

My Name is Mina by David Almond
Hodder Children's Books, 2010

Teacher's notes and Discussion Prompts

'My Name is Mina' is a thoughtful, literary novel which invites reflection. It is a book that can sustain reading and re-reading. Sensitive group discussion may enhance the reading experience and help to refine a personal response but it is important that the discussion is not overly interrogative and that it does not disrupt the flow or enjoyment of reading. The book takes as one of its major themes the philosophy of learning and education; it would therefore be antithetical to take an overtly didactic approach to studying the novel..

Discussion openers

The following discussion prompts are intended to support teachers and group leaders by opening up avenues for exploration and by offering invitations for personal response. They invite speculation, prediction, and emotional engagement. Useful discussion openers might include:

- 'I wonder why...'
- 'Does this remind you of: anything that has happened to you/ you have heard about/anything you have read'
- How do you feel about...?' 'How would you feel in this situation...?'
- 'Is there anything that you find puzzling, intriguing, interesting in this chapter?'
- 'I wonder why David Almond decided to write it like that....?'

These questions should be genuinely open.

Readers ask their own questions

Readers should also be encouraged to ask their own questions. It can be helpful to allow time for readers to jot down any thoughts or questions that arise after reading. Following a period of individual reflection, open the discussion by inviting the readers to share the thoughts and questions they have recorded in their notebooks. You can create a record of what is said, and use these starting points to help shape your discussion.

Talking points

Statements provide an interesting alternative to questions for opening a discussion. They are less interrogative and often elicit a more energetic and open response. The following statements might be used to explore readers' ideas about the nature of education and learning. It is often a good idea to include some statements that contradict each other or those that do not have clear right or wrong answers.

- 'School is the best place to receive an education'
- 'You learn more at home than you learn at school'
- 'You can learn by yourself.'
- 'It is easier to learn if you have people to talk to.'
- 'Reading is the key to learning.'

After reading you might invite the group to discuss the statements in pairs while you listen to see how you might tap into their ideas to lead the whole group discussion. The following chapter by chapter prompts offer a repertoire of discussion ideas. It is not a list that needs to be worked through systematically. Choose the suggestions that most suit the needs and interests of your group.

Chapter by chapter discussion prompts and teaching suggestions

Moonlight, Wonder, Flies and Nonsense

- What impression do you have of Mina after reading the first chapter? Would you like her as a friend? Choose three words that you think best describe Mina.
- ‘My name is Mina and I love the night’. In this chapter Mina reveals her sense of wonder at the night world. Is there anything that she says that makes you see the nighttime in a new way?
- Mina delights in words. She loves the words nonsensical and paradoxical. Do you have a favourite word? Make a collection of your favourite words.
- Mina’s motto is ‘How can a bird that is born for joy sit in a cage and sing.’ What do these words make you think about?

Bananas, Weirdos, A Beautiful Tree and Boring Heaven

- Do you learn anything new about Mina in this chapter? Did anything in this chapter surprise you?
- *‘I don’t really believe in Heaven at all, and I don’t believe in perfect angels. I think that this might be the only Heaven there can possibly be, this world we live in now, but we haven’t quite realised it yet. And I think that the only possible angels might be us.’* (p 29) Do you agree or disagree with Mina? Or are you uncertain?
- Chief Seattle reportedly said, “There is no death, only a change of world”. What do you think this means? How do different cultures explain what happens to us after we die? What are the similarities and the differences in these beliefs? Find out about their funeral customs and afterlife myths.

Dinosaurs, French Toast and A Journey in the Underworld

- ‘You don’t have to know every single thing about a person in order to understand them’ Do you agree with that?
- Mina writes the story Mina in the Underworld in the third person, ‘somehow it’s better to write this in the third person’ (p44) . Try writing part of this story in the first person. How does it change the story? You might try the extraordinary activities at the end of this chapter:
 - Write a story about yourself as if you are writing about somebody else
 - Write a story about somebody else as if you’re writing about yourselfWas it easy or difficult to write like this? Do you prefer reading or writing first person/ third person stories?
- Why might Mina have decided to write her story rather than just tell it to somebody?

Thoughts About the Archaeopteryx

- Talk in pairs about Mina's thoughts about the archaeopteryx. When you next have an opportunity, take a few minutes to sit and observe the birds in the garden/park/playground/street. Do you notice anything about the way they behave that you have not noticed before? You might share your observations with your reading group.

Ernie Myers, Rubbish, Dust, Metempsychosis and a Blue Car

- Mina describes how she carves messages into her tree, 'I used to write on my arms as well, but I stopped that too, except when I want to make a quick note to myself about something I've seen or heard.' What image do you have of Mina when you read these words? Look back at the three words you chose to describe Mina after reading chapter 1. Would you change any of these words? Chose one more word to add to your collection. Compare your words with a partner and discuss the reasons for your choices.

A Wish and a Prayer

- In this and the preceding chapters Mina has recounted stories from legend and mythology which feature birds. Which birds does she mention? Why do you think that birds are so important to Mina? What images are suggested to you by the different birds that you know from your local area? (Robin, seagull, starling, sparrow, pigeon, blackbird, wagtail.) You might use a reference guide, if you are unable to identify the birds that you see.

Sprouts, Sarcasm and the Mysteries of Time

- Views about school: Mina states that school loses its meaning the more you repeat the word and the more you attend it. Her Mum thinks that Mina's views are too extreme. In pairs, improvise a conversation between Mina and her mother about Mina's return to school. Then jot down the arguments given on both sides. With your class/or group discuss the merits and weaknesses in Mina's position.

Persephone, Daftness and Absolutely Nothing

- Mina asserts some simple facts about children, which she thinks are often overlooked by adults. With a partner, discuss these statements. Do you agree or disagree? Is there anything you would add to Mina's list? Share your ideas with your group or class.

Fig rolls, Pee, Spit, Sweat and All the Words for Joy

- Mina recalls her favourite books from early childhood: where the Wild Things Are, Going on a Bear Hunt and Dogger. She remembers how she felt and the memories of associated activities – dancing the dance of the Wild Things. Do you have a favourite book from when you were younger? Was it a book that was read to you at home or at school? What do you remember about the book and what you felt when you read it?
- Words and feelings: Mina has a special interest in words and associates them with feelings; words for joy and words for sadness. Take one minute to write down your own words for joy. Share your list with a partner.

Grandpa, Missing Monkeys and Owls.

In the story 'Mina and the Owls', Mina recounts a magical, memorable moment in her life. Everyone has a story inside them: what stories do you have to share? Can you remember a time when you went out into the night and everything seemed different? Perhaps you can remember the most magical experience you have ever had... or the most frightening? Or you may remember a very special time that you shared with a parent/grandparent/friend. Tell and swap stories with your partner.

(Stories from personal experience are more easily initiated when the teacher first tells their own story. One story told often stimulates another story. Encourage children to tell their stories in the moment rather than work systematically around the group.)

After you have told your stories, you may want to write them down as Mina has done. You could write your story in the third person.

SATS Day, Glibbertysnark and Calminosity

- Discuss this chapter with your group Consider this event from different points of view
 - Why does Mina sabotage her SATs results?
 - Why do you think Mrs Sculley and the Head Teacher react as they do?
 - What do you think Mina's mum thinks and feels about the situation?

- 'Hot seating'- use a hot seating approach to explore further the responses of each of the characters in this chapter. At least two people should take on the role of each character to allow different perspectives to be explored. After the hotseating reflect on the responses which seem most in keeping with the characters in the story. Reread the chapter or parts of the chapter. Has your thinking about any of the characters changed?

- Write this chapter from the point of view of Mrs Sculley or Mina's Mum

Eggs, Chicks, A Belly, Babies and Poems

- Discuss this chapter with your group
 - What do we learn about Mina from the poems that she writes?
 - How do the poems compare with her SATs writing?
 - Review your list of words that describe Mina. Are there any words that you would change now? Add one more word to your list.

Spaghetti Pomodoro and A Dream

- Mina dreams of the places in the world that she would like to visit. In pairs, share thoughts about the places that you would like to visit. Why are these places important in your imagination?
- You might try Mina's strategy; think about visiting these places before you go to sleep. Can you travel in your dreams?

The Story of Corinthian Avenue

- 'How can a bird that is born for joy sit in a cage and sing?' Consider how this quotation from Blake relates to Mina's circumstances.
- What feelings does Mina have about her visit to Corinthian Avenue? Was it as she expected? Why do you think she decides that it's 'not for her'?

- You might try Mina's word games. Can you fill a page with one sentence? Write a single word on a blank piece of paper. Does the word take on a new meaning when you look at it?

Chicks, a Lethal Cat and Limplessness

- How does Mina's encounter with Sophie affect her? Why do you think she doesn't run after Sophie and 'tell her she's nice too'?
- Why do you think Mina's Mum says 'I think maybe you're too much up there in your tree'?

Explore the thoughts of Mina and her mother in this chapter using the drama strategy 'statues'. Create a statue of Mina and her mother that shows their relationship. Think about how they are positioned next to each other. Details are important so give attention to hands and eyes as well. When you have created the statue have the class question Mina and her mother to find out what they are thinking. Encourage them to make the questions specific to things that have happened in this chapter. When you have done this, draw two life size outlines on a large sheet of paper. Invite the students to write one thought for either Mina or her mother in a large thought bubble. Place these around the character outlines to create a visual representation of the characters' thoughts.

Walking Pizza Stars and Dust

Taking some words for a walk

- Writing is like taking some words for a walk.
 - Discuss Mina's ideas about writing with a partner.
 - Compare this to your own experience of writing.
 - Do you enjoy writing or not? What makes writing easy?
 - What makes writing difficult? Do you need to know how you will end before you start or can you find out along the way?

As an alternative to questions, put together some statements to aid the discussion e.g.

- It isn't necessary to know the ending of a story when you start to write
- It is important to have fully planned your story before you write
- If you plan a story you don't need to stick to it when you write it
- The difficult thing about writing is getting ideas
- A piece of good writing is always neat and tidy
- Writing in school is easier than writing at home

'When you grow up, do you ever stop feeling little and weak?'

- Review the list of words you have created to describe Mina. After reading this chapter add one more word to your list.

A Dream of Horses

'My Name is Mina'

- How does Mina change by the end of this chapter? Add one more word to the list of words that you have created.

Stories from personal experience:

Mina plucks up the courage to go and introduce herself to the boy who has moved into Mr Myers house. . Have you ever been in a situation where you did something even though it was difficult for you? Perhaps you started a new school or joined a club where everyone already knew each other. Perhaps you spoke up when you saw someone being bullied? Perhaps you offered to help someone when it would have been easier to ignore them? Share your personal stories in small groups.

(Stories from personal experience are more easily initiated when the teacher first tells their own story. One story told often stimulates another story. Encourage children to tell their stories in the moment rather than work systematically around the group.)

Final reflection: consider how making a 'brave' decision makes you feel, if you act upon it.

Review

This activity facilitates a reflective discussion of the whole book. Students revisit memorable moments and consider how they relate to character development and the underlying themes.

- Choose one moment from the book that you think shows us something important about Mina.
- Choose a sentence or a few words that expresses the main idea e.g. 'How can a bird that is born for joy sing in a cage?' 'My name is Mina'
- Write your words on large sheets of paper and decorate them appropriately.
- Gather the quotations together and display them. Ask the children to explain their selections.

(Teachers might want to assign different chapters to groups or pairs of children to ensure that you capture key moments throughout the book.)

Keep a journal

Mina keeps a journal in which she records her thoughts, feelings and observations of things that interest her. You might start your own journal.

You might want to try out some of Mina's extraordinary activities. You may also want to create your own extraordinary activities.