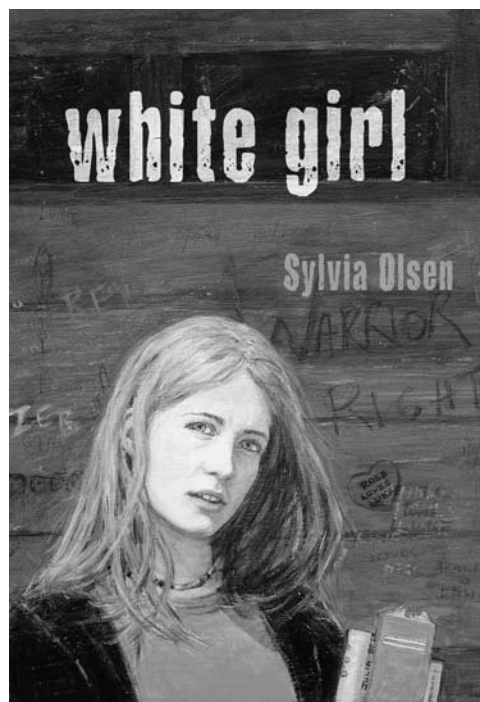


Teachers' Guide



White Girl

Sylvia Olsen

ISBN: 1-55039-147-X

5.25 X 7.75, 240 PAGES

AGES 12 AND UP

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Story Synopsis

Until she was fourteen, Josie was pretty ordinary. Then her Mom meets Martin, “a real ponytail Indian.” Before long, Josie finds herself living on a reserve outside town, with a new stepfather, a new stepbrother, and a new name – “Blondie.” In town, white was the ambient noise, the no-colour background. On the reserve, she’s White, and most people seem to see only her blonde hair and blue eyes.

Josie’s mother is no help. She never leaves the house, gripped by her fear of the unknown beyond Martin’s doorstep. But Josie can’t afford to hide out forever. She has to go to school, and she has to get herself a life, one way or another. So bit by bit, she finds a way through the minefields. She makes a friend, Rose, who helps Josie to bridge the gap between being an outsider and belonging. And Josie finds a family in Martin, Luke, and Grandma.

As Josie discovers more about her new family and her new home on the reserve, they become a real part of her, like nothing else ever has, or ever will.

As You Read

At some time or other, most people have the experience of being an outsider. How does Sylvia Olsen capture the shift in perspective experienced by Josie after the move to the reserve?

Questions for Discussion

- How does Olsen explore the relationship between Josie and her mother?
- White Girl received a starred review in Booklist Magazine. The review says, in part, “Olsen ... writes from the inside, especially about stereotypes that go both ways, and about the heartbreak of the reserve... characters will hold readers as much as the novel’s extraordinary sense of place.”

How important is the sense of place in this novel? How does Olsen convey this sense of place? What are some of the images that stay with you after you put the book down?

Connecting Literature and Life

- Do you have a variety of cultures represented at your school? Do the various groups mix? Why or why not?
- Have you ever visited an Indian reserve? What was the experience like? If not, what are your ideas about reserve life? How accurate do you think your ideas are? How can you find out more about life on a reserve?
- When was the first time you can remember thinking about your colour? What did you think? Why do you think the concept of colour came up for you in your life?
- How have your ideas about colour changed as you have grown older?
- How do your ideas about colour differ from your parents?
- If you are white, have you ever thought about being white? Or, like Josie, do you see yourself as transparent? Have you ever thought about how others might view you just because of your skin colour? Does this change the way you think about people of other backgrounds?
- If you are not white, how do you think life is different or the same for you as it is for white students? Is there anything you think white people misunderstand or don't know about you and your family simply because of your skin colour?
- Have you ever thought about what colour means to someone else, someone you know or have met? What have you done to try and understand issues relating to colour and race?
- Do you think racial tension in your community is better, worst, or the same as it was a generation ago?
- How do issues of race and colour affect our world – at local, national, and international levels?
- Have you ever had the experience of being an outsider? How well does Olsen recreate this experience?
- Sylvia Olsen has said that we learn about ourselves by seeing ourselves in reference to others. How does the author explore this theme in *White Girl*?

Getting to Know Each Other

- Interview another classmate. List ten ways in which your families are similar and ten ways in which they are different.

Plot

- Sylvia Olsen includes several sub-plots in *White Girl*. Identify the main storyline and one of the sub-plots. In what chapter does Olsen introduce this sub-plot? What is the central conflict in this sub-plot and where is this conflict resolved? How does the sub-plot echo the main theme of the book?
- Why do you think Ermaline committed suicide?
- In the final chapter Josie thinks, “It was the last day of something and the first day of something else.” What has changed?
- Olsen begins and ends *White Girl* writing from Josie’s perspective at some point in the future, after she has started art school. Why do you think the author chose this structure for the novel?

Character

- Identify three ways in which Josie changes over the course of the novel.
- Of the varied characters in the supporting cast, which one helps the reader understand Josie best?
- Find three examples of places where well-chosen dialog reveals something about a character.
- Why does Olsen include the character of Arnie? What purpose does he serve in the novel?

Point of View

- White Girl is told in the first person, from Josie's point of view.
- How would this story have changed if it had been written from Rose's point of view?
- What is the advantage of telling the story from Josie's perspective?
- **Writing Practice – Point of View**
Using Luke's point of view, rewrite the scene where Luke comes into the kitchen for breakfast in the first chapter.

Setting

- In what way does the setting of this book affect the plot, characters, and theme of the novel?
- Does the setting act as an antagonist? List three other settings that would lead to similar stories with similar conflicts.
- How does the setting allow Olsen to explore aspects of Josie's character that would not have been apparent in another location?

Style

- In several places in the text, Olsen uses swear words. Are these appropriate? Would these scenes have been believable if the characters had used alternate phrases?
- How would you describe Olsen's writing style?
- What kinds of techniques does the author use to
 - bring her characters to life?
 - describe the setting?
 - explore the underlying themes of the book?

Theme

- What is the underlying theme in *White Girl*?

Writing Practice

- Write a new back cover blurb for *White Girl*. What elements of the story do you think are most important? How would you entice another reader to read this book?

About the Author

Sylvia Olsen was born and brought up in the white, middle-class world of Victoria, British Columbia during the 1950s. At the age of 17, she married into the Tsartlip First Nation and moved to the reserve. Here she raised four children and became a grandmother.

“I find myself writing about the in-between place where First Nations and non-First Nations come together. Over the past decade there have been many important discussions about cultural appropriation and the use of cultural voice. What is often missing is the voice of those of us whose worlds are of various cultures. I write stories about the things I know, while honouring the things I do not.”

When Sylvia was thirty-five she returned to school and earned a master's degree in history. Specializing in Native/white relations in Canada, Sylvia went on to write about her experiences exploring the in-between place where Native and non-Native cultures intersect and overlap. As well as writing books for young people, Sylvia works in the area of First Nations community management and reserve housing.

When Sylvia begins to write a new book she doesn't begin with a particular story line in mind. Instead, she allows the characters and events to unfold often surprising herself.... To Sylvia, it feels as though the characters creep up over her shoulder and then she writes down what is happening to them. After that, she fusses and bothers about what words to use to best describe what is going on. Sylvia depends on fabulous editors to make sure she puts in the commas and other stuff that's required. It's only much later, after the story has been written, that Sylvia fully realizes what the books is about.

Other books by Sylvia Olsen

No Time to Say Good-bye

Girl With a Baby

Catching Spring

Just Ask Us

Yellow Line

Murphy and Mousetrap

Yetsa's Sweater

