



# BRIGHT

"Crackles with energy...  
In a word, gorgeous."

—SAMIRA AHMED,  
*New York Times* bestselling author of  
*INTERMENT* and *HOLLOW FIRES*

# RED

SAFIA  
ELHILLO

# FRUIT

EDUCATORS' GUIDE

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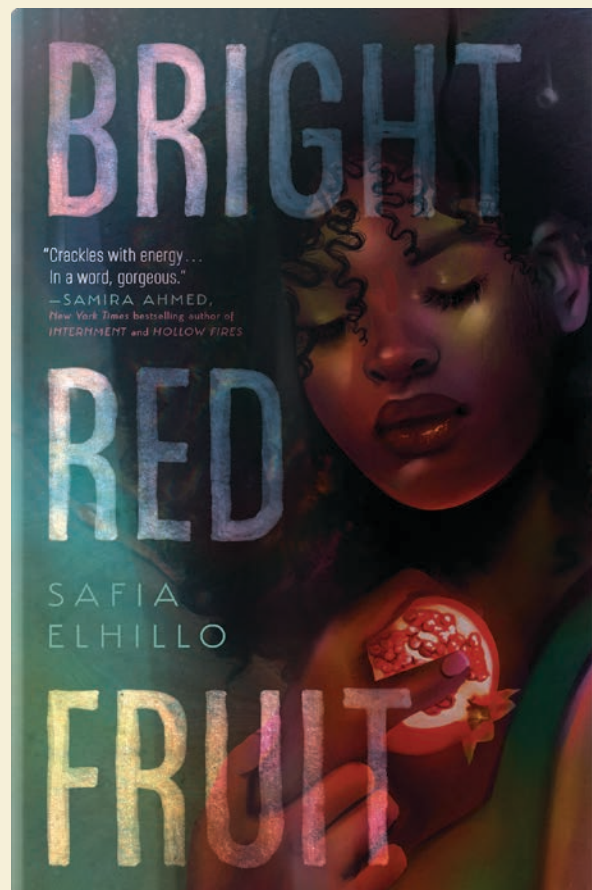
Please be advised that this guide, like its associated novel, contains references to sexual assault.

## About the Book

*Bad girl.* No matter how hard Samira tries, she can't shake her reputation. She's never gotten the benefit of the doubt—not from her mother or the aunts who watch her like a hawk.

Samira is determined to have a perfect summer filled with fun parties, exploring DC, and growing as a poet—until a scandalous rumor has her grounded and unable to leave her house. When Samira turns to a poetry forum for solace, she catches the eye of an older, charismatic poet named Horus. For the first time, Samira feels wanted. But soon she's keeping a bigger secret than ever before—one that could prove her reputation and jeopardize her place in her community.

In this gripping coming-of-age novel from the critically acclaimed author Safia Elhillo, a young woman searches to find the balance between honoring her family, her artistry, and her authentic self.



## About the Author



Photo credit: Aris Theodorakatos

**Safia Elhillo** is an award-winning poet and author. Her debut YA novel in verse, *Home Is Not a Country*, was longlisted for the National Book Award and received a Coretta Scott King Author Honor and an Arab American Book Award. Sudanese by way of Washington, DC,

Safia is a Pushcart Prize nominee, co-winner of the 2015 Brunel International African Poetry Prize, and was listed in *Forbes Africa's* "30 Under 30." She lives in Los Angeles.

Also by  
Safia Elhillo





## Pre-Reading Questions

1. In *Bright Red Fruit*, the epigraph, or introductory quote, is an excerpt of Louise Glück's poem "Persephone the Wanderer." The lines are:

"In the tale of Persephone  
which should be read  
as an argument between the mother and the lover—  
the daughter is just meat."

Let's focus on the last line, "the daughter is just meat." On first read, what do you notice, feel, and think about this line? Next, let's play with this line and make it yours. Try writing a poem of three to six lines that includes the phrase "the daughter is just meat."

Here is the myth that Glück refers to in the epigraph: Persephone is a mythical Greek goddess who became queen of the underworld after being abducted by Hades, who rules the world of the dead. Persephone, because of an arrangement between her mother, Demeter, and Hades, her new husband, returns to the earth every spring. Every spring, Demeter celebrates Persephone's return by allowing life to flourish and providing longer days with more sunlight. When Persephone returns to the underworld in the winter, Demeter mourns her loss and the cold and early nights return.

Advanced readers may read "Homer's Hymn to Demeter" if they'd like.

What new or different meaning does "the daughter is just meat" have for you now that you have more context for that line? You may write in prose, in a poem, or discuss.

2. A theme is an important idea that repeats throughout a book. There are many themes in *Bright Red Fruit*, some of which include: loving and supportive friendships, seeking out romantic love, mother-daughter relationships, how gossip and rumors can harm a young person, the richness and complications of living with more than one cultural identity, and becoming an artist (in Samira's case, a poet). Please pick one of these themes and answer these questions in any form you choose. Why is this theme or idea important to me? What are some specific and detailed examples of how this theme or idea shows up in my own life?

3. Samira, our main character, is Sudanese American. She speaks Arabic and English. Sudan is a country in East Africa with rich history and cultural values and practices. Arabic is a written and spoken language that millions of people use worldwide. Building upon what you already know, make a list of questions you have about the country of Sudan, Sudanese American life in the United States, and the Arabic language. Then, using reputable resources, research the answers. Keep the answers nearby as you read *Bright Red Fruit*. Please continue asking questions about aspects of language or culture that are new to you, looking up answers, and building upon your existing knowledge.



## Discussion and Writing Questions

1. The first three poems in *Bright Red Fruit* are called “Bad Girl,” “My Name,” and “Bad Girl.” What do they tell you about Samira’s perspective and experiences? How has being the target of gossip impacted her? What are some of Samira’s desires and wants? Please use examples from these poems to support your ideas. Then, as a creative exercise, choose to do either of the following: (1) write a poem titled “My Name” that explores how you or others feel about your own name, or (2) write a poem that explores your experience with gender roles.
2. Friendship, and the power of friendship to provide support and love, are key themes in this book. What does Samira value about Lina? About Tamadur? What do you imagine Lina and Tamadur value about Samira? Please use evidence from the text to support your ideas. Over the course of the book, pay attention to what challenges arise in their friendship. How do they navigate obstacles together? As a creative exercise, write a poem that describes a person in your life who you care about. Consider what details, behaviors, and ways of being you might include so others can envision this person as clearly as you do.
3. Within the first fifty pages, we are introduced to three women who have taken different life paths and have varied relationships with their community: Samira’s mother, Samira’s aunt Aida, and Farah, the older sister of Samira’s friend Lina. What does each woman’s relationship to Samira’s community look like? How does Samira see herself reflected in each of these women? Is she proud of the similarities? What dangers or opportunities do their examples present? As a creative exercise, please choose one of these three characters and write a first-person story from *their* perspective that describes Samira’s community and their place within it. In it, you are encouraged to imagine why they have made the choices they have.
4. Please compare the poems “Reputation” (p. 33) and “Religion” (p. 34), which work as a pair. What is the “ancient / stir” that Samira feels when she recites? How do you imagine this “stir” compares to the feelings and images she describes in “Reputation”? What point is she making about reputation and religion (use evidence to support your answer)? As a creative exercise, try to write a poem in couplets (two-line stanzas) that is about a practice that you have or would like to start in your life that causes a feeling similar to the “ancient / stir” Samira mentions.
5. In “The Landline,” we learn about Mama’s long-distance phone calls “stretched across an ocean” (p. 44) to Sudan. Yet in the poems called “Mama,” one before “The Landline” and one after, Samira imagines herself talking to her mother, who has become more inaccessible to her even though they live under the same roof. What complications exist between Samira and her mother? Why do you think that Samira does not tell her mother everything she wants to tell her? What might it take for Samira and her mother to talk? And what clues (foreshadowing) can you find in these three poems of how this relationship might continue to grow?
6. In her notebook, Samira writes down Farah’s instruction to their class as they explored poetry: “. . . instead of reading the poem for *sense* / we read it for *sensation*.” (p. 139) “Sense” might be understood as “meaning,” while “sensation” might be described as “feeling.” Pick three poems you’ve already read and reread them for sensation. What lines stick out to you? What do you feel? What are you reminded of? What sensations do you have as you read each poem? And what do you learn from reading for sensation rather than reading for sense?
7. As you watch Samira get to know Horus, what decisions do you notice that Samira makes as he becomes a bigger part of her life? At what points would you advise her to be cautious, and why? Why does Samira choose to not tell Lina and Tamadur? What beliefs does Samira have about Horus that contribute to her silence? What behaviors does Horus engage in that make it difficult for Samira to ask for help?
8. As Horus assaults Samira, she fights him off. He lets her go, insults her, and leaves. Afterward, even though it might be clear to you, the reader, that Horus has done something wrong, Samira tries to apologize to Horus. As she stares at her mother’s back in the kitchen, she writes: “i’ve made every wrong choice / eaten every forbidden seed of pomegranate / trapped myself beneath the world of the living / & i’ve never felt more alone. / it’s all my fault i did it to myself / but i wish someone would help me.” (p. 313) Feelings of shame, isolation, and self-blame are normal when a trauma—like assault—has occurred. It can also be difficult to read about these moments in a book if something like this has happened to you or to someone you love. You may always reach out to the resources listed at the back of this guide and, if you have access to one, a trusted adult



in your own life. As an exercise, if you feel able to do so, try writing a letter to Samira that describes your own reaction to this moment in the text. What did you feel? Think? What would you like to communicate to her?

9. As Samira discovers and connects to other young women who've been hurt by Horus and other men, she writes that they are "sistered to each other by this violation." (p. 341) How does this sisterhood compare to the other examples of sisterhood in this book? As Samira heals and shares her story with people who love her, she mentions the "enormous belonging" (p. 344) she experiences with her mother and aunt, which connects to this line earlier in the book: "the burden & blessing of our collectivist cultures / of belonging so

hard to a people that it hurts / so hard that it leaves a mark." (p. 164) Please consider all three of these quotes together. What are Samira's communities at the end of the book? What do they each teach her? How do they each validate her?

10. When she's on stage, Samira describes the "perfect calm / that perfect internal quiet" (p. 364) which is the opposite of the silencing that she's experienced throughout the book (p. 122 and elsewhere). As a reminder to yourself, what locations, people, and activities bring you that sense of perfect calm and perfect internal quiet? Describe those spaces. Write about those spaces, people, and events. Conjure that feeling for yourself.

## Post-Reading Questions

1. Let's talk about the title, *Bright Red Fruit*. In Persephone's myth, which is referenced throughout the book, the fruit that Persephone tastes that "tethers" (p. 62) her to the underworld is a pomegranate—a bright red fruit. A metaphor can be an object that is given symbolic meaning. If the bright red fruit, a pomegranate, is a metaphor, what might it be a metaphor for? Please use examples from the text. It may be helpful to find places in the book where Samira talks about bright red fruits and/or pomegranates specifically (for example, on pages 78, 179, 180, 287, 314, and 357).
2. Samira writes: "& the girl, throughout history / is still silent / a blank space for us all to color in." (p. 357) Now that you've read *Bright Red Fruit*, how would you define that "blank space"? How do you see Samira write herself into that blank space? Use evidence from the text. As a creative and personal exercise, consider the identities that you hold or the experiences you've had that have been, at some point, "color[ed] in" by others. Write your own poem, in any form you choose, that colors in your own spaces.

3. Samira mentions incredible poets throughout her story! Here are their names: Patricia Smith, Kamau Brathwaite, Joyce Mansour, Kwame Dawes, Aracelis Girmay, and Natalie Diaz. Choose one or two (or all!) and read poems that they have written. How are their styles different from or similar to Samira's? Which of the poems do you really like? What do you like about them? As a creative exercise, find a poem you really like by one of these authors and write a response to it. If you're feeling brave, look at one or more of their books and read through for sensation. What do you discover?

## Resources

If you or someone else needs resources on sexual violence, here are a few resources to start looking for help:

- National Sexual Violence Resource Center: [nsvrc.org](https://nsvrc.org)
- The Sexual Assault Kit Initiative: [sakitta.org/survivors/](https://sakitta.org/survivors/)
- The National Sexual Assault Hotline (RAINN): (800) 656-HOPE (4673)

*Christina Olivares is a longtime educator and author of the poetry books  
No Map of the Earth Includes Stars (2015) and Future Botanic (2023).*



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