

A Curriculum Guide to

Bird

by Crystal Chan

About the Book

Jewel has been haunted her entire life by John, the brother who died the day she was born. Nicknamed “Bird,” he tried to fly off a nearby cliff and fell to his death. Grandpa has not spoken a word since that day, and Jewel is secretly drawn to the cliff when no one else is around. There, she works out her own way of dealing with the grief. The appearance of a new boy in the neighborhood named John sets in motion a cascading flood of emotion in the family that brings their buried feelings to the surface and nearly tears the family apart. But John has deep secrets of his own that may help Jewel’s family come together in new ways.

Prereading Activity

The following question particularly addresses the Common Core State Standards: (ELA.4-7.4, 9)

Research the origin and meaning of the word “duppy.” Determine the meaning of this word and concept in the folklore and culture of the Caribbean islands and, particularly, Jamaica.

Discussion Questions

Characters

The following questions in this section particularly address the Common Core State Standards: (RL.4-7.1, 3, 6)

1. Describe Jewel and the influence of her family history on her character. How does her family’s cultural background affect her life? How does her family’s recent history impact her life? Why is she so interested in geology?
2. Describe the character of “John.” How has his family’s background affected him? How has his family’s present situation affected him? Why does he say he is only visiting his uncle because has to? Why is he so interested in space and astronomy?
3. What does Jewel mean when she says, “If you give up too much of yourself, too fast, then someone can just up and take it away”?
4. What is the reaction of Jewel’s mother to meeting “John”? What is the reaction of Jewel’s grandfather? Why do they react so differently?

5. Does Jewel believe in spirits and the traditional ways to guard against them? Does she believe in the existence of a “duppy”? What feelings draw her to visit the cliff and create her stone circle?
6. Why does Eugene pretend that his name is John? What is Jewel’s reaction when she finds out he knew about her brother all along? How does she reconcile with him after her angry outburst?
7. Describe the relationship that Jewel’s family has with the people of Caledonia. Why does Jewel’s mother quit her job? What do Eugene and Jewel hope to accomplish by going to see Mr. Robinson?
8. Why does Jewel’s grandfather leave the cassette tapes for her to play? How does the music create a bond between them? What makes it possible for Grandpa to speak again? How does the return of his speech affect his relationship to others?
9. What does Eugene mean when he tells Jewel, “You know, you and your brother are like a close binary system”? What other characters in the story act, at times, like a close binary system? What are the forces that draw them together and, at other times, tear them apart?
10. What is the sadness that Jewel and Eugene both experience without saying it out loud? What happens when they both are able to express their one deep sadness? How do they reconcile their feelings with their reality?

Setting

The following questions in this section particularly address the Common Core State Standards: (RL.4-7.1, 3)

1. Describe the importance of Event Horizon to Eugene and to Jewel. Why does Eugene call it Event Horizon? Discuss how the scientific meaning of that term relates to the emotional climate of Eugene’s life.
2. Describe the cliff and the boulder, both of which are important to Jewel. What is Jewel’s relationship to the geography of her home area and how is that reflected in her interest in geology?
3. Eugene and Jewel both have sacred places. For Eugene, it is Event Horizon. For Jewel, it is the cliff. What other characters have sacred places? Where do Grandpa and Jewel’s dad go to collect their thoughts? Do you have a sacred place?

Themes

The following questions in this section particularly address the Common Core State Standards: (RL.4-7.2)

1. Early in the story Jewel asks, “Where does joy go when it leaves your family?” Later she says, “Joy is like a child . . . You feed it or it dies.” Discuss the theme of joy in this story, its importance in both Jewel’s and Eugene’s families, and the events that keep them from feeling it.
2. How does the theme of superstition affect Jewel’s family? Who is the most superstitious member of the family? How do their separate beliefs keep them from being happy together?
3. Discuss the theme of loneliness throughout the story. What are the circumstances in which loneliness keeps people apart or brings people together in this book?
4. Discuss the theme of anger in this story. What are the various ways that characters express their anger? When is anger most destructive in relationships, and at what points is anger expressed in a way that is constructive and revealing?
5. There are two different families in this plot and both are multiracial families. Discuss the effects on both Jewel and Eugene of growing up in a multiracial family. Are their problems due to the nature of their families or to things that occurred even before they were born? What have you learned about the nature of “family” by reading this story?
6. The theme of silence has such a presence in the story – from injuring silence to healing silence. Explain the different ways that the characters use silence to communicate their feelings.

Postreading Activities

The following questions in this section particularly address the Common Core State Standards: (RIT.4-7.7) (W.4-7.3)

1. Locate Iowa on a map of the United States. Research the geology of the state and the variety of rocks found there:

<http://www.igsb.uiowa.edu/browse/minerals/minerals.htm>

Make a list of the rocks that Jewel might find in her home state and where she would be most likely to find them. Then, research the geology of your own home state. What kinds of rocks can be found there? Where can you find them?

2. Write another chapter for this story imagining what you think will happen when Jewel and Eugene get together again. Use what you have learned about each character’s personality to speculate about the dynamics of their relationship as their families begin to heal from emotional crises.

Guide written in 2013 by Connie Rockman, Youth Literature Consultant, adjunct professor of children's and young adult literature, and editor of the eight, ninth, and tenth books in the Junior Authors and Illustrators series.

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