

The Bite of the Mango

by Mariatu Kamara and Susan McClelland

Genre: Autobiography, Memoir

Themes: Resilience
Children in War
Self-Esteem
Physical Disabilities
Family
Heritage: Faith, Hope, Superstition, and the Power of Dreams
Injustice, Betrayal, and the Importance of Social and Political Responsibility
Immigration

Suitable for: Grades 9–12

The Bite of the Mango

As a child in a small rural village in Sierra Leone, Mariatu Kamara lived peacefully surrounded by family and friends. Rumors of rebel attacks were no more than a distant worry. One day 12-year-old Mariatu set out for a neighboring village, but she never arrived. Heavily armed rebel soldiers, many no more than children themselves, attacked and tortured Mariatu. During this brutal act of senseless violence they cut off both her hands. Stumbling through the countryside, Mariatu miraculously survived. The sweet taste of a mango, her first food after the attack, reaffirmed her desire to live, but the challenge of clutching the fruit in her bloodied arms reinforced the grim new reality that stood before her. With no parents or living adult to support her, and living in a refugee camp, she turned to begging in the streets of Freetown. As told to her by Mariatu, journalist Susan McClelland has written the heartbreaking true story of the brutal attack, its aftermath, and Mariatu's eventual arrival in Toronto, where she began to pull together the pieces of her broken life with courage, astonishing resilience, and hope.

THE FOLLOWING ACTIVITY IDEAS ...

... are only a start. There are many possibilities for helping students construct meaning from text.

BEFORE STARTING THE BOOK

Activities to build the context and introduce the topic of the book, and to establish prior knowledge and interest.

1. Ask students if they know where Sierra Leone is located. Have students locate it on a map of Africa.
2. Brainstorm with students to discover what they know about Sierra Leone, and what they know in general about Africa. Have students record their thoughts so that they can compare them with what they know and feel after reading the book.
3. Ask students what they know about wars have been fought in Africa in the past 15 years. What is similar about all these wars? What is different?
4. Is there ever justification for war? Discuss.
5. Ask students what they think about their dreams. Why do they think they dream? Do they believe dreams have a special meaning or importance in real life? Can dreams foretell your destiny?
6. Ask students to discuss what stereotypes people with physical disabilities face and what they think might help dispel these stereotypes.
7. Brainstorm with students why they think people write an autobiography. Have them compare their thoughts with what they observe by reading Mariatu's account of her life.

WHILE READING THE BOOK

Activities to check on comprehension, stimulate interest, involve readers in reflection as they read, and encourage consideration of other readers' reactions.

A) RESILIENCE

The seeds of resilience lie in the belief that life can make sense, that one's actions can have value, and that it is possible for an individual to have some control over what befalls him or her. In African society, these lessons are taught by example through acts of kindness and generosity every day, and together they contribute to a strong sense of community.

Although Mariatu identifies her family as "very poor" (p. 13), she paints a picture of a childhood in which there was a sense of order, and loving relationships, a world in which she saw her actions and the actions of those who surrounded her contribute positively to the community as a whole.

1. Examine pp. 13–22 of Chapter 1 to identify how the values she learned from her family and from African society in general helped her survive her ordeal.
2. Keep a log of the traumatic events that Mariatu experienced. Beside each event, describe the internal and external resources she drew on to help her avoid total despair.
3. Think of some other people who showed resilience after going through a traumatic event. These could be famous people or family members. Write a short biography of one of them, highlighting how he/she exhibited resilience in the face of adversity.

B) HERITAGE: FAITH, HOPE, SUPERSTITION, AND THE POWER OF DREAMS

Sometimes people find strength and meaning in life by making connections to their heritage, tradition, and faith. The following questions can be the basis for a Q & A where one student takes on the role of an interviewer and another the role of Mariatu.

1. To what extent has your life been influenced by religion and prayer?
2. What role do folk wisdom, superstition, and dreams play in your life?
3. How did your dreams change over time? How do you think the changes reflected what you were feeling and thinking?
4. Why did the memory of the little weaver bird (p. 59) hold so much meaning for you?
5. Why did you feel "really alive" while you were dancing (p. 120)?

C) INJUSTICE, BETRAYAL, AND THE IMPORTANCE OF SOCIAL AND POLITICAL RESPONSIBILITY

1. Bookmark and track the extent to which characters — both adults and children — in the book demonstrate integrity and/or social and political responsibility.
2. As you read the book, record questions you may have regarding the history of the conflict in Sierra Leone, then do research to find the answers.
3. To what extent did adults fail the children of Sierra Leone? Do research to find out what the situation is today in Sierra Leone for the child victims of the war.
4. Do people in other parts of the world bear any responsibility for what happened to the victims of the war in Sierra Leone? What can or should people in countries such as Canada or the United States do to help?
5. Discuss the differences between civil wars and wars fought between countries. Give examples of each.
6. Where else in the world have children been recruited as soldiers? Why do you think children are forced into rebel armies? Once the war is over, what do you think happens to these children as they return to civilian life?
7. Although Mariatu at times despaired and almost gave up, why is she ultimately a role model for young people around the world?

D) DISABILITIES

1. Mariatu has lived without hands since she was 12 years old. How do you think this has affected
 - a) her ability to do things for herself?
 - b) her self-esteem?
 - c) her feelings about her captors?

Find examples from the book to support your thoughts.

E) IMMIGRATION

1. What were Mariatu's thoughts about coming to Canada?
2. What challenges did she have to face when she arrived?

3. What does Mariatu miss most about Sierra Leone?
4. Do you think that Mariatu has integrated well into Canadian society? Explain your answer.
5. Pick a country anywhere in the world where you neither speak the language nor know much about its customs, history, geography, etc. Now imagine that you are going to immigrate there. What would you do to prepare yourself? How would you feel about making such a move? What would you miss most about your home here?

F) AUTOBIOGRAPHY AS A GENRE

1. From your reading of Mariatu's memoir, draw examples of how the story is:
 - an account of the events of her life
 - an account of the history of Sierra Leone
 - a condemnation of war
 - a condemnation of, or an apology for, the perpetrators of the crimes committed
 - a message that the human spirit is strong enough to overcome any trial.

G) READER'S THEATER

Have students work in groups to select a key conversation or dialogue they would like to bring to life through Reader's Theater. Explain to students that they will read aloud the section in "theater" style, i.e., with drama and feeling, as if they were on stage reading to an audience. Students need to find a suitable segment that will take about two to three minutes to read. Photocopy the section each group selects. Ask students to use a different color to highlight the direct speech of each character. The text that is not highlighted becomes narration. Students may choose to omit tags such as "he said" or "she said," which will become redundant when a different person reads aloud the words of the character.

Students may present their segment to the class individually, or they can work as a group to create a tableau from which speakers emerge using background music, character masks they make, or simple props they bring from home.

AFTER READING THE BOOK

1. At the end of the book, Mariatu describes her reunion with her grandmother. Her grandmother tells her, "... many things have changed because of the war. And witchcraft can't change the past. I wish a spell could have stopped the attack on you. But you have turned your hurt and pain into something positive. When those demons reappear, think about all the angels who have come into your life since then." (p. 204)

Mariatu goes on to name some of her angels: Fatmata, Kadi, Adamsay, Abibatu, Mohamed, and Sulaiman. Summarize how each of them contributed to her life.

In your life, who are your angels? How does "counting one's angels" contribute to developing a resilient outlook?

2. Discuss why the book is entitled *The Bite of the Mango*. Do you think this is a good title? Do you have suggestions for other titles? Explain your choices.

3. Examine the book cover. Explain how the images encapsulate and symbolize the content and themes of the book.

4. What social and political challenges do we face here in North America? What can young people do to help make a difference?

5. Read another autobiography by an African figure and compare the challenges and achievements of the principal characters. Some suggestions are:

A Long Way Gone by Ishmael Beah

Desert Flower and Desert Dawn by Waris Dirie

Long Walk to Freedom by Nelson Mandela

Unbowed by Wangari Maathai

6. Is reconciliation possible after violent armed conflicts? Discuss with reference to Mariatu Kamara's account of her life. Find out more about attempts to bring peace and reconciliation after other conflicts in Africa and in other parts of the world. (Consider reading about the Nuremberg Trials after World War II, the writing of the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights, Gacaca Courts in Rwanda, and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa.)

7. What role should journalists play in reporting conflicts? At what point does reporting become exploitation? How has journalist Susan McClelland written Mariatu's story with integrity? What kinds of questions do you think Susan asked in order to learn the details of the story from Mariatu? Compare the images McClelland helps Mariatu to describe from her life in Sierra Leone with media

images like those provided in films such as *King Kong* or *Blood Diamonds*. (NB: *Blood Diamonds* is rated “R”; do not use this as an example for students under 17 years of age.)

8. Have a look at your notes from before you read the book regarding your knowledge of Sierra Leone and Africa in general before and after reading the autobiography. Have your views remained the same? Changed? Developed? Discuss the reasons with reference to the book.

9. Compare your understanding of people with physical disabilities before you read the book with what you now. Have your views remained the same? Changed? Developed? Discuss the reasons using examples from the book.

To read more about Mariatu, go to www.mariatufoundation.com.