

## Teaching Suggestions for *The Weight of Our Sky* by Hanna Alkaf

1. Start with Metaphor to Meaning: The title of the book is “The Weight of Our Sky” which is taken from a Malay expression. As Melati Ahmad explains to the Malay and Chinese gang members who would prevent her from taking a child and an injured teen to the hospital, “It means that where we plant our feet is where we must hold up the sky. We make our own sky, and we can hold it up together.” Ask students the following:

- How do the actions of Melati, her mother, Vince, Auntie Bee, Jay, and others hold up the sky?
- What is the weight or cost of the sky that Melati and communities of both Malay and Chinese have to hold up? Explain in your own words what happened and how much physical, psychological and property damage is detailed in the book.
- How might we describe the current sky in the United States, in our local, state and national communities?
- In what ways can our actions as teens serve to hold up that sky? Some say that as teens still in school our actions would have too minimal an impact to make any dent in the troubled sky above us. What does the quote Hanna Alkaf used tell us about the impact of individual actions? Do you feel this is true or not? React. You can also develop a poem or an illustration to communicate your feelings.

2. Vince compares Melati to jasmine flowers, which are pale and delicate and yet thrive the tropical heat of the Malay climate. In what way is this a viable description of her growth during the pivotal week of May 13, 1969?

3. This book is set in a divided capital city polarized by ethnic distrust. The plot not only details Melati’s maturation but also shows how misconceptions and stereotypes about others lead to violence. Encourage students to discuss this by:

- Challenge them to take notes citing specific pages and chapters from the book to identify the actual historical, geographic, political and ethnic facts behind the events in the story that causes Melati to search for her mother, and displaces many because of the riots.
- After collecting the facts, have them construct a timeline of the events in small groups or as a class.
- Ask them to find at least two pages or chapters about the events given by the Chinese and the Malays characters, and discuss which viewpoints hold greater weight when compared to actual facts.

- Have any of the teen characters-either Malay or Chinese-in the book witnessed or experienced the riots and violence or their impact? Have any investigated the truths behind their statements? What might this mean in terms of their points of view?

4. The events of 1969 triggered tremendous upheaval and growth among the fictional characters in the book as well as the community of Malays and Chinese caught up in the riots. In this powerful historical novel however, cultural elements of that year-particularly pop culture-played a key role.

- Focus students' attention on the songs, songwriters, vinyl records, movies, movie stars, sports, etc. that figure so prominently in the story. Discuss the extent to which American movie royalty and British pop icons figured into the lives of the teens and adults affected by this fateful violence in Maylasia.
- Suggest that students download lyrics and listen to at least three key songs mentioned in the book. How do their lyrics help the characters to navigate life-threatening challenges to survive? Are some of these lyrics still familiar to 21<sup>st</sup> century readers; why have these continued to be popular some fifty years later?

5. Are the events that occurred in Kuala Lumpur during the week of May 13, 1969, relevant to us in the United States today? Can readers of this work, who are neither Malaysian or Chinese, relate to this story of racial tension, teen confrontations, violence in the streets, looting, biases, volunteerism and survival? Help students to discuss this by:

- Challenge them to list at least three local, state or national news events or trends, which parallel the plot, interactions and character evolution described in this book.
- Identify aspects of this story which deal with OCD, survivor guilt, volunteerism, resilience, bullying, anti-bullying, advocacy and student leadership, that currently figure in their personal or school lives.
- Note the ways this book personally resonates and inspires them as they move forward as individuals who are defining their own values. What values and lessons does the book underscore that can be useful in their own lives at present?

6. Melati Ahmad deals with her OCD throughout the narrative. It increases the natural anxiety any vulnerable teen would have felt as she searches for her mother and faces assault, terrorism, death, curfew, and ongoing uncertainty. Have students discuss:

- In what ways does her family's cultural response to the djinn, and her own perception of OCD as a powerful djinn, amplify the danger and tension of her situation?
- How does the reaction of even her closest relatives to her condition make things worse for Melati?

- While this condition and its coping rituals are recognized clinically and legally today, does this mean that every teen currently dealing with OCD has a calm life? What social challenges do they face in being accepted by peers and revealing themselves to others?
- How does Melati on her own with no guidance or expert support navigate her tapping rituals and the loud drumming of the djinn to cope? What specific actions, activities and connections help her emerge to help others?
- Are there any lessons this character can impart for peers dealing with undiagnosed or not yet confessed OCD symptoms? In reading this work, did you realize that some peers you mocked or called out, might be displaying behaviors on the OCD spectrum? How might you change your personal interactions towards them going forward?

7. Hanna Ahmad begins her author's note, which prefaces this book by saying that "this book is not a light and easy read, its contents include graphic violence, death, racism, OCD and anxiety triggers." She cautions readers about reading the book if its contents are not what they want to read. Many books are written to be light, easy and relaxing. Is it best to avoid this book because it covers upsetting, emotionally jarring, and too real elements that echo real life? Should the narrative have included more Malaysian culture and geography and focused more on teen romance with less emphasis on death, anxiety, destruction and immutable change? Do you as a teen prefer to easy reads instead of a book like this? Write a letter to the author reacting to her warning based on your response to having read the book.

8. Hanna Alkaf, a native of Malaysia, states in her author's note that she is offering "our story, and without an audience, a story dies." Despite the fact that this is a story she needs to tell, she emphasizes "I can't say all of what you're about to read is true; this is a work of fiction, after all and even in nonfiction, so much relies on the memories of traumatized survivors and the words of those who write the history books, and both of these can lie." What are the implications of this statement? Does it mean that even in history textbooks, the absolute truth of an event, even if substantiated by primary sources can still be in question? If this is so, how can we learn and comprehend "history" courses? How can we move forward to learn from history and connect the past with our present?

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