



Student Reading & Discussion Guide

Common Reading Program 2016 Pacific Lutheran University

Featuring:

We Need New Names
by NoViolet Bulawayo

As you read *We Need New Names*, we encourage you to use this reading guide to assist you in thinking deeply and critically about the book. This will help you prepare for the small group discussion you will have with a faculty member and your peers.

To be prepared and organized for the small group discussion you should **make notes** of items of particular interest to you, **including page numbers** so that you can easily locate information **to support your claim/opinion** during the discussion.

Theme: Style of writing

Background

NoViolet Bulawayo, like all authors, made unique decisions in the construction of her novel. From the very first page of *We Need New Names*, the reader encounters a text rich in descriptive imagery, but devoid of some standard punctuation and full of intentional misspellings and phonetic language (like “Destroyedmichygen”).

Questions to consider

- Why do you think the author chose to leave out the quotation marks in the dialogue? Did the lack of quotation marks influence the way you engaged with the text? Did it influence your ability to understand what was taking place?
- Is there a connection between the style of writing and conceptions of race? For example, is the lack of quotation marks symbolic for lack of voice or not being heard?
- How does hearing the story through Darling’s voice influence the story? How did the word choice and misspellings the author included highlight Darling’s view on the events and circumstances taking place in her life?
- Sometimes we learn about Darling’s views and feelings through her dialogue with other characters. At other times, Darling summarizes conversations or information she has gleaned from others or from her own reflection as if she were talking to herself and letting the reader in on her thoughts. What different effects do these two approaches to conveying Darling’s experience have on you as a reader?

Theme: Home, belonging, & assimilation

Background

In describing *We Need New Names*, Bulawayo stated, “Those of us who give up our homelands live with quiet knowledge nestled in our blood like an incurable disease; even as we are here, we are tied to somewhere else.”* Darling’s story of this type of divided existence and the way that she experiences the events in the novel highlights themes of identity, belonging, and assimilation.

Questions to consider

- The author never mentions the country in Africa by name. Why do you suppose this is? Does keeping the country anonymous affect the novel and affect your understanding of the narrator’s life? Can you think of a time when you or someone you know decided not to let others know where you were from? If so, what was your reasoning?
- During a skype conversation Chipo pushes back against the concern Darling expresses about events in her homeland by asking, “It’s your country, Darling? Really, it’s your country, are you sure?” (p.288). Who decides where or if an individual belongs in a given group or community? What happens when you are excluded from a place where you once belonged?

- What does it mean to assimilate? Does cultural assimilation always mean the erasure of a person's prior identity? What specific examples does the text provide of Darling's cultural assimilation and the ways in which it reflected in her identity?
- When addressed to an immigrant, what other questions is "Where are you from?" conveying?

Theme: Conceptions of race

Background

We Need New Names portrays race and racial issues in two very different cultural settings, thus contributing to our campus conversation on three of PLU's core values: diversity, social justice, and sustainability (DJS).

Questions to consider

- Locate a scene or a stretch of dialogue that highlights how a character in the text understands "race" and summarize that understanding. Does it conflict with another character's understanding of "race" and if so, how?"
- How does Darling's conception of her own racial identity change after she arrives in the US?

Theme: NGOs - intent vs. impact

Background

The scene in which the aid workers visit Darling's village gives insight into the sometimes dehumanizing impact of charity. "The man starts taking pictures with his big camera...they don't care that we are embarrassed by our dirt and torn clothing...we don't complain because we know that after the picture-taking comes the giving of gifts" (p.54).

Questions to consider

- If this scene were written from the point of view of the aid workers, how do you think it would be different?
- What is the difference between donors' intentions and the actual impact in aid work?
- Imagine that you are looking to donate to or volunteer with a non-profit organization. What criteria would you use to evaluate the potential impact of the program? What would you want to see (in order for you to donate or volunteer) regarding how a charitable organization works with communities?

Theme: Sexuality & taboos

Background

There are two 'adult' scenes in the novel, one in each half. The narrator describes the attempt to abort Chipó's baby in Africa and in the US she shows Darling and her friends watching pornography on the internet together. An important part of becoming a college student and an adult is learning to take material that may shock us initially and put it into a context which we can understand and discuss maturely. We ask you to work through that process with these two scenes.

Questions to consider

- How did these scenes affect you when you read them? As you were reading them did either scene seem far-fetched?
- What does a comparison of these scenes reveal about the narrator's experience of the societies she lived in in Africa and in the US?

Theme: Environment

Background

At the beginning of the novel the children are sneaking out of Paradise to go to Budapest to harvest guavas. The contrast between the two locations is so great that the narrator states "This place [Budapest] is not like Paradise, it's like being in another country altogether. A nice country where people who are not like us live" (pg 6). Budapest is described as having "big, big houses with satellite dishes and neat graveled yards or trimmed lawns" (pg 6) while Paradise is described as "tiny shack after tiny shack crammed together like hot loaves of bread" (pg 28).

Questions to consider

- What do the descriptions suggest about the value of each place? Do the names seem appropriate for each place (Why call it Paradise)?
- Is there a connection between our valuing of places and our valuing of the people who live in those places? How does the environment Darling encounters in "Destroyedmichygen" compare to Budapest and Paradise?
- From Darling's perspective is Destroyed more similar to Paradise or to Budapest? Does this surprise you?
- What do the news stories about the undrinkable water in Flint, Michigan suggest about how the environment and people in Flint are valued?

***See also: Little, Brown & Co. reading guide --**

http://www.littlebrown.com/rgg/WeNeedNewNames_ReadingGroupGuide.pdf