

TEACHER'S GUIDE

Created by Renée Watson & Ellen Hagan

Red Velvet Cake Ingredients
2 1/2 cups all-purpose flour
1 1/2 cups sugar
1 teaspoon baking soda
1 teaspoon salt
1 tablespoon cocoa powder
1 1/2 cups vegetable oil
1 cup buttermilk, at room temperature
2 large eggs
2 tablespoons red food coloring
1 teaspoon white distilled vinegar

ABOUT THE BOOK

What if your daddy did the worst thing in the world? And what if you were never going to see your momma again? How do you remake your life when you are only thirteen years old?

Serenity knows she is good at keeping secrets, and she's got a whole lifetime's worth of them. Her momma is dead, her daddy's gone, and starting life over at her grandparent's house is strange. Luckily, certain things seem to hold promise: a new friend, a new church, a new school. But when her brother starts making poor choices, and her grandparents hold to a faith that Serenity isn't sure she understands, it is the power of love—in all its forms—that will repair her heart and keep her sure of just who she is.

ABOUT THE GUIDE

- The writing prompts in this guide can be used for journal entries, poetry assignments, or as topics for narrative or persuasive essays.

PRE-READING ACTIVITIES

- Create a Family Tree & Oral History: have students make a family tree and interview a family member.
- Self Portrait Collages: have students create a collage representing who they are, where they're from, what they care about, etc.



"Warm, rich and satisfying." —Kirkus Reviews

"Inspiring, authentic, and told in a straightforward yet poetic style." —Publishers Weekly

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Chapter 1: OUR FATHER

Writing Prompts

- FREE WRITE: Write about a gift you've been given but rarely use.
- POEM: Write a character poem about a person in your family.

Discussion Questions

- In this chapter Serenity wonders if all children are like their parents. What do you think? In what ways are you like your parents? In what ways are you different?

Chapter 2: WHICH

Writing Prompts

- FREE WRITE: Write about a time you were afraid.
- NARRATIVE: What is your favorite poem or song lyric? Write about what it means to you, how it's inspired you, etc.

Discussion Questions

- Reading the Lord's Prayer over and over made Serenity feel better the day her mother died. Do you have a favorite song lyric, scripture or quote? What does it mean to you?

Chapter 3: ART IN HEAVEN

Writing Prompts

- FREE WRITE: Using the five senses, make a list of the things you see, smell, touch, taste, and hear in your neighborhood.
- NARRATIVE: Write about a time you moved. How was the new place different/similar? What did you miss?
- ART ACTIVITY: Students create a map of their neighborhood or draw their favorite place

Discussion Questions

- Serenity compares her new neighborhood to her old one. What conclusions can you make about where Serenity used to live? Which neighborhood would you prefer to live in? Why?
- Danny marks his calendar with an X. He says he's counting down the days for school to start. Serenity doesn't believe him. What do you think Danny is keeping track of? Have you ever anticipated something? What did you do as you waited?

Chapter 4: HALLOWED BE THY NAME

Writing Prompts

- FREE WRITE: What is the meaning of your name? Does it reflect who you are? (Have a name dictionary or access to the internet so that students can look up their name.)
- POEM: Write a Name Poem using Serenity's poem as an example.

Discussion Questions

- Mrs. Wilson says, "Fruit doesn't fall far from the tree." What does this mean? Do you agree? Why or why not? Serenity says she doesn't want to be abused like her mother. When Ann asks her if she thinks she has a choice, Serenity shakes her head, no. Do you think Serenity has a choice? Why do you think she believes she doesn't have a choice?



Shaavonte Sims

About Renée Watson

Renée Watson has been a teaching artist for more than ten years. She teaches poetry and theater in the New York City Schools. She is the author of *A Place Where Hurricanes Happen*, a picture book about life before, during, and after hurricane Katrina (Random House, June 2010). This is her first novel.

Chapter 5: THY KINGDOM COME

Writing Prompts

- FREE WRITE: What does family mean to you?
- POEM: Write a poem about your family using similes.

Discussion Questions

- What is a kingdom? Why is this chapter titled, Thy Kingdom Come?
- Grandpa tells Danny, "Bad company ruins good intentions." What does this mean? Do you agree? Explain.

Chapter 6: THY WILL BE DONE, IN EARTH

Writing Prompts

- FREE WRITE: Brainstorm a list of the things you hope for. [Give students 2 minutes to write. Encourage them to think and write as fast as they can].
- POEM: What do you wish for? Write a poem about it using alliteration.

Discussion Questions

- Grandpa says that Pastor Mitchell is doing things right by reaching out to the community. What role does church play in your community? What role do you think it should play?
- Serenity is worried about what people will think of her if she is seen hanging out with Jay. Do you think she should be concerned? Do you think she should go on a walk with Jay? Why? Why not? What would you do if you were Serenity?

Chapter 7: AS IT IS

Writing Prompts

- FREE WRITE: Write about a time you really wanted something but couldn't get it.
- POEM: Write a poem using the anaphora, "I Believe."

Discussion Questions

- Do you think Grandpa comes up with a fair compromise? Why? Why not?
- How does the scene when Danny pushes Serenity mirror the relationship between Serenity's mom and dad?
- At the end of this chapter Serenity says Jay is the type of person you have to take "as is." What does this mean? Do you think Jay needs to change? Why or why not? What does it take to change something about your personality that you don't like?

Chapter 8: IN HEAVEN

Writing Prompts

- FREE WRITE: What secrets have you kept? What secrets have you told?
- POEM: Write a poem about your day using personification.

Discussion Questions

- Serenity tells Maria that her father didn't leave any bruises on her-- "not the kind people can see..." What invisible bruises did Serenity's father leave?
- Serenity wants to tell her grandparents about the abuse that Maria is experiencing, but Maria makes her promise not to. Do you think Serenity should tell? Is it ever okay to tell a secret?

Chapter 9: GIVE US

Writing Prompts

- FREE WRITE: What makes a good friendship?
- POEM: Write a poem using sensory detail to describe an emotion.

Discussion Questions

- In this chapter we learn that Danny had been keeping track of his father's absence. What does this tell you about how Danny feels about his father being gone?
- Serenity doesn't cry over her father's suicide until she sees the calendar in the trash. Why do you think this is? Have images, scents, or songs ever triggered an emotion or memory for you?
- How is Serenity's poem, *Betrayal*, at the start of this chapter about both Maria and Serenity's father? Have you ever been betrayed? When?

Chapter 10: THIS DAY

Writing Prompts

- FREE WRITE: Write about the worst punishment you ever received.
- POEM: Write a poem describing someone you know using metaphors.

Discussion Questions

- Do you think Serenity should fall for Jay? Why or why not?

Chapter 11: OUR DAILY BREAD

Writing Prompts

- FREE WRITE: Does your family celebrate Thanksgiving? If yes, how? What are some of your family's traditions?
- POEM: Write a list of Thanksgiving hyperboles.

Discussion Questions

- Is Serenity being nosy or do you think she should be checking up on Danny?

Chapter 12: AND FORGIVE US

Writing Prompts

- FREE WRITE: What does forgiveness mean to you? Does everyone deserve to be forgiven?
- POEM: Write a list poem naming 10 things you know.

Discussion Questions

- What is a hypocrite? Do you think Serenity is being a hypocrite?

Chapter 13: OUR DEBTS

Writing Prompts

- FREE WRITE: Write a list of the dreams you have--big and small.
- POEM: Write your own version of *Harlem* [visit www.poetryfoundation.org for full poem]

Discussion Questions

- Maria says she's learned a lesson from the life of Sandra Cisneros. She learns that even though your dream comes true, sometimes it might not turn out how you thought it would. Do you agree with this? What are the moments in the story when the characters strive to get something, but then have regrets? Has this ever happened to you? When?

Chapter 14: AS WE FORGIVE

Writing Prompts

- FREE WRITE: What are some of the generational gaps between youth and adults?
- POEM: Write a forgiveness poem. Who do you need to forgive? Who needs to forgive you?

Discussion Questions

- How can Serenity apply what she learned about Maya Angelou to her own life?

Chapter 15: OUR DEBTORS

Writing Prompts

- FREE WRITE: What do parents owe their children? What do children owe their parents?
- POEM: Write a poem about your mother's shoes (i.e. slippers, dress shoes, casual shoes). What do they represent? Can you "fit" them or are they "too big" for you?

Discussion Questions

- How might have Maria handled the situation in the classroom differently?
- What does Serenity mean when she says, "...parents owe their children something more?"

Chapter 16: AND LEAD US NOT INTO TEMPTATION

Writing Prompts

- FREE WRITE: Write about a time you were tempted to do something you knew you shouldn't do.
- POEM: Write a haiku about your favorite season.

Discussion Questions

- Do you think Serenity should have gone with Jay to the mall? Do you think she feels guilty? Why or why not?

Chapter 17: BUT DELIVER US FROM EVIL

Writing Prompts

- FREE WRITE: What is the best advice you've ever been given?
- POEM: Read "Still I Rise" by Maya Angelou. How does this poem reflect Grandma's advice?

Discussion Questions

- What do you think about Grandma's advice to Serenity? Do you think it made Serenity feel better?

Chapter 18: FOR THINE IS THE KINGDOM

Writing Prompts

- FREE WRITE: Whom do you admire? Write about that person.
- POEM: Read "Knoxville, Tennessee" by Nikki Giovanni. Write a poem about a family gathering.

Discussion Questions

- For the first time, Serenity misses being in the kitchen. Why do you think she's starting to want to cook again?
- Do you think Serenity did the right thing by telling her cousin about Maria? What would you have done?

Chapter 19: AND THE POWER

Writing Prompts

- FREE WRITE: What does it mean to be brave?
- POEM: Choose a character from the book and write a poem from his/her perspective.

Discussion Questions

- When Maria thanks Serenity for making her tell the truth, Serenity says, "I did it for my momma too." Why does Serenity say this? What do you think Serenity has learned about keeping secrets?
- When Serenity gives the clothes back to Jay, she says she feels like her momma. Why does she feel like her mother?

Chapter 20: AND THE GLORY FOREVER

Writing Prompts

- FREE WRITE: Who are you?
- POEM: Write an identity poem.

Discussion Questions

- What is the legacy Serenity's mother left her?

Chapter 21: AMEN

Writing Prompts

- FREE WRITE: What are some of your family recipes?
- POEM: Write an ode to your favorite food.

Discussion Questions

- At the end of the novel, Serenity has baked a Red Velvet Cake all by herself. Why is this a significant moment?
- What do you notice about the titles of each chapter?
- How do the chapter titles tie in to Serenity's story? Why do you think the author chose to use phrases of The Lord's Prayer for chapter titles?

Classroom Projects

- Create a classroom cookbook.
- Create a poetry anthology of the poetry written inspired by *What Momma Left Me*.
- Put on a Rites of Passage Ceremony for your class.

Community Service Projects & Field Trips

- Volunteer at a soup kitchen or donate food to a local food bank.
- Make holiday cards for a local women's shelter.
- Make art pieces for a local shelter and donate it for decoration.
- Visit a bakery and get the behind the scenes tour. Learn how they make their baked goods.
- Is there a historic church or synagogue in your city? What's the oldest place of worship in your community? Find out and plan a trip to visit it.

POST READING DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. The color red appears several times in *What Momma Left Me*; Serenity's face often turns red when she is embarrassed or around Jay, the air hockey puck at the church retreat is red, and at the end of the story, Serenity bakes her Momma's Red Velvet Cake. Can you think of other examples in the book where the color red appears? What are some things or feelings that are often associated with the color red or that you, personally, associate with the color red? Why do you think Renée Watson chose this particular color to appear so many times in this story and what do you think it means?
2. Secrets and lies can both be found throughout *What Momma Left Me*. Serenity, in particular, keeps a lot of secrets and tells some lies; often she has to lie in order to keep the secrets. Can you think of some of the major secrets Serenity keeps and lies she tells? What conclusions does Serenity reach about secrets and lies at the end of the book? What do you think the author is trying to say about secrets and lies?
3. Even though we never meet Serenity and Danny's father, he has a lot of influence over not only Serenity and Danny's lives, but also the way that they view and react to the world. For example, in the chapter "As It Is," when Danny and Grandpa have a loud argument because Danny wants new shoes and Grandpa wants him to be happy with what he has, Danny winds up flinching and putting his hands out to protect his face. When Grandpa asks Danny why he did that, Danny says, "I thought you were going to hit me" because that's what Danny's father used to do when he got angry. What are some other scenes from the book that show how Serenity and Danny's father changed their lives or influenced the way they view or react to things?
4. How do Serenity's feelings about Jay change throughout the story as she discovers new things about him? How do you feel about Jay at the end of the book? Do you like him or dislike him? Do you think he will ever change?
5. What is your favorite scene in the book? Why is it your favorite? What was your least favorite part of the book and why didn't you like it?
6. Several of the characters in the story have dreams – Momma wants to open her own restaurant, Grandma wants to write a cookbook, and Maria wants to be a singer. What are the dreams that other characters in the book have? What are some of the obstacles that stand in the way of the characters reaching their dreams? What are some things that other characters in the book do to help them achieve their dreams?
7. Who is your favorite character in the book? Least favorite? Why? If your school was to put on a play of the book, what character would you want to play and why?
8. Serenity, her family, and her friends go through a lot of changes throughout the course of the book. Serenity also thinks and writes a lot about change. How do you feel about change at the end of the story? Which characters do you think changed the most in the story? The least?