paintings on the walls, “the shack took on a different light, as though more windows had opened up” (243). Analyze Owens’s use of diction here. What “windows” has Jody’s visit and the paintings opened up for Kya?
30. In jail, “Kya wondered who started using the word *cell* instead of *cage*” (276). What is the implication for her own imprisonment? How does the Amanda Hamilton poem she recalls, “Broken Gull of Brandon Beach,” support this depiction of Kya’s imprisonment?
31. Kya imagined taking her own life versus living in constant fear of Chase. Why, here, does she also recall again the Amanda Hamilton line “Who decides the time to die?” (284) What is the implication? Who does Kya think *should* decide the time to die?
32. In jail, Kya is “more vulnerable than ever. . . . Standing in the most fragile place of her life, she turned to the only net she knew—herself” (285). How does Owens use diction here to underscore key themes in the novel?
33. In court, Robert Foster sits with “Tate, Scupper, Jodie, Jumpin’ and Mabel, behind Kya” (333). What is the significance of their position in the courtroom? Discuss the author’s use of imagery in this scene and how it supports her purpose.
34. Kya’s lawyer says, “We called her the Marsh Girl; now scientific institutions recognize her as the Marsh Expert. . . . It is time, at last, for us to be fair to the Marsh Girl” (341). How does Tom Milton use irony to make his point? Discuss the meaning and impact of his final use of the label, “Marsh Girl.”
35. The author writes of Kya, “Most of what she knew, she learned from the wild. . . . If consequences resulted from her behaving differently, then they too were functions of life’s fundamental core” (363). To what degree is this true in the novel? Discuss how Kya has simply lived up to expectations. In what ways has she lived beyond them?

**CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES**

(CONTINUED)

**CRAFT AND STRUCTURE**

The following activities focus on diction, syntax, and the impact of structure and style on mood, meaning and tone.

**Close Reading**

Multiple passages in Owens's novel provide students with an excellent opportunity to unpack the author's craft and structure. The close-reading process focuses on excerpts or "chunks" of text, promoting interpretation that is deep rather than wide, and fostering critical thinking skills. Choose a short passage students have already read. Excerpts that work well for close reading include the prologue, where "Marsh" is initially personified, the end of chapter 20 where Kya observes female fireflies (142), and chapter 51, which starts "The language of the court was, of course, not as poetic as that of the marsh" (320). Once the passage is selected, ask students to perform multiple reads. After each read, one of the following questions can be discussed with a partner or group and answered in writing. After the first read, students answer the question, "What is happening in the text?" (Plot). The second read takes a deeper dive. Students address the question, "What is this passage beginning to be about?" (What patterns are beginning to emerge or continuing to develop? What seems to be the author's purpose)? Finally, after the third read, students focus on diction, syntax, and other writer's craft, answering, "Which words and phrases contribute to the text's meaning and tone?" For all three questions, students must return to the text and cite evidence. For more information on close reading, view the following Douglas Fisher video: [www.tiny.cc/DFisher](http://www.tiny.cc/DFisher)

**MIST Analysis**

*Where the Crawdads Sing* has a structure that cannot be easily qualified. The chapters switch between past and present until the two blend seamlessly at the end. The format shifts between narration, nature vignette, and poetry. With these shifts, the reader might be submerged into the marsh itself or into Kya's subconscious. Ask students to explore these departures from narration using the MIST analysis method. With this close-reading tool, students use a four-column chart to perform a rhetorical analysis by examining mood, imagery, shifts, and tension. Questions to explore include: Where are there shifts in tone or point of view, and what do they signify? What conflict is creating tension and how is it developed? Ask students to synthesize their analysis with a summary statement at the bottom of their chart. In it, they might address the line of inquiry: *How do Owens's stylistic choices support the text's overall purpose, theme, and aesthetic beauty?*

**Juicy Sentences/Mentor Text**

Inspire students to read like writers by analyzing and imitating the author's style. Provide or allow students to choose a "juicy sentence" from *Where the Crawdads Sing*. Juicy sentences are central to comprehension, complex in their wording, worthy of close examination, and indicative of the author's style. They are a type of mentor text, serving as models of strong writing. As a class, break the selected sentence into parts and delve into the impact each part has on the text as a whole. Ask students what they notice and what they admire about the sentence. Now ask

**CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES**

(CONTINUED)

students to write a similarly styled sentence in their own words. These student products can stand alone or serve as starters for longer writing responses. One example of a “juicy sentence” in Owens’s text is: *The marsh did not confine them but defined them, and, like any sacred ground, kept their secrets deep* (8). More on juicy sentences can be found at <https://achievethecore.org/page/3160/juicy-sentence-guidance>.

**See, Think, Wonder**

At the front of the book, the author includes a map of the novel’s setting. Ask students to analyze the map while applying the “See, Think, Wonder” routine to consider how Owens uses setting to support author’s purpose. Students should ask themselves:

- What do I see? (what details stick out?)
- What do I think? (what about the image or wording makes me think that?)
- What does this make me wonder? (what broader questions does this image or wording raise?)

With each question, students apply a more critical lens. After individual think-time, students can share with a partner, small group, or the class as a whole. Observations might include that Kya’s shack is as far as possible from Barkley Cove and the reading cabin is in the deepest part of the marsh. Discuss with students: What is Owens’s purpose in designing the map and including it in the text? How does setting in the map impact meaning and support the novel’s key themes?

**INTEGRATION OF KNOWLEDGE & IDEAS**

These activities encourage exploration of multiple genres and representations of key scenes, themes, and ideas.

**Author Interviews**

The phenomenal reception of *Where the Crawdads Sing* provides a rare opportunity for readers to connect to its author. Included at the end of the novel is “A Conversation with Delia Owens” (376–84). In it, Owens discusses not only themes and characters but also the marsh, her experience as a wildlife ecologist, and her writer’s craft. Ask students to read and annotate their reactions to the interview. Next, show students the “CBS Sunday Morning” interview with the author ([www.tiny.cc/Owens](http://www.tiny.cc/Owens)). In this video clip, Owens discusses her love of nature and how she came to write specific components of her novel. Again, students should jot down their reactions, including what surprises them or what they admire about Owens’s writing. As a class, discuss the following: taken together, what do these author interviews reveal about the author’s choices and inspiration? How does hearing from the author in this way change, confirm, or extend your understanding of *Where the Crawdads Sing*?

**CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES**

(CONTINUED)

**Movie Tie-In**

Invite students to explore the Facebook Group page for the movie version of Owens's novel. <https://www.facebook.com/CrawdadsMovie/>. They should notice casting choices, filming locations, and social media posts. Discuss with the class: What surprises you about some of the choices made? Do the casting and location support, contradict, or extend your understanding of character and setting while reading? Point out the March 26, 2021 #FemaleFilmmakerFriday post, where the film's director, Liv Newman, says she is making the movie with "an incredibly brilliant team of women." Ask students: How does the deliberate choice to employ a female screenwriter, director, producers, and designers link to Owens' exploration of female relationships in the novel? Once filming is complete, students can compare specific scenes in the book to those same scenes in the film, noticing where they are similar and different, and why such choices may have been made.

**Companion Texts**

Pair one or more of the novel's nature scenes with an informational text on the same topic. For instance, Owens writes, "Floodplains are living extensions of the rivers, which will claim them back any time they choose. Anyone living on a floodplain is just waiting in the river's wings" (113). Her narrative paragraph then continues to explore the impact of draining wetlands. Students might pair this excerpt with the National Geographic article "Marsh," which discusses the impact of draining marshes for industrial and agricultural development. Ask students to create a two-column chart where they record notes from the novel excerpt on one side and notes from the article on the other. After reading and note-taking, students should highlight in one color any points made by both texts. Discuss: what differences do we see in the book and the informational text? What do we learn about marsh and wetland erosion from the article that we don't see in the novel excerpt? How does the fiction paragraph add to your understanding of facts in the article? What impact does narrative style have on learning about nature? More opportunities for text pairings can be found throughout Owens's novel. <https://www.nationalgeographic.org/encyclopedia/marsh/>

**Paideia Seminar**

Hold a Paideia Seminar on one scene, chapter, section, or the entire text of *Where the Crawdads Sing*. Prior to the seminar, discuss with students what an ideal seminar looks and sounds like, including participation, active listening, and respect of multiple viewpoints. Ask students to set a class goal, such as: "I will contribute to the discussion at least one time," as well as a personal goal, such as: "I will mention a classmate's name and extend on or disagree with his thinking." Students should record their goals on paper or sticky-notes which are visible to them during the seminar. During the discussion, take a facilitator's role. Ask a low-risk opening question to encourage total class participation in a round robin response, such as: "What character in Owens' novel is the most "civilized?" The opening question might be provided the night before. Its purpose is to identify main ideas in Owens' text. After providing their answers, students will discuss their reasoning with one another. Then move to a core question for the purpose of analyzing text details, such as: "How does the novel's structure support Owens's intent?" End the discussion with a

**CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES**

(CONTINUED)

closing question that promotes personalization and application, such as: “How might this novel’s themes and ideas apply to a current social issue?” After the seminar, ask students to evaluate their own and their classmates’ speaking, thinking, and listening. Did they meet their class and personal goals? What should the class do differently in the next seminar discussion? How did the Paideia seminar deepen their understanding of Owens’s text?

**WRITING PROMPTS AND ACTIVITIES**

The following activities include formal and informal opportunities for literary analysis, academic discourse and creative writing.

**Culminating Writing Assessment**

A culminating assessment prompt provides students with a frame for reading and analyzing the novel, and it provides a formal writing opportunity at the end of the reading. Students should be introduced to this prompt prior to reading so that they read with a purpose. Prompts should be complex enough to encourage critical thinking and to promote a variety of student responses. Students can apply thinking and evidence from the themes trackers, character maps, text-dependent questions, and other activities outlined in this guide as they respond to the prompt. For instance, students might respond to one of the following prompts:

- *In a well-written essay, analyze how Owens conveys theme(s) of abandonment, isolation, and resilience (or choose another theme) through purposefully chosen literary elements and techniques. Strategies may include but are not limited to diction, imagery, and point of view. Use explicit text evidence to support your thesis.*
- *Write an essay in which you analyze how Owens’s distinctive style reveals her purpose in *Where the Crawdads Sing*. Consider her juxtaposition of past and present, her mix of prose and poetry, or another of her writer’s crafts. Support your thesis with examples and details from the text.*

**Quick Writes**

Ask students to respond with quick writes before, during, or after reading passages of text. These informal writing opportunities provide a way to generate and hold thinking about authors’ complex themes, as well as a chance for students to make connections to prior knowledge, to their own experience, or to the world around them. Quick Writes can come directly from the questions included in this guide, from significant quotations in the novel, or they might be more creative or personal in nature. Sample Quick Writes that apply to Owens’s novel include:

- How does isolation impact or change a person?
- Which character do you find yourself most like, different from, or drawn to? Explain.
- Respond to the following quotation: “If anyone understood loneliness, the moon would.” (215)
- Kya compares Chase to a turkey, and she herself is comparable to a seagull. Why does Owens use animal analogies in the novel?
- Did the ending surprise you? Why or why not?

**CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES**

(CONTINUED)

**Found Poems**

Just as Kya writes poetry to explore and express her feelings, students can create poems to explore meaning and synthesize interpretation of the text. Ask students to write a “found poem” by intentionally selecting specific words, phrases, and quotations from *Where the Crawdads Sing*, and rearranging the language to underscore a significant theme from the novel. First, ask students to select approximately 15–25 words and phrases from the novel that are significant or meaningful. Next, students brainstorm a theme and message found within some or all of these choices. For instance, students might see that most of their chosen excerpts touch on the theme of education, and the message might be that Kya’s learning was remarkable and successful because it was based on her love of nature. Once students have settled on a theme and message, they will compose their found poem by arranging the author’s words, phrases, and quotes in an order that expresses the identified message. While students can repeat words and phrases as often as they like, and while they may add punctuation, conjunctions, articles, and prepositions to piece the poem together, they should not deviate from Owens’s language. Remind them that they do not need to use all the originally selected words and phrases. Students can use font, spacing, and justification to make their poems unique. They should add a title that may or may not come from the novel. Students can share their poetry online via Padlet, Jamboard, or the classroom platform, or they might hold a poetry jam session where they perform aloud. A final class discussion might focus on new insights students derived from the found poem strategy.

**Class Backchannel**

Provide an informal space for students to ask questions, pose inferences, and talk with peers as they read the novel. A “backchannel” is an online discussion board that facilitates total-class participation and provides quiet students a platform to establish voice. As they read each of the novel’s chapters, ask students to generate questions about the text. Questions might ask for background information, clarification, or interpretation. They could also be about diction, imagery, structure, or point of view. These student-generated questions can be submitted on Twitter, Backchannel Chat, Zoom Chatbox, or Padlet. Students then respond in writing to one another’s thinking. Their written responses can stand alone as an informal, individual assignment or may lead to more formal writing later. The teacher can also use the backchannel to pose questions, assign quick-writes, and post digital media that deepens understanding of the text at hand. For information about back channeling, see the following article: [www.tiny.cc/backchannel](http://www.tiny.cc/backchannel).

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR  
OF THIS GUIDE**

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