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English 112B

Book Talk

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THE SECRET SKY

By: Atia Abawi

 

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**ABOUT ATIA ABAWI**



* Atia Abawi is a journalist and author who is established in the Middle East.
* Atia Abawi was born in West Germany but grew up in the United States.
* Her parents are from Afghanistan but fled the country before she was born. More specifically, Abawi’s parents fled Afghanistan during the Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan.
* Abawi completed her studies at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, which is commonly referred to as Virginia Tech.
* She has served as a correspondent for popular news outlets such as CNN and NBC.
* *The Secret Sky* is Abawi’s first book that she has written.
* Atia Abawi’s book, *The Secret Sky* is a book is considered a fictional book but she has revealed that the book is inspired by the time she has spent in her family’s home country, Afghanistan. The book is inspired by people she met as well as the tragedies and conflict villages face.

 Synopsis of the *Secret Sky*

The *Secret Sky*, written by Atia Abawi, is a book about the prohibited romance between two teenagers from Afghanistan. Fatima and Samiullah have always loved each other since childhood. They are best friends who are separated by the course of time. Eventually, Samiullah comes back to Fatima’s live and they grow closer than ever before. Their friendship quickly blossoms to a romantic type of love. There is a problem, though. Fatima and Samiullah come from different ethnic groups, as Fatima is a Hazara woman and Samiullah is a Pashtun man. Their relationship is exposed and they have to decide whether their love is worth tainting their reputation, as well as sacrificing and risking the lives of their families, and their very own lives. *The Secret Sky* is a story of love, repentance, and hope.

 Significant Quotes

**#1:**

“I move my own lips in prayer: Please guide me in what I should do, most merciful and generous God. I know what I’m feeling can’t be wrong. I know it in my heart and in my mind. I don’t believe you would have me feel this way, so deeply and so purely, if it wasn’t right. Thank you for blessing me with this feeling that I can only describe as love. And if it is love, this means I have always loved her. All I ask, dear God, is don’t let me lose it. Don’t let me lose this feeling and don’t let me lose her. I know her family and my family will be against any kind of union, but I believe it is possible with your help and will. I just need time to figure it out. Please, God, help Rashid. Protect him from himself and the evils that surround him. Please stop him from the evil thoughts that darken his soul and please give him the strength to find the goodness I know is in him. Oh, most merciful God, stop him before it is too late, before his soul can no longer be saved.”

**Significance:** This passage comes after Samiullah’s cousin, Rashid, exposes his relationship to Samiullah’s father and Fatima’s father. As Samiullah expects, his family and Fatima’s family are going to oppose a relationship or marriage union between the two teenagers because they are of two different ethnic groups. Additionally, Rashid’s intention is to ruin the reputation of both teenagers by claiming that they had premarital sex, so he makes the conflict worse. In this passage, Samiullah demonstrates that he is afraid, yet is ready to face and fight whatever might serve as an obstacle in his love for Fatima. While he prays to God, surely he says that his love for Fatima is pure and not a feeling or act against love. He asks God to help him form a union of love between Fatima and him. Samiullah is shocked that Rashid betrayed him and asks God to save his soul and protect him from all evil.

pp.(86-87)

**#2**

﻿As angry as I have been with my cousin, Mullah Sarwar’s words have been running through my head since last night. And for the first time in a long time, everything makes sense to me: Your rage is not because of Sami or that poor girl. The anger is a part of the darkness you are holding inside yourself. It’s a darkness you must let go. No one can fix your heart but you. . . . If you don’t fix it, your suffering will only increase as your sins grow in number. I don’t want my sins to grow any more than they have. My father told me as a child that my soul was as clean as a glistening white shirt, but even one small spot on that shirt could ruin the entire cloth. I had to work on being a righteous, moral and God-loving man to keep the outfit stainless. Right now, I feel as though I have soiled my soul with deep stains that may never come out. But I must try. What my cousin did was wrong, but I don’t think he should die for it. And as for Fatima, I can’t expect forgiveness for what I have done to her. She must not even know that her little sister has been killed. I tried to make myself believe it was justified, but I can’t pretend anymore. The guilt has been growing since last night and is festering in my soul. God must be so angry with me for using his name to rationalize murder—the way these thugs do. God, please forgive me. I need absolution and will start by helping Sami and Fatima. Mullah Sarwar said it’s possible, but I have to prove my sincerity. I’m ready to prove it now.

pp. (252-253)

**Significance:** This passage reflects a turning point in this story, as Rashid, Samiullah’s cousin is full of remorse for his actions. His jealousy and anger towards his cousin led him to risk his life and Fatima’s, as well as commit other atrocious crimes that go against the word of his God. Rashid becomes responsible for the deaths and misery of many people but does not begin to show repentance until he witnesses the death of an elderly wise man named, Mullah Sarwar. Some of Mulla Sarwar’s left a life-long impact on Rashid’s life and conscious. Mullah Sarwar opens Rashid’s eyes and allows him to see that the anger and other negative feelings that are deep within him will lead him to committing more sins and continue to live a life of misery. It is up to Rashid to fix his life and live a life that God will approve of. Rashid realizes that the revenge he sought against Fatima and his cousin is wrong and it is not his duty to punish people but it is God’s duty. Rashid knows that his actions will not erase the murders he committed but he will gain some respect from God and his family.

**#3**

﻿“For a moment, her words send chills up my spine, but her smile calms my nerves. I hear the door open and turn to look. Through the blue fabric, I see him. He looks exhausted and dirty. But his emerald eyes still shimmer. My face falls into my hands, and I can’t stop my tears. But for the first time in days, they’re not tears of sadness—they’re tears of joy. “Fatima?” he says. “Fatima, don’t cry. We’ll be okay. I promise.” He walks toward me and brings me in for an embrace. I pull my arms from under the fabric and squeeze as tight as I can. In this moment I want to fly with him toward a secret sky. I want to take a step without feet, with only our hearts to guide us. And I know we will.”

(p. 280)

**Significance:** This passage is important because the lives of Fatima and Samiullah are about to change, yet Fatima does not know it. Fatima is sitting at a humans’ rights office in Kabul filled with feelings of fear and uncertainty. Fatima does not know where Samiullah is or if he is alive. Samiullah suddenly arrives and hugs her. Fatima and Samiullah might be able to begin a new life together in a new city and Fatima’s dream of being an independent woman and going to college might become a reality.

Why Should Teenagers Read This?

* The *Secret Sky* is a book that focuses on several themes that teenagers might relate to, such as: coming of age, love, repentance, act of rebelling or obedience, and the act of dreaming and fulfilling dreams. For example, some young adults desire to be independent and experience life, according to their own terms, which is something that sometimes causes conflict with their families. A teenager might enjoy this story because The *Secret Sky* is about two teenagers who might live in a foreign country but might have quite similar or quite different experiences than the teenager reading the story.
* Teenagers might enjoy this book because it is very straightforward and it is told from the point of view of three different characters, which are: Fatima, Samiullah, and Rashid. For example, one chapter can be told from the perspective of Fatima, and the other chapter can be told from the perspective of Rashid. This might allow the reader to better understand the intentions and actions of each character, and better understand the story as a whole.
* This book will give teenagers a glimpse of customs and traditions of a different country, which in this case is Afghanistan. Although, the *Secret Sky* is a book of fiction, the author, Atia Abawi, acknowledges that much of the book’s content is based on real conflicts that take place of the villages of Afghanistan.
* *The Secret Sky* is a book that some teenagers might find inspiring as it is a realistic fiction book, and it begins with conflict and ends with a resolution. Despite the obstacles that the protagonists face, they don’t stop or lose hope. Fatima and Samiullah take many risks to attain their shared dream and eventually, they find hope.

Text Complexity

**Lexile Level**

 Ages: 14 and above

Score:720L

**ATOS Level**

Grades: 9-12

Score: 4.9

**Analysis of Scores**

Both Lexile and ATOS generated similar scores and levels. Lexile generated the idea that *The Secret Sky* should be read by people who are fourteen years of age and above. ATOS generated the idea that the book should mostly be read by ninth through twelve grades, which is equivalent to teenagers from about fourteen to eighteen years of age. The difference between both scores is that ATOS suggests that the book is suitable only for teenagers up to eighteen years of age. Lexile believes that any reader who is over eighteen years of age should read this book. I disagree with Lexile because I believe this book is suitable for readers of any age as long as they are fourteen years old. The book has themes and ideas that people of many age ranges can relate to or find interesting, such as: love, regret, friendship, and violence. I agree with both programs on the idea that a reader of this book should be at least fourteen years of age because the book has mature content, such as violence and murder, as well as contains profane language.

**Exeter Qualities**

* “A strong, interesting, and believable plot centering around a problem that a young person might really have/face.”
* The Secret Sky is a fictional book faced on realistic events and themes that are common in Middle Eastern countries. In some middle eastern countries, such as Afghanistan it is common for people to arrange the marriages of two people despite their wishes. In the book, the parents of Fatima oppose a union between Samiullah and herself because they belong to different ethnic groups and they do not believe a young man like him can provide her and them with a stable financial life.
* “A subtlety that stimulates the reader to think about the various aspects of the story.”
* The book is narrated by three different characters, which are: Samiullah, Fatima, and Rashid. This gives the reader the opportunity to look at the story’s conflict and plot from three different perspectives, and also allows them to better understand the characters’ motives.
* “The power to transport the reader into another person’s thoughts and feelings.”
* The book is narrated by three different characters and provides the reader with three different points of view, but more specifically, it also allows the reader to analyze the frustrations, hopes, desires, and motivations of the characters.

 How to Teach Using *The Secret Sky*

* Have students write a narrative of a time they had a strong desire to accomplish a dream, but their families did not agree with them. Have the students write about how they dealt with that situation.
* Have students write about a time they visited a foreign country or a different home, and describe the difference of custom and traditions of the students’ families and the other families.
* Have students write a piece of fiction told from the perspective of three different characters. Require that they write about characters that are completely different from them in character and who have completely different experiences from them.

 Rationale

* Chapter 4: Books About Real Life Experiences: “Making Life Choices, Facing Violence, or Abuse, And Living Through Family And Relationship Issues”
* In *The Secret Sky*, Fatima deeply desires to marry Samiullah and create a life with him, but when her family discovers the relationship between the two teenagers, they suffer from consequences. Upon, discovering Fatima’s secret relationship, her mother pours boiling water on both of her arms, and threatens to kill her if she shows her burned arms to her father.
* Chapter 5: Books About Facing Death and Loss
* In order for Fatima to live a life of happiness with Samiullah, she must risk losing her family forever, as they do not agree with her relationship or some of her choices. Towards the end of the story, Fatima realizes that her decision to flee with Samiullah, not only cost her the love of her family, but cost the life of her young sister.