

**An Educator's Guide  
to Renée Watson's**



**BLACK  
GIRL  
YOU  
ARE  
ATLAS**

*New York Times* bestseller and  
Newbery Honor recipient

**Renée Watson**

with fine art by Caldecott honoree  
**Ekua Holmes**

"Renée Watson in these poems has beautifully embraced the joys of being a girl and especially the love of being a sister. This 'Atlas' holds our hearts up. You will love it." —Nikki Giovanni, poet





## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**RENÉE WATSON** is a #1 *New York Times* bestselling author, educator, and community activist. Her books have sold over one million copies. Her young adult novel *Piecing Me Together* (Bloomsbury, 2017), received a Coretta Scott King Award and a Newbery Honor. Her children's picture books and novels for teens have received several awards and international recognition. She has given readings and lectures at many places, including the United Nations, the Library of Congress, and the US embassies in Japan and New Zealand. Her poetry and fiction center the experiences of Black girls and women, and explore themes of home, identity, and the intersections of race, class, and gender.



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## ABOUT THE ILLUSTRATOR

**EKUA HOLMES** is the acclaimed bestselling illustrator of several award-winning picture books, including *Voice of Freedom: Fannie Lou Hamer* (Caldecott Honor, NAACP Image Award, CSK John Steptoe Award, Sibert Honor), *Out of Wonder* (CSK Award, *New York Times* bestseller), and *The Stuff of Stars* (CSK Award). A painter and collage artist, she graduated from the Massachusetts College of Art and Design. Visit her at [ekuaholmes.com](http://ekuaholmes.com).



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## ABOUT THE BOOK

In this semi-autobiographical collection of poems, Renée Watson writes about her experience growing up as a young Black girl at the intersections of race, class, and gender.

Using a variety of poetic forms, from haiku to free verse, Watson shares recollections of her childhood in Portland, tender odes to the Black women in her life, and urgent calls for Black girls to step into their power.

*Black Girl You Are Atlas* encourages young readers to embrace their future with a strong sense of sisterhood and celebration. With full-color art by celebrated fine artist Ekua Holmes throughout, this collection offers guidance and is a gift for anyone who reads it.

**Dr. Kimberly N. Parker** is an award-winning educator based in Boston who holds a steadfast belief in the power of literacy to normalize the high achievement of all students, especially Black, Latinx, and other children of color. She is currently the Director of the [Crimson Summer Academy at Harvard University](#), and published [Literacy is Liberation: Working Toward Justice Through Culturally Relevant Teaching \(Feb. 2022\)](#) with the Association for Curriculum and Supervision Development (ASCD). The book documents her successful literacy work based on her classroom and professional development experiences.

Kim is the 2020 recipient of the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) Outstanding Elementary Educator Award; a co-founder of #DisruptTexts and #31DaysIBPOC; and a former president of the Black Educators' Alliance of MA (BEAM). Follow her on Twitter at: @TchKimpossible



★ “A **compelling ode to self-resurrection and Black sisterhood.**”

—*Kirkus Reviews*,  
starred review

★ “**Exceptionally powerful and dynamic.**”

—*School Library Journal*,  
starred review

★ “A **celebration of the complexities of, and the bonds formed through, Black girlhood and womanhood.**”

—*The Horn Book*,  
starred review



# PREPARING TO TEACH THIS TEXT

“Black girl you are Atlas. The way no one expected you to be the fulfillment of prophecy. But it is you, always, who holds the world up” (p. 17).

It is suggested that educators spend time reading the poems a few times, as multiple readings deepen the understanding of the poetry and also strengthen students’ literacy skills. In subsequent readings, educators can draw on questions and explore themes with students as they develop an understanding of the depth of Black girlhood experiences the book offers.

In this guide, poems are grouped by common themes and discussion questions. Activities are also included that help to deepen engagement and understanding of the collection.

It is suggested that educators take necessary time to examine their own biases about anti-Blackness and stereotypes about Black girls. This self-work is critical for understanding the ways Black girls are too often maligned, vilified, and denied opportunities. Some suggested resources are included for this ongoing personal identity work, as well as how to have discussions with white and other students about race and gender. These conversations and preparation are important for facilitating affirming, liberatory discussions that will ground a critical reading of *Black Girl You Are Atlas*.

Taken together, Watson and Holmes have provided a rich invitation and counternarrative into the complex interior lives of Black girls and why we should understand Black girls, speak up for Black girls, and love and protect Black girls. *Black Girl You Are Atlas* provides affirming, lyrical reasons for why and how we can start today and why we can no longer ignore the beauty and brilliance of Black girls.

In this guide, you’ll find discussion questions around themes from the poems that include: Identity, Blackness, Consent, Coming-of-Age, Body Image, Family and Community, Gender, Possibilities, Sisterhood, Well-Being, Legacy, and Love, in addition to activities for art and poetry, journal prompts, and other resources.





# COMMON THEMES AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

## Identity

### “Where I’m From” (pp. 1–2)

We are all from somewhere. The people, places, and experiences of our lives impact us, sometimes in ways we cannot yet understand. What details help the reader understand where the speaker is from? What are the themes of each stanza? How does the poem incorporate rich sensory details to help describe a vivid picture of where they are from?

### “Resurrection” (pp. 4–5)

Make a connection between the title of the poem and the importance of naming, writing, and saying one’s name. What history, legacy, or aspirations does your name contain? If you could tell or make up a story about the importance of your name, what would you say? Why is it important that we learn to pronounce each others’ names correctly? What impact does repetition of the phrases “To write my name . . .” and “To say my name . . .” have on understanding the poem’s meaning?

### “Atlas” (pp. 16–17)

Drawing on the three definitions of “atlas,” list the ways Black girls represent these different terms. What do the different uses of the metaphor help us to understand about the roles Black girls are expected to play? How is “atlas” used as an illusion, and what is its significance? Why is it difficult for some to give Black girls credit for being the ones who “[hold] the world up”? How does the stereotype of “strong Black woman” prevent us from understanding the challenges Black girls face being atlas, and what can we do to support Black girls and the challenges they carry?

## Blackness

### “Black Like Me” (pp. 62–63)

Identify the positive associations with Blackness that the speaker lists. What is the impact of the actions of the science teacher who is “blind to [the speaker’s] brilliance”? Compare the science teacher’s actions to those of the English teacher. What is the difference, and how does it help the speaker understand her Blackness?

### “Black with a Capital B” (p. 64)

What is the difference between stanza 1 and 2? Explain how the distinction between a color and a culture impacts how Black girls and others see themselves, and how others see (or refuse) to see Black girls.



# COMMON THEMES AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS (CONTINUED)

## Consent

### “Turning Thirteen” (pp. 36–38)

What is consent? What lessons does the speaker learn at age thirteen, especially related to consent and boys? Why does the speaker juxtapose the beating of Rodney King, the death of Miles Davis, and the Black boy who continues to sexually assault her with Anita Hill’s testimony against Clarence Thomas in 1991 about his sexual assault of her? (Note: Be prepared to offer additional support and resources to facilitate this discussion. Amaze.org is a resource that can help to structure conversations about consent.)



## Coming-of-Age

### “Turning Seven” (pp. 28–31)

This poem has seven stanzas. How does each stanza convey the different feelings (positive, negative, neutral) of birthdays? Where does the tone shift throughout the poem and what does the shift suggest about wishes? What do the speaker’s wishes help us to understand about her? What does the line “I look away, wonder if I will ever be touched by the sky again” suggest about the difficulties of growing older?

### “Turning Sweet Sixteen” (pp. 42–44)

Why are Black girls expected to perform happiness rather than show a range of emotions? What are people afraid of, and, ultimately, who is harmed by this discomfort? What are the lessons the speaker is learning about how she is regarded in the world, her voice, and her safety?

### “Turning Seventeen” (p. 48)

What does it mean to be “grown”? What contradictions and uncertainties does the speaker have about turning seventeen, and how does she prepare herself to address those feelings? Have you experienced similar feelings around particular birthdays?



# COMMON THEMES AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS (CONTINUED)

## Body Image

“Church of Press & Curl” (pp. 24–25)  
and “Scalp” (p. 27)

What is the price to the speaker and the way she thinks about herself as she endures having her hair pressed? Identify the words the speaker uses to describe her hair and the connotation of each use. How does the speaker’s hair demonstrate resistance, and how might that action help us to understand the relationship between Black girls and their hair more deeply? How does the speaker in “Scalp” respond to the speaker in “Church of Press & Curl”? What do they have in common? How do they differ? Altogether, what is the positive message for Black girls and their hair that both poems convey?

“Underbelly” (p. 40)

What are the words used to characterize Black girls’ bodies? Are these words positive, negative, or neutral? Describe the shape of the poem. What do these words suggest about the relationship Black girls have to their bodies?



## Family and Community

“A Black Girl Gives Thanks” (pp. 8–9)

This poem reminds us of all the ways families can support and love us, “by blood and by choice.” What images resonate with you about what that support looks like? Why is it important to acknowledge this support and give gratitude for it? Who are the people who support you, both by blood, and by choice?

“That Girl” (pp. 18–19)

Who is That Girl, according to the poem? What does she want more than anything else and what prevents her from obtaining her dreams? Why is she being blamed for actions that are not her fault? What responsibility do we have for her?

## Gender

“King” (p. 46)

What does the speaker learn about Black masculinity through her brother? Analyze the significance of her brother’s love in helping the speaker to understand healthy relationships with Black boys and Black men. In what ways does King help defy stereotypes of Black boys and men?



# COMMON THEMES AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS (CONTINUED)

## Possibilities

“Penny Fountain” (p. 32) and “Lessons on Being a Sky Walker” (p. 33)

Read these two poems together. Why do we toss pennies into fountains? How does this action hold our hopes and dreams? Notice the spacing in “Lessons.” In what ways does the spacing reinforce the idea of possibilities and the hopes that were named in “Penny Fountain”? What might the speaker mean when she says, “do not make a wish—make yourself?” Discuss the relationship between these two poems, especially as related to dreams and our own ability to make our future.

“Wield Your Laughter” (p. 53) and “When Tomorrow Comes” (p. 54)

How can laughter be a weapon and a tool of resistance? What is the importance of laughter for “hold[ing] on to joy/while you wait for happiness”? Notice the repetition of “Stay, stay” in “When Tomorrow Comes,” and its impact on understanding the poem’s theme. What possibilities are held in tomorrow and why does it matter that the speaker keeps persisting and resisting?

## Sisterhood

“Sisterhood Haiku, I” (p. 10);

“Sisterhood Haiku, II” (p. 20);

“Sisterhood Haiku, III” (p. 56)

Read these three haikus together. Suggest some ways the speaker demonstrates her love for her sisters and their importance in supporting her. Why do you think Watson chose the haiku format for these poems?

“How Sisters Love” (pp. 12–13)

Describe the ways the sisters in this poem express love. How does the speaker know her sister loves her? Which words and phrases support your thinking? What is the importance of this type of love?





# COMMON THEMES AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS (CONTINUED)

## Well-Being

### “Altars” (p. 14)

What is an altar and what purpose does it serve? Why does a Black girl need her own altar? What would you put on your own altar?

### “What I Know About Rain” (p. 58)

How does the speaker encourage us to be open to the realities of life? Where are the places and who are the people in your life where you’ve found shelter to wait out the rain (real or imagined)?

## Legacy

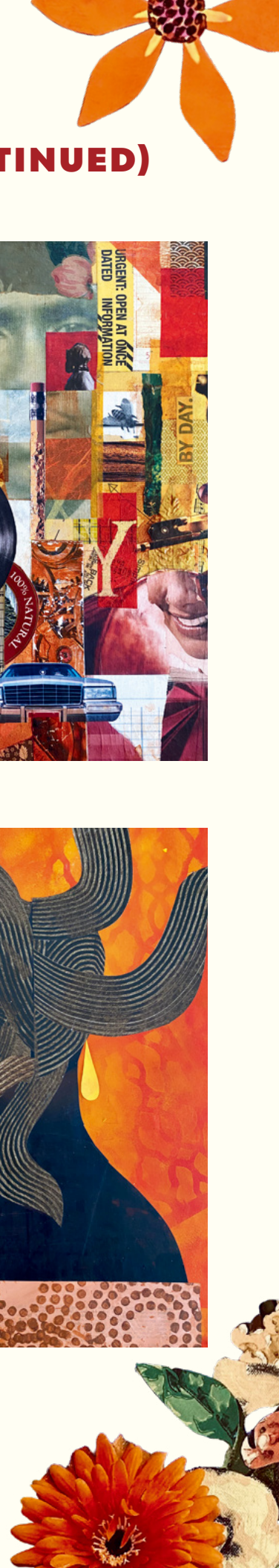
### “Knock, Knock” (p. 68), “A Pantoum for Breonna Taylor” (p. 71) and “A Tanka for Michelle Obama” (p. 72)

Who are the Black women subjects of these poems? How are each of these poems love songs to them? What lines help you to understand who they are/were and, for Taylor and McBride, the impact of their murders? Study the particular forms of each poem. How does the format of each celebrate their lives and help us to remember all three of these Black women?

## Love

### “Love Shows Up” (p. 22) and “When I Say I Love Us” (pp. 34–35)

bell hooks says “love is an action, never simply a feeling.” What are the specific ways love is an action in this poem? How do these actions, and hooks’s definition of love, resonate with your own definition of love? Are there similarities and differences in how you define and talk about love? What does it mean to love all Black people, using the examples in “When I Say I Love Us” to support your thinking? What stops us from a complete love of Black people? Who is missing from that complete love, and what do we need to make the love we have for all Black people inclusive?





## ACTIVITIES

“Where I’m From” (pp. 1–2) ends with the question: “Now you tell me—where you from?” Using each stanza as a mentor text, brainstorm details that tell a story of your own background, selecting ones that resonate with your life. (Remember to think about and use sensory details as Watson does in her poem). Then, try drafting your own “Where I’m From” poem in Watson’s style. When you’re done and feel comfortable, share with an audience of your choice.

“How Sisters Love” (pp. 12–13): Write a poem about someone important to you. You might focus on completing these lines to begin: To understand \_\_\_\_\_, you must know \_\_\_\_\_

Black women have a complicated relationship to their hair. Read the poems “Church of Press & Curl” (pp. 24–25) and “Scalp” (p. 27). Then, [analyze the image](#) “Atiai, 1970” by the Nigerian photographer J.D. ‘Okhai Ojeikere and create a response that depicts your own feelings about your hair. Be sure to focus on the ways the poems’ speakers uplift and affirm their hair, even despite resistance.

[Watch this video](#) of Renée Watson reading aloud “Atlas” (pp. 16–17) and [this video](#) of Watson reading “Sisterhood Haiku, I” (p. 10); “Sisterhood Haiku, II” (p. 20); “Sisterhood Haiku, III” (p. 56). Did hearing the poet read these aloud change your view of the poems? What is the power of poetry being read aloud?

## ACTIVITIES AROUND ART, POETRY, & EKUA HOLMES

Get to know Eku Holmes and learn about her process; her love of her hometown, Roxbury, Massachusetts; and why Black art matters to her in this [short video from Boston’s Museum of Fine Arts](#). After watching the video, look at the illustrations in *Black Girl You Are Atlas* and connect Holmes’s inspiration to the images in the text. Where do you see evidence of her love for Black girls and Black people?

Holmes is known for using newspaper clippings, photographs, and other mixed media in her collages. Use the [Visual Thinking Strategies](#) for the images throughout the book and ask yourself the following questions:

- What is going on in this picture?
- What do you see that makes you say that?
- What more can you find?

How do Watson’s text and Holmes’s illustrations work together to portray a love for Black girls? Compose a response in either Watson’s (poetry) or Holmes’s (art) style, or combine them for your own interpretation.



# JOURNAL PROMPTS

**“Sixteen Reasons to Smile” (p. 45)** is a list poem. Reread the poem several times, noting specific details that resonate with you. What conclusions might you draw about the speaker’s life and what she values? Brainstorm a list of reasons that make you smile, aiming for as many reasons as your age. Then, compose a poem and share with an audience of your choice.

**“How to Survive Your Teen Years” (p. 50)** provides advice about adolescence. As you read it, select lines that resonate with you, either that you’ve experienced or that you need to hear. What would you add to this list?

**“Hiraeth” (p. 60)**  
Read the definition of *hiraeth* on page 61 and Margaret Walker’s [“Sorrow Home”](#). What words and phrases characterize this longing for home, particularly as a Black young woman? Where is the speaker’s home? How does one reconcile the feelings of hiraeth with where we eventually end up, and how do we preserve our homes wherever we go?

**“This is How You Ride a Horse” (pp. 66–67)**  
Write about a time when you pushed past your limits. What were the results of conquering your fears—internally and externally?

**“Soundtrack for the revolution” (pp. 74–75)**

What songs would be essential for your own soundtrack? Create a playlist for a particular occasion and share it with someone, or write a poem in Watson’s style that captures your favorite songs.



**“Love It All” (p. 77)**

What parts of yourself do you struggle to love and accept? What words of kindness and acceptance could you say to yourself instead? Write them out in a poem, using “Love It All” as a mentor text. Be sure to use the word “love” to start every line. Then, read your poem often on days when you feel insecure to remind yourself of all you love about yourself.



# JOURNAL PROMPTS (CONTINUED)

## “Phenomenon” (pp. 78–79)

While *Black Girl Magic* is special, what is underneath? Reread the stanzas that begin “And all I have . . .” Explore the significance of the poem’s final lines, “The magic is all ways me./ The miracle is that I even exist at all.” What is miraculous about yourself?

## Ekua Holmes’s Illustrations

Every illustration is a visual invitation into writing. Select one of Holmes’s images that resonate with you, study it (using the Visual Thinking Strategies on page 9), then compose a poem that captures the feelings you have about the image.

## POETRY WRITING TIPS FROM RENÉE WATSON

### MAKE THE ORDINARY EXTRAORDINARY

A poem can be about anyone, anything, any place. No topic is off-limits. If you’re ever out of ideas when writing, think of a favorite season, a place where you feel safe, or a person you love, and write a poem about that. Paint a picture with your words by using vivid images and descriptive words. The beauty of poetry is showing how simple, everyday things are actually full of wonder if we look close enough.

### USE A REPEATING PHRASE

All poetry doesn’t have to rhyme, but all poetry should have rhythm. One way to create rhythm is to choose a word or phrase to repeat throughout your poem to give it a pulse.

### BREAK THE LINE IN UNIQUE PLACES

In poetry, you don’t have to write in full sentences. Experiment with where to break a line and see how the poem changes with one word on a line, versus three or four.

### READ IT OUT LOUD

Try out different tempos, find the right cadence, and practice reading your work aloud. After you practice, be bold and brave and share it with a loved one.

### READ POETRY

You’ll get better at writing poetry the more you read poetry. Here are a few poems that will hopefully inspire to you write your own: “Knoxville, Tennessee” by Nikki Giovanni, “Ode to Pablo’s Tennis Shoes” by Gary Soto, “What For” by Garrett Hongo, and “My Grandmother Is Waiting for Me to Come Home” by Gwendolyn Brooks.



# OTHER NOTES AND RESOURCES

## Suggestions for Text Sets

Mahogany L. Browne, *Black Girl Magic*

Creating a Respectful and Open World for Natural Hair: The Crown Act  
<https://www.thecrownact.com/>

Vashti Harrison, *Big*

Candice Iloh, *Every Body Looking*

Eve Ewing, *Electric Arches*

*The Collected Poetry of Nikki Giovanni* by Nikki Giovanni; introduction by Virginia C. Fowler

Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

Jacqueline Woodson, *Brown Girl Dreaming*

Ibi Zoboi, *Nigeria Jones*

## Notes on Poetry

The Academy of American Poets [offers advice](#) on how to read and appreciate poetry. Some tips include how to read poems aloud, working with line breaks, and questions to guide your analysis. What is important, also, is to let yourself be moved by the poems in *Black Girl You Are Atlas* and to ask yourself what they mean to you. Additionally, Watson includes different types of poems that invite additional study and imitation of form and meaning.

## Types of Poems

Haiku (“Sisterhood Haiku, I” p. 10; “Sisterhood Haiku, II,” p. 20; “Sisterhood Haiku, III,” p. 56)

Etheree (“An Etheree for Moving On” p. 51)

Elegy (“Knock, Knock” p. 68)

Pantoum (“A Pantoum for Breonna Taylor” p. 71)

Tanka (“A Tanka for Michelle Obama” p. 72)

## Research About Black Girlhoods

Monique W. Morris, *Cultivating Joyful Learning Spaces for Black Girls: Insights Into Interrupting School Pushout*

## Resources for Facilitating Conversations About Race

Tricia Ebarvia, *Get Free: Antibias Literacy Instruction for Stronger Readers, Writers and Thinkers*

Lorena Escoto Germán, *Textured Teaching: A Framework for Culturally Sustaining Practices*

Learning for Justice, *Let’s Talk! Facilitating Critical Conversations With Students*

Kimberly N. Parker, *Literacy Is Liberation: Working Toward Justice Through Culturally Relevant Teaching*

