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INTRODUCTION

Anna sees ghosts. The spirits of her ancestors call to her from the shadows, and no matter where she is, Anna always answers. Kids in her middle school tease her. Teachers and parents are worried by her strange behavior. The only one who seems to understand is Anna's beloved grandmother, Bubbe, who has always treasured Anna's *shayna neshama*, her beautiful soul. Spending Shabbos with Bubbe is the only thing that gives Anna the sense of love and belonging that she needs.

But when a ghost named Ruthie appears at Bubbe's house by the sea, Anna begins to uncover long-hidden secrets that reveal the mystery of her family's troubled past. As Anna and Ruthie get closer, Anna must decide for herself whether being connected to a restless ghost is worth the risk. When it becomes clear that Bubbe's life is in danger, Anna must face the horrible truth: She alone has the ability to save her family and heal the wounds that follow them from one generation to the next.

National Book Award long-listed author Marcella Pixley brings her Jewish faith and her acclaimed sense of lyricism to this powerful story of bravery, forgiveness, and healing.

This teaching guide can be used in ELA classrooms to help students reflect on their own complex identities and create powerful original poetry inspired by the text. First, use the guiding questions to inspire self-reflection and literary analysis. These questions will encourage students to develop empathy, see reflections of their own experiences, and look deeply at the text. Then lead students through a series of prompts that will inspire their own set of verse poems based on an aspect of identity that is important to them.

Instructional Standards

This guide, which can be used with large or small groups, will help students meet several of the instructional standards for English Language Arts. These include the reading literature standards for key ideas and details, craft and structure, and range of reading and level of text complexity (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL), as well as the speaking and listening standards for comprehension and collaboration and for presentation of knowledge and ideas (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL). Questions can also be used in writing prompts for independent work.



Windows, Mirrors, and Sliding Glass Doors: Using *Neshama* to Explore Cultural Identity

Questions for Inspiration and Reflection

1. As you read *Neshama*, reflect upon how Anna's story connects to your own identity and experiences. Have you ever felt conflicted about one part of your identity? Can you imagine taking a journey or writing a story that would bring you closer to some aspect of who you are?
2. What moments in this text offer a reflection of your own cultural and ethnic identities? Do you have any connections with details in this novel: the prayers, the meals, the grandmother, the chicken soup? What about the conflicts, hardships, and secrets in Anna's family? What about the relationships between children and parents?
3. In what ways does this story present a window into a world that might feel very different from your own? In what ways does Anna's story contrast with what you have experienced? How might her story help you to feel empathy and connection with people from other backgrounds, religions, or cultures?
4. If your ancestors could tell you stories, what might they want to say to you? What songs and prayers would they sing? What messages might they have for loved ones who still miss them dearly? If you could tell them anything about your own life, what would you say?

The Endless Thread

A Lesson About Family Stories, Objects, and Rituals

Read these two poems about the celebration of Shabbat.

The Soup Pot (page 61)

Bubbe lifts the lid
and lets the steam rise
into the kitchen,
this battered soup pot
dented from its journey
from an apartment in Brooklyn
to Bubbe's old kitchen
in Gloucester, Massachusetts,
where I stand transfixed,
watching the broth bubble.

Bubbe gives me a sip.
*When you taste my soup,
close your eyes,* she says.
*Imagine my mama,
her hair covered by a kerchief,
stirring Shabbos
with a wooden spoon,
one generation
sipping the broth
of the one that came before.*

Blessing (page 62)

Then she strikes the match,
circles her hands
above the flickering glow,
and covers her eyes
to whisper the Shabbos prayer:
*Baruch atah Adonai
Eloheinu Melech ha-olam.*

The real blessing
is that the prayer has lasted
so many years,
like the spiderweb thread
of this white lace
woven with a silk
that is at once
incredibly fragile
and as strong as a story
told over and over
from a mother's mouth
to a daughter's ear,
one generation after another.



1. In “The Soup Pot,” we learn about an important ritual object that was passed down from one generation to the next in Anna’s family. When Anna takes a sip of the broth from this pot, Bubbe tells her, “Imagine my mama . . . stirring Shabbos with a wooden spoon.”

Do you have any objects in your home that remind you of an older generation, an elder like a grandparent or a great-grandparent? Do you know any stories or family memories associated with this object? In what ways might this object connect you with the identities of your ancestors, as evoked by the lines “one generation / sipping the broth / of the one that came before”?

Write a poem about a real or imagined object that reflects your cultural identity. In your poem, imagine the hands of your ancestors holding it, using it, passing it down between one generation and the next. Allow yourself to imagine their voices talking to you about what the object meant to them. If the object is a symbol of one of your identities, include details that help you to connect to why this identity is important to you.

2. In “Blessing,” Bubbe speaks in Hebrew, and the poem includes words from a Jewish prayer that is important to Anna and her family. Do you have any old songs, stories, prayers, lullabies, or poems that have been important to more than one generation of your family? If there is a language in your family other than English, think about your own connection to that language. In what ways are those songs and stories a kind of blessing?

Write a poem about a family song or story that includes words that have been important to more than one generation of your family. Can you think of a comparison for how it feels to be connected to the language or the homeland of your ancestors? Can you think of a metaphor or symbol that can help you describe what it feels like to belong to more than one world?

Creating Your Own Identity Story in Verse

In *Neshama*, Anna learns to celebrate her Jewish identity. What aspects of your own identity are most important to you? Drawing on your own observations and experiences, create a fictional character who will learn to embrace some part of their identity. Highlight identity markers from this list that you would be interested in exploring further and use them as you create your character.

ability	hopes	phobias
accent	immigration	politics
appearance	insecurities	popularity
beliefs	interests	race
body image	language	religion
confidence	memories	sexuality
creativity	mental health	social class
culture	nationality	strength
family	neighborhood	struggles
food security	neurodiversity	trauma
friendships	parents	vocabulary
gender	passion	
health	personality	



Interview Your Character

Before you create a story, spend some time exploring who your character is and what they most need to learn throughout the process of the story. If you want, you can use a journal and imagine your character answering these questions with their own voice. Spending some time working on your character's psychology before writing will help you write with more purpose and power once your story starts.

- What aspects of your character's identity are most important?
- Which aspects do they struggle with?
- In what ways do your character's different identities intersect?
- What does your character need to learn in order to be happy and whole?
- What is getting in their way?
- What are their weaknesses or flaws?
- In what ways are they fearful or inhibited?
- What scares them most?
- How do these aspects of their personality get in their way?
- What are their greatest strengths?
- In what ways are they brave and resilient?
- What will they learn about themselves that will help them grow stronger?

Poem Prompts: Rising Conflict

Now create a story in verse where your character struggles with some aspect of their identity. Choose among the following poem prompts to help you build your story. How will your poems explore your character's rising conflict?

- Your character is being teased because of some aspect of their identity that makes them special.
- Your character looks in the mirror and all they can see is what sets them apart.
- Your character tries to hide some aspect of who they are in order to fit in.
- Your character recalls a moment in preschool or kindergarten when they first realized they were not like the other kids.
- Your character gets in trouble at home or at school because of who they are.
- Your character looks out the window and describes the landscape, but everything they see is clouded by how they feel and what they have been going through.
- Your character writes in a journal or composes a letter to a grandparent or an imaginary friend describing what they have been going through.
- Your character looks at a photograph and recalls a time in their life when they felt different.
- Your character looks at an object that is somehow a symbol for who they are.



Poem Prompts: Finding Resolution and Strength

By the end of your story, your character needs to find their voice and their bravery. Create a series of poems that allow your character to recognize that this identity, which at first set them apart, is actually something powerful and important.

- Your character stands up to someone who has been making them feel small.
- Your character writes in a journal or composes a letter telling their tormentors how it feels to be who they are.
- Your character has a moment where they feel whole, strong, brave, and fantastic. Maybe they go outside on a gorgeous day and the sun is shining. Maybe they go for a walk in the woods. This poem contains a moment of beauty that shows your character that sometimes, even in a messy world, there can be beauty.
- Your character looks in the mirror and realizes that who they are is enough.
- Your character looks at a photograph and remembers a time when things were happy.
- Your character stops trying to hide the thing(s) that they are afraid will not be accepted and for the first time is unapologetically themselves.

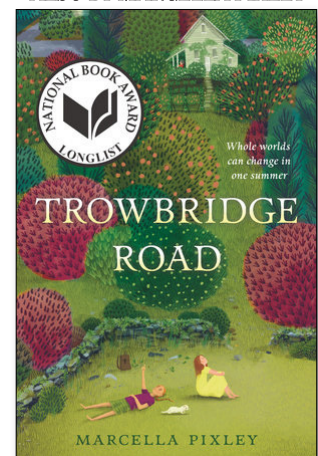


ABOUT MARCELLA PIXLEY

Marcella Pixley is the award-winning author of four novels for middle-grade and young adult readers, including *Trowbridge Road*, which was long-listed for the National Book Award, received a Massachusetts Book Award Honor, was nominated for Vermont's Golden Dome Award, and was a Junior Library Guild Selection. It was also named a *Shelf Awareness* Best Book of the Year, a Mighty Girl Book of the Year, and a Reading Group Choices selection.

Marcella Pixley teaches eighth-grade language arts in Massachusetts, where she lives with her family.

ALSO BY MARCELLA PIXLEY



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