

The Door of No return by Kwame Alexander

LIKES

- Empowering – not just looking at ‘victims’ but people with rich and multi-faceted lives that were taken from them. Choosing an individual to follow (similar age to the target audience) – the reality hits home. That sense of what was lost. The potential of people’s lives, family, friends, stories ...everything. The personal and the cultural.
- The true history – obviously well-researched but wore this lightly. Students get taught a lot about slavery but it’s not always taught well. This takes a different angle. Works as the story of one boy, but in the context of the bigger historical picture.
- Getting to know more about Ghanaian/Asante history and culture and the history of the area. One teacher had visited this area and loved the specificity and detail which took her back there.
- Enjoyed the swimming sections – so calming and the contrast with what happens later
- Words of wisdom woven through. The joy and wonder of friendship. Lots of great messages and ideas for young people to think about.
- Humour
- Sense of a particular time and place, but also relatable characters
- Visual aspect – the poem on the page
- Verse form worked really well for this story – stripped back to essentials and key moments.
- Unflinching descriptions of characters
- Exploring different aspects of masculinity. The relationships between the characters
- Felt authentic, honest, realistic. Deals with the violence between groups, the teacher who has taken on colonial attitudes. Nuanced – not just a perfect life and then slavery. But a life that belongs to them.
- Good judgement – how to handle trauma and atrocity for a young adult reader. Unflinching and brave without alienating the reader.
- As soon as the brother was killed it was completely gripping. Ramps up the tension all the way through.
- Redemption of the cousin
- The fighting competition – gripping.
- The way the crush is handled/the love poems
- Reading the glossary and acknowledgements. Enjoyed gaining a new understanding of how cleverly it is structured – subtle and with implicit meaning. The use of the Adinkra symbols.

DISLIKES

- Beginning seemed a bit slow at the time, and some find the verse form offputting at first. But looking back, the dreamy start was a necessary part of the structure. Might want to give students a heads up to persevere. Almost like two different books.
- Some really enjoyed the slow start but, because of the title, dreading the segue into slavery. Many readers might not know about the 'Door of No Return' so this might not be their experience.
- Very graphic in terms of the violence, rape etc. Necessarily uncomfortable. This is not really signalled by the blurb.
- Kind of exhausting – no let up. Again, necessary but still... Might have enjoyed a bit more description.
- Prose at the start of chapters were interesting/necessary but did interrupt the flow of the poetry.
- Ending perhaps felt a bit rushed?

PUZZLES

- The ending 'we fly'. What's happening here? Are they off the boat? Do they die? Afterlife? Want them to be swimming to safety, but they probably aren't.
- The politics between the tribes got a bit confusing. Is the gold only valuable because the colonisers value it or was it valued before?
- Murderous retribution – is this something that really happened? Probably as Alexander has done his research.
- What comes next in this trilogy? In the acknowledgements Alexander mentions the TV series Roots. Does this suggest he will be looking at the generational impact as the series continues, not necessarily continuing with that character.
- A lot of discussion about who to recommend it to. Some Black students have said they are tired of seeing Black people represented as slaves. Alexander said 'I'm glad that slavery was not my only narrative'. On the other hand, this book takes a different approach – exploring Asante culture and history and a sense of the 'before' of slavery. Some concerns about the violence, rape etc. BUT – this is the true story, a context for why people are still angry and the generational impact. Good for the teacher to know the book and be able to give a heads up, but it is up to the YP to make their own decision. We remembered that we had similar discussions and concerns about *Cane Warriors* last year (slavery, some brutal scenes) and students, including Black students, *really* loved it and recommended it to each other.

PATTERNS (Within this book and links to other books and real-life experiences)

- Water, swimming. Empowerment and freedom. Sense of strength. Follows through from beginning to end.
- Foreshadowing – the river in the dark, sense of danger lurking but not the danger you expect.
- ‘Roots’ – the TV show he mentioned and which some of remembered watching and the impact of it.
- Things Fall Apart – West African history & heritage
- Storytelling and game playing (the stones). Richness of the culture. Trying to hold onto that on the boat. Game – a small and benign element of competition, winners and losers.
- Wisdom that runs through the book. Not just brute strength that’s needed, but strategy.

HOOKS

- Notes from the author: ‘It was a hard story to write, but one I thought needed to be told’ ‘I wrote it for the me nobody knows and the you who is still becoming’. An inclusive invitation.
- Cultural heritage students may be interested to learn more about
- Emotional journey
- Link up with history lessons – the personal impact, the geographical and cultural context.
- Many young readers already know and love Alexander’s verse novels – the writer’

RESOURCES

- 25th March is the UN International Day of Remembrance of the Victims of Slavery and the Transatlantic Slave Trade and 2015-2024 was designated 'International Decade for People of African Descent'.
- Resources on UN website:
 - <https://www.unesco.org/archives/multimedia/subject/90/Slave+route>
 - <https://www.un.org/en/observances/decade-people-african-descent>
 - <https://www.unesco.org/en/routes-enslaved-peoples#slavery-racism-and-discrimination> (includes 'Breaking the Chains': a video with images of the 'Door of No Return')
- [Submit](#) your pupils' questions to be included in RTRP's interview with Kwame Alexander — Submissions open 19 February 2024 and close 22 March 2024. Email to education@cheltenhamfestivals.com. The interview will be published on Monday 15 April 2024 on <https://www.cheltenhamfestivals.com/literature/rtrp-books>