

# Teaching *Some Places More Than Others*



In *Some Places More Than Others*, Renée Watson tells the story of Amara, a young girl on the verge of adolescence who is determined to discover who she is, where she comes from, and where she belongs.

This poignant novel explores themes of identity and self-discovery, family and generational connections, cultural heritage, and belonging. Amara's journey is marked by the navigation of literal and figurative borders: She travels from Oregon to Harlem, where her family has roots, and she has to navigate the strained relationship between her father and grandfather and the secrets they keep from her. She uses this journey to explore where she belongs; feeling disconnected from her heritage while living in Oregon, Amara yearns to learn more about her family's history in New York. By exploring Harlem, which is portrayed as a central character in its own right, and connecting more with her family there, she begins to feel a

stronger sense of belonging and self as she situates her identity in the context of personal and cultural histories.

The themes of this novel align with Facing History's **Borders & Belonging ELA Collection**. We've created this planning guide to support your school community in small-group, whole-class, or schoolwide reading and discussion. The discussion questions are designed to spark critical thinking and conversations around issues of identity, belonging, culture, heritage, home, coming of age, and self-discovery.

**Note on edition:** This guide is based on the 2020 edition of *Some Places More Than Others* by Renée Watson, published by Bloomsbury Children's Books, an imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing Inc., New York, NY (ISBN: 978-1-68119-110-2).

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# Who We Are

For nearly half a century, Facing History & Ourselves has championed an approach to humanities education that balances the mind, heart, and conscience. In the English Language Arts (ELA) classroom, our approach integrates literacy skills development with social-emotional learning and civic education. Our professional learning opportunities and curriculum resources—including thematic text sets, unit guides, and engaging teaching strategies—enable middle and high school ELA teachers to foster environments where students can explore the complexities of human behavior and decision-making. Through these resources, students develop their reading and writing identities, build their civic capacities, and broaden their global perspectives.

You can learn more about our [approach to English Language Arts](#) and explore our wide range of [curricular resources and professional learning](#) for ELA educators on our website.

# Navigating Facing History's ELA Mini-Guides

Facing History ELA mini-guides can be used to support independent reading or whole-class book units. Use them as standalone resources to support group discussion during and after independent reading, or plan a whole-class book unit by pairing a mini-guide with our [ELA Unit Planning Guide](#). Taken together, these resources support the design and implementation of a whole-class read that centers students' identities and experiences as young adults in the world. Each mini-guide aligns with one of our thematic collections—such as [Coming of Age in a Complex World](#) or [Borders & Belonging](#).

## **This ELA mini-guide is organized into the following sections:**

- **Section 1: Introducing Borders & Belonging**

This first section of the mini-guide provides framing for themes and big ideas that students will explore during their discussions of the book.

- **Section 2: Designing Your Book Unit**

The second section supports the unit design process. Use this section alongside **Sections 1–5** of Facing History's [ELA Unit Planning Guide](#) to prepare to cultivate a brave and reflective classroom community, determine your unit's essential questions and learning objectives, and design the summative assessment task.

- **Section 3: Teaching *Some Places More Than Others***

The third section offers content specific to the book, including a brief summary, relevant historical and contemporary context, content considerations, and text-specific discussion questions. Use this section alongside **Sections 6–7** of the [ELA Unit Planning Guide](#) to design lesson plans that incorporate Facing History journal prompts, discussion questions, teaching strategies, and learning experiences.

# Introducing Borders & Belonging

**This mini-guide is aligned to Facing History’s Borders & Belonging ELA Collection.**

There is a fundamental human desire to belong—to be part of a group that values, respects, and cares for us. Social psychologist Solomon Asch described this desire to feel valued, respected, and cared for in a community as “among the most powerful forces to be found.”<sup>1</sup> Our sense of belonging can impact our self-esteem, agency, and the meaning we ascribe to our lives. Young adults, deeply attuned to their peers and surroundings, are no exception. They seek respect and belonging in groups where they can be supported, heard, and understood.

Exploring the intersection of borders and belonging is especially relevant for young people, who are navigating their rapidly developing identities and social roles. Everyday actions—like choosing what to wear, making friends, or even smiling at someone—can impact their and others’ sense of belonging for better and for worse. By engaging with books that depict characters who are navigating complex borders and who sometimes struggle to belong, we can normalize these feelings for students, helping them reframe their experiences with the understanding that the factors that shape belonging are both internal and external. This dual perspective has the potential to increase empathy and deepen students’ understanding of the complex dynamics that influence everyone’s sense of belonging.

Ultimately, belonging is not just about where we come from or what we look like; it’s about our shared experiences and values as humans. Engaging in a shared reading experience that explores the relationship between borders and belonging can help students recognize their capacity to foster belonging and consider how they can build bridges across the borders that might otherwise divide us, fostering more inclusive and empathic school environments.

<sup>1</sup> Geoffrey L. Cohen, *Belonging: The Science of Creating Connection and Bridging Divides* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2022), 5.

## Designing Your Book Unit

Because teachers take many approaches to reading and discussing a work of literature with their students, Facing History does not assume that everyone will teach this book in the same way at the same pace. For this reason, our mini-guides are designed to supplement our [ELA Unit Planning Guide](#), which features planning resources, classroom-ready activities, and a [Unit Planning Template](#) so you can apply Facing History's approach to design a book unit suitable for your unique context.

In addition to the resources in the ELA Unit Planning Guide and mini-guide, we recommend that you give consideration to how you will foster belonging in your classroom so all students feel like their voices are heard and that they matter.

### Cultivate a Brave and Reflective Community

At Facing History, we understand that before students can participate in courageous conversations, they need to know that they are part of a classroom community where they are known, valued, and supported. This process begins with teachers and students co-creating rules and norms for how everyone will treat one another. The following resources support the creation of brave and reflective discussion spaces where students can bring their full selves to conversations about literature and life.

- **Create a community contract:** Before introducing the unit, prepare students to engage, take risks, and support one another by creating a [classroom contract](#) with agreed-upon norms and behaviors. Such a contract increases the likelihood of each student feeling seen, heard, and valued. We recommend routinely revisiting the contract to reestablish group norms and commitments.
- **Incorporate a journaling routine:** In addition to creating and upholding the classroom contract, [journaling](#) is an instrumental tool for helping students develop their ability to process what they are learning, practice perspective-taking, and make informed judgments about what they see and hear. Providing students with time and space to reflect on complex issues and questions allows them to formulate their ideas before sharing their thoughts with their peers. Many of the discussion questions in the next section of this mini-guide can also be used as journaling prompts.

# Teaching *Some Places More Than Others*

## About the Book

### Publisher's Summary

From Newbery Honor- and Coretta Scott King Author Award-winning, *New York Times* bestselling author Renée Watson comes a heartwarming and inspiring novel for middle schoolers about finding deep roots and exploring the past, the present, and the places that make us who we are.

All Amara wants for her birthday is to visit her father's family in New York City—Harlem, to be exact. She can't wait to finally meet her Grandpa Earl and cousins in person, and to stay in the brownstone where her father grew up. Maybe this will help her understand her family—and herself—in a new way.

But New York City is not exactly what Amara thought it would be. It's crowded, with confusing subways, suffocating sidewalks, and her father is too busy with work to spend time with her and too angry to spend time with Grandpa Earl. As she explores, asks questions, and learns more and more about Harlem and about her father and his family history, she realizes how, in some ways more than others, she connects with him, her home, and her family.<sup>2</sup>

## Content Considerations

When teaching memoirs and novels that address themes of borders and belonging, students will often be exposed to dehumanizing language and imagery as well as descriptions of tragic and unjust experiences. Students may have strong reactions to some events described in this novel. For this reason, it is important to use the strategies addressed in the **Prepare to Cultivate a Brave and Reflective Community** and **Anticipating and Supporting Emotional Responses** sections of the [All Community Read Guide](#).

In addition, the following notes can help you and your students be better prepared when you encounter dehumanizing or emotionally distressing content in the text:

- **References to miscarriage.** Amara's mother is pregnant and goes into premature labor near the end of the book, ultimately delivering a healthy child. On page 7, Amara explains that her mother has lost several pregnancies before her current one; these losses are referred to multiple times throughout the book and are a source of fear and worry for the characters.

<sup>2</sup> Bloomsbury website, "Description" (*Some Places More Than Others* page).

- **Strained family relationships.** Tension in parent-child relationships is a motif throughout the book and is described across multiple generations.
- **Pressure to conform to gender roles.** One aspect of Amara's tension with her mother is her feeling that she is "not girl enough" to suit her mother. This grappling with expectations around gender is introduced on page 17 and referred to throughout the book.
- **References to racism and slavery.** Learning more about Black history in the United States is a significant aspect of Amara's literal and figurative journey throughout this book. She explores both painful and inspiring aspects of that history.
- **References to incarcerated parents.** While Amara is in Harlem, she spends time with her cousins, whose father is incarcerated.

## Get to Know the Context

It is not necessary to teach historical context before inviting students to engage with this book. The book is intended for young readers to read independently and therefore provides most of the context that is needed to make sense of the characters' experiences. However, if you would like to support students in building additional background knowledge about the historical context and/or specific references in the book, we recommend engaging with the following resources:

### Prominent Figures in Black American History

As Amara explores Harlem, she and her family members look at statues of and discuss several prominent Black Americans. The following resources provide concise biographies of several of these figures:

- [Frederick Douglass profile](#) from Biography.com
- [Martin Luther King Jr. profile](#) from Biography.com
- [Malcolm X profile](#) from Biography.com
- [Adam Clayton Powell profile](#) from Britannica
- [Harriet Tubman profile](#) from Biography.com

### Key Locations in Harlem

Harlem as a place features prominently in the story, functioning almost as a character in its own right. The characters visit and discuss these key locations:

- [The Apollo Theater](#) interactive history site
- [The Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture](#)

# Discussion Questions While Reading

*These questions encourage deep engagement with the book's central themes, focusing on borders and belonging in particular. Based on the Facing History pedagogical triangle, these questions spark intellectual, emotional, and ethical engagement with the text. Spanish translations of these discussion questions are available [in this folder](#).*

1. The book begins with Amara's mother saying, "New York City is no place for a little girl . . . I don't think Amara is ready to visit" (p. 1).
  - a. How does this set the reader up for the first major conflict of the novel?
  - b. What does the phrase "little girl" indicate about how Amara's mother views her daughter?
2. On page 11, Amara overhears her parents talking about how her father hasn't spoken to Grandpa Earl in 12 years. Amara then says, "How do you not talk to your father, and why didn't I know this?"
  - a. How does this new knowledge about Amara's family help explain why her parents don't want her to go to New York?
  - b. How would you be feeling if you were in Amara's shoes right now? What questions would you want to ask your parents?
3. On page 14, the reader learns that Big T, Amara's father's best friend, often talks about missing Black culture. Amara says that "Big T starts just about every sentence with, "Well, in Harlem . . ." and that "he's always talking about how he misses black people, which makes me wonder why he moved to Oregon."
  - a. What inferences can you make about the differences between Beaverton, Oregon, and Harlem, New York?
  - b. Why might this detail about Big T, who is otherwise not a major character, be included? How might it relate to Amara's sense of identity and belonging?
4. When Amara and her mother are discussing the differences between their church and Titus's church, Amara's mother says, "I also believe that what you look like on the outside is a reflection of who you are. And how you dress going anywhere—school, church, or even the mall for that matter—shows how much you respect yourself or a place" (p. 15).
  - a. Do you agree with these statements? Why or why not?
  - b. How do these statements reflect the relationship between Amara and her mother, and the conflicts between them?

5. On page 16, when Amara's mother asks her if the dress she made for her is too tight, Amara says, "No, it's not too tight." Then she thinks to herself, "But it is suffocating me."
- What might Amara mean when she says the dress is "suffocating" her, if it is not too tight?
  - What larger ideas or issues might the dress represent?
6. On page 17, Amara's mother tells her, "When I was a little girl I loved wearing dresses. I'd sneak into my mother's closet and play dress up in her clothes, strutting around in her high heel shoes. I don't know whose child you are." Amara tells the reader, "When she says this I feel like what she is saying is that I am not girl enough, daughter enough, that I am nothing like her. I look at Mom's belly, think maybe it's a great thing she's having a baby. Maybe she'll have the daughter she's always wanted. A girl nothing like me."
- How might Amara be feeling in this moment? How do you know?
  - What does this interaction suggest about Amara's sense of belonging in her family?
  - Have you ever felt pressure to fit in, act, or be a certain way? How did it make you feel?
7. On pages 23–26, Amara's teacher Mr. Rosen introduces the "suitcase project," for which the class will be "creating time capsules that explore your past, present, and future." He explains that "at the end of the semester, you each will decorate a suitcase with personal artifacts, poems, and essays about where you're from and what your dreams are for the future." He continues, "Maybe your suitcase carries actual, tangible items. But some things you won't be able to put into your suitcase; some things are intangible, and yet, you carry them with you. Think about how you will represent the places you come from, the people who are important to you."
- What do you think Mr. Rosen might mean by "some things are intangible, and yet, you carry them with you"?
  - What would your suitcase look like? What are some things, tangible or intangible, that you would include to show where you come from, where you feel like you belong, and the people who are important to you?
8. On page 29, Amara remembers that Mr. Rosen said that "everything and everyone has a story."
- What do you think Mr. Rosen meant by that? How can objects have a story?
  - How might this moment relate to the tense relationship between Amara's father and Grandpa Earl?
  - Can you think of an object in your life that has a particularly interesting story to tell? What is it, and what is the story?

9. On page 52, Amara learns that she will be going to New York City for her birthday. Her mother tells her, "I actually think it will be good for *both of you*. We think it will be good for you to get to know your Grandpa Earl and the rest of the family. And it will be good for your dad to reconnect with them."
- How do you think Amara is feeling right now? How would you feel if you were in her place?
  - Why does Amara's mother think the trip will be good for both Amara and her father?
  - How might this trip help Amara learn more about her own "story"?
10. On page 70, Amara thinks about her grandmother, saying, "I miss her even though I never met her. I love her even though I never knew her."
- How can you miss someone you never met or love someone you never knew?
  - Why do you think Amara is thinking so much about her grandmother? What might she represent to Amara?
11. On pages 75–76, Amara goes with her grandfather to a coffee shop. She says, "I look around the coffee shop. There are so many shades of brown here. I've never seen this many black people in one room except at a church. This place feels like some kind of church in the way Grandpa says, 'I know that's right, brotha,' to the man working behind the counter."
- What does this scene tell you about how Amara relates to Harlem versus how she relates to Beaverton?
  - Think about the word "church." What does this word bring to mind for you?
  - How can a place "feel like a church" even if it's not a church? What does this comparison suggest about why this place seems special to Amara?
12. On page 80, Grandpa Earl speaks about Amara's father: "in a quiet, quiet voice, [he says,] 'I didn't understand him back then.'"
- What do you think Grandpa Earl means by this?
  - How do you think Grandpa Earl is feeling now?
  - What connections do you see to Amara's relationship with her own parents?
13. On page 87, Amara's father says, "Nah, I want Amara to be who she wants to be. I'm not trying to create a mini-me. . . . I don't want *my* child growing up with pressure to be someone she's not."
- Does this conversation give you more insight into the tension between Amara's father and grandfather? How so?
  - How does this moment relate to Amara's conversation with her mother about the dresses earlier in the book?

- 14.** On page 102, Amara says, “We pose in front of Harriet Tubman, and I am starting to see why Big T is always saying there’s no place like New York. No place else constantly reminds us that we are important, that we come from a people who sacrificed and fought and protested for us to be able to walk these streets free. . . . In Oregon, I only see stuff like this in museums when there’s a special exhibit up that celebrates Black history. But here—right outside in the middle of the street—there’s a reminder.”
- How is Amara’s perspective of her world changing?
  - What is she realizing about the places where her family comes from and how those places relate to her own identity?
  - How does this passage relate to Amara’s feelings of belonging (or not belonging)?
- 15.** On page 121, Amara visits the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture. Amara says, “Grandpa Earl turns to us and says, ‘This place was created with you in mind.’ I know he is talking to all three of us, but for some reason, I feel like he is especially talking to me. Our eyes meet when he says, ‘Your ancestors wanted to preserve your history, wanted there to be a place where you could come and hold on to your roots, know the story of how you got here.’”
- Why do you think Grandpa Earl took Amara, Ava, and Nina to the Schomburg Center?
  - Why might Grandpa Earl be talking more to Amara than her cousins?
- 16.** Reread pages 127–28, where Amara interviews her grandfather.
- How does this information help Amara better understand the relationship between her father and grandfather?
  - What do you think Grandpa Earl means when he says, “If you know better, do better” on page 128?
  - Can you think of a time when you changed your mind about something big? What influenced you to change your mind?
- 17.** On pages 161–62, Amara and her father are finally sightseeing and spending time together. This is also when Amara breaks down and tells her father that she feels as if her mother “wants me to be a *Baker girl*. I think she wishes I was more like her and into girly things.” Her father responds, “You know, you should talk with your mom. Tell her how you feel. I promise you, she has no idea your feelings are hurt. I think she just wants to bond with you, and making clothes for you is her way of showing you how much she loves you. She isn’t trying to make you be someone you’re not. . . . You two just need to talk. Something your Grandpa Earl and I never did.”

- a.** How is Amara’s mother like Grandpa Earl, and how is Amara like her father?  
How are they not alike?
  - b.** What do you think Amara’s father is finally realizing about his relationship with his own father?
  - c.** Make some predictions: Will Amara talk to her mother about how she feels?  
Do you think Amara’s father will finally forgive his own father and rebuild their relationship? Why or why not?
- 18.** In Chapter 20, Amara gets to know two family members: her new baby sister, Tadala, and her Grandma Grace (through the journals her dad finally shares with her).
  - a.** Why are these new family connections meaningful to Amara?
  - b.** How do these new family connections influence Amara’s sense of belonging?
- 19.** The book ends with Amara’s suitcase project poem, titled “My Suitcase Carries.”
  - a.** What does her poem suggest about Amara’s new, more complex understanding of her identity?
  - b.** What does her poem suggest about the relationship between specific places and our sense of belonging in the world?
  - c.** What does her poem suggest about the relationship between specific people and our sense of belonging in the world?

# Discussion Questions After Reading

*These questions invite you to consider the book as a whole and draw lessons from the text that you can bring into your own life.*

**Directions:** Choose from the following questions for a culminating discussion after you have finished reading *Some Places More Than Others*. You can also bring your own questions to the discussion. Spanish translations of these discussion questions are available [in this folder](#).

1. Consider your key takeaways from reading this book:
  - a. What scene from the book was most memorable to you and why?
  - b. What is one valuable idea you learned from this book? Why do you find it valuable?
  - c. What questions does this book raise for you? Where might you go to seek answers to your questions?
2. On page 114, Amara says, “I imagine Nina, 18 years old, with her newly-cut hair, making a trip to visit her dad. And I think about how even though she has Grandpa Earl, she still wants her dad, too. I guess maybe we all want to be connected to our roots.”
  - a. In what ways does her trip to New York connect Amara to her roots?
  - b. What does it mean to be “connected to our roots”? How can the meaning be different for different people?
  - c. How has something you’ve learned about your “roots”—whether that’s family, culture, or something else—helped you understand yourself better?
3. Throughout the novel, Amara struggles to figure out who she is and where she belongs. What does the book suggest about the many factors that help make up our sense of who we are and where we belong?
4. This book explores the importance of communication, seeing things from other perspectives, and forgiveness in relationships.
  - a. What are some examples from the story where better communication could have prevented misunderstanding or hurt feelings?
  - b. How does seeing things from other perspectives help Amara to grow and understand her family in a different way? How does it affect her sense of belonging?

- c. What is the relationship between storytelling and healing? How does *Some Places More Than Others* help you think about this question? What about other stories you have read or heard?
  - d. How did this story connect to, extend, or challenge your thoughts about the role of forgiveness in close relationships?
- 5. How can Amara's story help us better understand ourselves, other people in our communities, and the world? How does her story challenge us to consider our role in creating supportive communities where everyone feels that they belong?

## Connection Questions

*These questions can be discussed in relation to any book with themes of borders and belonging and can be used to facilitate discussion across multiple books.*

- What borders—literal and figurative—do the characters in your book navigate? How do those borders influence their sense of belonging?
- How does your understanding of where you belong shape who you are, your choices, and the decisions you make?
  - How would the main character or figure in your book respond to this question?
- What is one significant idea that is sticking with you after reading and discussing your book?