

The Blackbird Girls
Discussion Guide
Grades 4-7

Before Reading: to activate schema, build background knowledge, and set a purpose.

Before using this book with your class or recommending the book to students we suggest reading the book closely to determine if it is a good fit. Consider saying to your students: "This book contains topics and language that may be sensitive. Not all books fit all readers. If you are uncomfortable with this book, you have the right to stop reading it, but please pick another."

- What are socialism and communism?
- What is the purpose of having a government?
- What could happen when people distrust the government?
- What gives hope for people to survive through wars?
- Frontload vocabulary: Chapters 1-5 (see vocabulary list)

During Reading: to engage students, check for understanding, and make connections.

- How would you describe the relationship between Valentina and Oksana? Do you think Oksana's beliefs are based on facts? How can we avoid prejudices like this? (Ch. 1-2)
- How could corporal punishment affect children physically and mentally? (Ch. 3)
- Where can we tell the subtle difference in how Elenora and Gaina treated their daughters? How would Oksana and Valentina feel differently? (Ch. 4-6)
- Who do you think Rifka is? (Ch. 6) *Note: Pay attention to the timeline on pages 1 and page 39.*
- Why did Rifka need to leave her family? What happened in 1941? (Ch. 6)
- What do you think about Elenora's reaction? How might it affect children? (Ch. 7-8)
- Valentina and her mother chose to help Oksana even though she bullied Valentina at school. Why did they do that? What would you do? (Ch. 9-10)
- Do you think Valentina's mother should have told her friend about the radiation? Do you think it is deceptive? Why or why not? (Ch. 12-14)
- The information we receive can be deceptive, just as the information given by the government in the book. How can we avoid misleading information, especially on social media? (**See support lesson plan From [Stanford History Education group: Lateral Reading](#)**) (Ch. 1-14)
- Do people have the right to know the truth even if the truth may cause public panic? Why or why not? (Ch. 15)
- How does Rifka feel when she has to leave her family because of the war? (Ch. 16)
- Why was Oksana gradually changing her beliefs about Jewish people? Do you have similar experiences of changing some beliefs? (Ch. 17-19)

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- Why would Oksana decide to defend Valentina when she got bullied at the new school? (Ch. 20)
- Do you agree with the farmer’s decision? What could possibly happen if Rifka decided to stay at the farm? (Ch. 21)
- Why would Oksana wish she could be as strong as Valentina? What does it imply about her personality? Support your thinking with details from the book. (Ch. 22)
- What is the importance of the freedom to practice one’s religion? Why do people choose to practice their religions even if doing so may get them into trouble? (Ch. 23)
- What do you think might happen if the man who saved Rifka knew she was Jewish? (Ch. 24)
- What beliefs does Oksana have about herself? Support your thinking with details from the book. (Ch. 25-27)
- Feruza said, “By saving someone, you are doing holy work, so you own the person you save a debt because they are the reason you did a sacred deed.” (p. 247) What are your thoughts about this statement? Do you agree with it? Why or why not? (Ch. 32)
- How did Oksana’s mother react when Oksana showed her the paintings? Why do you think she reacted this way? (Ch. 33)
- How does Oksana feel when she was standing alone waiting for the flight to Tashkent? (Ch. 39)
- What do blackbirds represent in this book? What are other symbols that can represent resilience or friendship? (Ch. 40)

After Reading: to summarize, question, and reflect.

- What can fundamentally change one’s beliefs?
- How can we respond to bullying and domestic violence and seek out help?
- From the author’s perspective, how is communism protracted in the book? Are there potential biases?

If your students enjoyed this book...

- Extend the significant topics in the book, such as prejudice, racism, and wars into a research project. Using multiliteracies as a medium to integrate more perspectives throughout history and contemporary social contexts.
- Encourage them to continue to discuss it and refer to it in other lessons and conversations.
- Let them explore more about the topic by reading other books with similar themes, structure, characters, or content.