

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for A Girl Named Disaster by Nancy Farmer

Book Information

Nancy Farmer, A Girl Named Disaster

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Book Level: 5.1

Interest Level: UG

While journeying to Zimbabwe, eleven-year-old Nhamo struggles to escape drowning and starvation and in so doing comes close to the luminous world of the African spirits.

Award: ALA Notable/Best Books; National Book Award/ Honors; Newbery Honor; Publishers Weekly Best Book; YALSA Top Ten

Topics: Adventure, Misc./Other; Adventure, Survival; Countries/Regions, Zimbabwe; READNOW - Demco Media Turtleback Books, Demco Media - Read Now Grades 9+; Recommended Reading, California Recommended Lit., English, 6-8; Recommended Reading, Children's Literature Choice; Recommended Reading, NY Publ. Library Best Books for the Teen Age; Recommended Reading, YALSA Popular Paperbacks

Main Characters

Ambuya Nhamo's maternal grandmother

Aunt Chipo Runako's sister, who helped raise Nhamo after Runako died

Baba Joseph a Vapostori leader who lives and works at Efifi

Dr. Everjoice Musuku a woman who worked at the research station where Nhamo was nursed back to health

Masvita Nhamo's cousin and Chipo's daughter

Nhamo a young Shona girl whose mother had been killed by a leopard, father had abandoned her, and was being raised by her mother's family

Vocabulary

dare men's meeting place

karoyi little witch

nganga traditional healer

ngozi an avenging spirit

roora bride price

Synopsis

Nhamo is a Shona child being raised by her mother's family. Her village and family seem to be the target of witchcraft when they are struck by cholera. Nhamo's Uncle Kufa seeks out a *muvuki* to determine the source of the witchcraft. The *muvuki* states it is the spirit of the man Nhamo's father killed, who must be satisfied by Nhamo's becoming the junior wife of the dead man's brother. To avoid this terrible destiny, Nhamo's grandmother sends her away to seek the help of the Catholic church in locating her father's family, the *Jongwes*.

Nhamo sets off in a boat by herself, following her grandmother's directions. She nearly reaches her destination, Zimbabwe, when she falls asleep and drifts off course into Lake Cabora Bassa. She reaches a large island and must stop because her boat is leaking and seems irreparable. Nhamo spends the entire dry season on the island while attempting to make herself a new boat. During this time, she also plants a garden, builds a tree shelter, forages for food with baboons, and becomes a woman.

Pushed by the sudden death of a baboon at the hands of a leopard, Nhamo decides she must continue on her search for her family. Nhamo manages to repair the boat and make it to Mozambique. There she encounters a number of terrors and ends up in a cattle barn, which she believes is the underwater world. The cattle are part of a research station studying tsetse flies. The people there nurse her back to health and teach her many things.

Eventually, she is taken to her father's family, where she finds acceptance when her great grandfather sees that she has inherited his ability to communicate with the spirit world. Her great grandfather tells her about her father and gives her

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a picture taken at her parents' wedding. Nhamo stays with the Jongwes and attends school, but she returns each summer to live and work with her friends at the research station.

Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

Initial Understanding

Aunt Chipo demonstrates her opinion of Nhamo by the way she treated her. How does she show her feelings, and why does she view Nhamo so negatively?

Like Cinderella, Nhamo is made to do all the chores and dirty work, while Chipo's own daughter, Masvita, is treated almost royally. Masvita is often praised, then compared to the often derided Nhamo. Ambuya eventually reveals to Nhamo that Chipo's feelings were rooted in her life-long resentment of Runako, her smarter and (until she married Proud Jongwe) more favored sister.

Literary Analysis

Nhamo was raised in a society that believed in spirits and witchcraft. Baba Joseph believed in the saving power of Jesus. How are these beliefs the same and how do they differ?

They both accept the belief that the "spirit world" directly affects events in the physical world. Both Baba Joseph and Nhamo's beliefs stipulate good and evil forces, which ceremonies like exorcism, prayer, and gift-giving can influence. Nhamo's culture places more value and emphasis on the role of ancestors and the persistence of their personal motives and needs. Baba Joseph's beliefs instead emphasize forgiveness and personal trust in the divine.

Inferential Comprehension

What would most likely have happened to Nhamo if she had been sent to marry Zororo?

The marriage posed definite dangers to Nhamo, from Zororo's violent nature, unhealthy household, and jealous wives. When Masvita tries to look on the bright side, before Nhamo's arranged departure with Zororo, it is clear that she will also be completely separated from her family. Ambuya--the reader's most trustworthy source--told Nhamo, "Believe me, you wouldn't last a year before he either beat you to death or one of his wives poisoned you."

Constructing Meaning

Why was Nhamo's skill as a storyteller important in the novel?

The stories were Nhamo's best tools for survival. While on her own, they helped her draw on the spirits of ancestors and nature for guidance. She told stories to many different kinds of characters, as well. From Masvita to Baba Joseph, these characters praised her abilities--a sign of both Nhamo's intellectual gifts and her social abilities.

Teachable Skills

Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors

In Nhamo's culture, becoming a woman is a significant event in a girl's life. When it is determined that a girl is a woman, she goes to be trained to be a wife and an adult in the community. Many cultures and/or religious groups have formal procedures that they follow when a boy or girl are deemed ready for adulthood. Find out what some different groups do to mark the occasion of adulthood. Information can be obtained through research or interviews with members of these different groups. Present the information to the rest of the class or discussion group.

Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors

Archaeological artifacts are useful items in explaining the historical and cultural practices and daily life of a group of people. When Nhamo was on the island where she discovered the

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abandoned hut, she found different items in and around the hut that helped her to determine who had lived there and what that person did. Create a list of items you would find if you came upon different sites that Nhamo encountered, such as her village, the trading post, Nhamo's island, and Efifi. This project can be extended to an art project to create these artifacts and locations out of clay or some other medium.

Comparing and Contrasting Even before Nhamo reaches Efifi, she came to understand that not everyone believes the same things about who created the world, how things came to be, and who controls a human's life. Nhamo, of course, was raised to believe the spirit world had a great deal of control over her life and should be given the proper respect. Nhamo later learns that Rosa and Joao believe in a man that hangs on a cross. She saw that Baba Joseph and Sister Gladys did not believe the same things, either. Compare the religious and cultural beliefs of the different characters. Note the areas where they agree and disagree. Find the similarities and differences between the various belief systems.

Deriving Word or Phrase Meaning Throughout the story, Nhamo retells the stories she was told by her grandmother. These stories often explained why something came to be or how to understand something. Such stories are one way knowledge and traditions are passed down in cultures where most people cannot read or write. Though outsiders may not agree, within the culture the stories are believed to be true explanations for everyday experiences. Choose some everyday items or common beliefs and create your own story to explain how they came to be or what they mean.