

Book club 13: Activism & engagement

Clouds over California
by Karyn Parsons

Rules

In this book club you will discuss *Clouds over California* by Karyn Parsons in a group of 4-6 readers. The book club opens with a brief introduction that one of you reads out loud. The book club then continues in four rounds:

- 1 Round 1 consists of 5 questions about the plot. One of the group members acts as the quiz master who reads each question out loud, after which everyone (including the quiz master) writes down their answer. The correct answers will appear on the screen after you have turned over the final question card. You may then check your answers and calculate your scores.
- 2 Round 2 consists of asking and answering questions each of you have about the book/story. Each group member consults the group about elements of the text that they thought was unclear. Together, you try to find answers to the questions that are raised. After everything has been cleared up, your group is ready to proceed to the next round.
- 3 Round 3 consists of discussion questions. The person with the most correct answers to the quiz questions from round 1 gets to be the first to turn over a card and respond to the question. The other members of the group may then add to the discussion by responding and sharing their ideas. Take turns until all cards are flipped.
- 4 Round 4 is where you get to review the text. How many stars would you give the text and why? Discuss this together until you have reached a shared verdict. Use the text box to explain your choice.

This book club was developed by the editors of LitLab, a digital laboratory for high school literature research. For more teaching materials, visit www.litlab.nl. A teacher's guide and a didactic justification of this teaching method are available at www.litlab.nl/docenten.



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Clouds over California

Introduction

“Oh, Stevie,” Mom puts her head in her hands. “You don’t know anything”

Eleven-year-old Stevie’s life changes a lot in a short time. She moves from her old neighbourhood and has to leave her old friends behind. She starts at a new school where she finds it difficult to make new friends. Meanwhile her mum starts to behave differently and her dad is not happy with this change of behaviour at all. When on top of that Stevie’s cousin Naomi comes to live with her, she learns about political ideas that will cause her world – California in the 1970s – to change even more. She discovers why she should not hide her natural hair and why civil rights (*burgerrechten*) are so important. In a year’s time Stevie learns a lot about her mom and dad, about equality between men and women, and about police violence. In this book club you’ll connect these topics to your reading of *Clouds over California*.

Round 1: Understanding the plot

Take turns turning over a card and answering the question. After the person whose turn it is has answered, the rest may add to that answer or share their own views.

Round 2: Initial questions

Take turns selecting one of the excerpts (*fragmenten/ stukjes*) from the book listed below. Think of a question you would like to ask one of the characters, and work together to find an answer to that question.

1. Stevie’s mum and dad argue about Stevie’s mom wanting to go to college: ‘You have... to college?’ (p. 9)
2. Naomi sees two of Stevie’s classmates, Kenny and Doug, make fun of Stevie: “Look! It’s... her that?” (p. 30)
3. Stevie is waiting for her mom outside the school when she suddenly sees a car stop. Her mom steps out of the car and Stevie sees her mom isn’t wearing a wig. “I’m so... remember Clarence?” (p. 41)
4. Naomi, Stevie and her mom are in the car after they have just left dad in the house. It’s the end of the night when Stevie’s parents went out for Halloween and Stevie fell on the stairs. “Did something... like this?” (p. 58)

Round 3: Discussion

Take turns turning over a card from a pile of your choice and answer the discussion question. The other members of the group may then add to the discussion by responding and sharing their ideas.

Round 4: Opinion

Review *Clouds over California* by rating the novel on a scale of one to five stars, and then provide an explanation for your choice. Discuss what aspects you enjoyed and what aspects you didn’t, and provide reasons for your opinions. Reflect on whether the discussion influenced your individual perspective, and if so, how. Incorporate examples and arguments from your responses to the discussion questions to support your review.



Question 1

What often wakes Stevie up at night?

Question 2

Why is Stevie's cousin Naomi coming to live with Stevie and her parents?

Question 3

Where does Stevie's mom go and what does she do when she is not at home?

Question 4

How does Stevie's dad know about Naomi's boyfriend?

Question 5

What is the name of the political movement Naomi joins?

Answers

1. Stevie often wakes up at night because her parents are arguing.
2. Naomi and her mom are arguing a lot since Naomi's dad died. Naomi made some bad friends and ran away from home.
3. Stevie's mom goes to the library and to night classes because she wants to become a librarian.
4. He secretly records the phone calls because he doesn't trust his wife.
5. The Black Panthers.



Question

3

Question

2

Question

1

Answers

Question

5

Question

4



Personal connections? 1

Stevie is not very happy about Naomi coming to stay at her house. Why does Stevie not want Naomi to come and stay? Would you feel the same as Stevie if this happened to you?

Personal connections? 2

Naomi's dad has died and Naomi seems to have been in some trouble at school. Naomi's mum and Stevie's parents think it is best for Naomi to live with Stevie's family for a while. Do you understand why the adults think this is a good idea? Do you agree with them? Explain your answer.

Personal connections? 3

Stevie's mom wants to go to school and she wants to work. Stevie's dad does not want her mom to go to school or to work. What do you think Stevie wants for her parents? What would you want if you were Stevie?

Personal connections? 4

Stevie's mom keeps secrets from her husband and Naomi keeps secrets from Stevie's parents. Do you keep secrets from your family? Do you think it is wise to keep secrets from your family? Why or why not?

Personal connections? 5

Stevie is worried her dad will find out about her mom's phone calls with Clarence. She does not tell her dad that she knows her mom is spending time with Clarence and talking to him on the phone. Would you do the same as Stevie or not? Why or why not?

Personal connections? 6

At the end of the story, Stevie's parents no longer live together. Do you think this is a good solution (*oplossing*) for the situation? Can you think of another possible solution?



Personal connections?

3

Personal connections?

2

Personal connections?

1

Personal connections?

6

Personal connections?

5

Personal connections?

4



Food for thought? 1

Clouds over California is a personal story about Stevie, but also a political story about the role of the Black Panthers in the 1970s. What did you already know about this movement and what have you learned by reading this book?

Food for thought? 2

Stevie's mom and dad think differently about the roles of men and women. Stevie's dad thinks women don't need education because he should be the only parent working. Meanwhile, Stevie's mom secretly goes to school. Do you think that the story agrees with Stevie's mom or Stevie's dad? Is one of them being portrayed as 'right' or 'wrong'? If yes, how?

Food for thought? 3

Stevie's mom makes some decisions in the story that have a huge influence on Stevie. The changes in Stevie's life due to (*vanwege*) her mom's decisions are not always positive for Stevie. Can you give an example of such a decision? Should her mom have more consideration (*aandacht*) for the effects of her decisions on Stevie?

Food for thought? 4

Naomi is interested in the Black Panthers and standing up for equal rights for all people. Stevie's mom sees the Black Panthers as trouble and does not want to be involved. Do you think a movement such as the Black Panthers can be dangerous? Use examples from the book in your discussion.

Food for thought? 5

In recent years, there have been major protests for equal rights (such as the Black Lives Matter movement or the Feminist march) similar to those from the 1960s and 1970s. Which inequalities (*ongelijkheden*) are most important in Stevie's life? Which of these inequalities are still being discussed or protested today?

Food for thought? 6

In the end Stevie's parents no longer live together but Stevie still sees them both. Do you think these changes have a negative or positive impact on Stevie? Explain your answer.



Food for thought?

3

Food for thought?

2

Food for thought?

1

Food for thought?

6

Food for thought?

5

Food for thought?

4