Fran Pridham, Teacher Trailblazer

How to belong
Exploring ‘Brown Girl’ by Indigo Mudbhary

This lesson plan explores Indigo Mudbhary’s poem ‘Brown Girl’ (after Jamaica Kincaid’s ‘Girl’), a winning poem from the Foyle Young Poets of the Year Award 2020.

This prose poem pushes us to reflect on the challenges of belonging and the pressures this places on us in our daily life.

Content warning: the poem used in this resource deals with themes of racism and contains offensive language and swear words.

Activity 1 Paired work

In pairs, discuss firstly what groups you are part of. The discussion might include the following:

- Your family
- Your school, your school year, your class
- Your friendship groups
- Your church, mosque, synagogue, temple, or other religious group
- Any clubs or societies e.g. Scouts, dance, music, sports etc.
Take three of your groups. Use the chart below to explore how you show you belong to each group. Discuss what your work tells you about belonging!

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Listen while your teacher reads Indigo Mudbhary’s poem ‘Brown Girl’, or watch the poet herself reading it online.

Using different coloured pens, underline the following on your copy of the poem:

- Words/phrases related to food
- Words/phrases related to religion
- Words/phrases related to language
- Words/phrases related to clothes
- Words/phrase related to skin colour

Use the glossary below if needed and discuss any words you don’t understand.

Now consider in your group what your findings reveal about ‘belonging’ and fitting in. How are these ideas relevant to the title of the poem?

The poem seems to be based on the advice given to the narrator by her parents, guardian, or other adult in a position of authority. Discuss the following questions:

- Which piece of advice in the poem reminds you of your own parents or guardians?
- Which advice is different?

Activity 2 Group activity

Activity 3 Individual freewriting

Over the years you will have received much advice from your parents and other adults, and you know what behaviour they expect and what aspirations they have for you. You can use this to construct your own poem using a technique called ‘freewriting’.

Freewriting is a way to get your thoughts onto paper. It means that you write continuously without censoring your work or worrying about spelling or punctuation. Keep your pen on the page and write whatever comes to mind. If you get stuck, repeat the phrase ‘their advice’. It doesn’t have to make sense, and it definitely doesn’t have to be a poem. Just don’t stop writing!

Set a timer for four minutes to freewrite, starting with the following phrase:

_Their advice swims in my head……._
‘Brown Girl’ is a prose poem. The word ‘prose’ means text that is not written in a metrical structure. In other words, the lines run all the way across the page, instead of breaking to form a verse structure. For example, *Jane Eyre* is written in prose, whereas ‘The Owl and the Pussycat’ is written in verse.

What do you think the term ‘prose poem’ might mean? How do we know something is a poem?

At first glance it is obvious that ‘Brown Girl’ is not set out in the lines expected of most poetry. On reading the text aloud, however, despite its visual similarity to prose, it does not read like a short story or an extract from a novel. The whole text is packed full of visual images but is only one sentence long! With no full stops it seems to cascade over the reader like a torrent of unstoppable advice.

1. **Take some time now to consider how the features of this piece differentiate it from prose.**

   - Normally in writing you are encouraged to avoid repetition. This prose poem, however, breaks that rule. Underline the repetition and discuss how the repeated words and phrases alter the rhythm and structure the poem.
   - In prose pieces, a common type of sentence used is a statement, or ‘declarative’. Other sentence types include an ‘imperative’, an ‘exclamative’, and an ‘interrogative’. What type is repeatedly used in Brown Girl? What impact does this have on the reader?
   - How many examples of the pronouns ‘you’ and ‘your’ can you find? How does that affect the reader?

2. **Now take some time to read over and edit the freewriting you did earlier.**

   - In her poem, Mudbhary repeats the phrases ‘here’s how to…’; ‘this is how you…’ What happens if you take these phrases or choose a similar phrase and add it at regular intervals to your freewriting?
   - What type of sentences are you using? Can we hear your parent or guardian’s voice more clearly if you use more imperatives?
   - What happens to your freewriting if you edit it to speak directly to the reader with the pronouns ‘you’ and ‘your’?
   - Have you included clear specific examples to illustrate the advice your parents or guardians give you?

Finally, celebrate the poem you have created by reading it aloud either to your partner or to the class.
• ‘Girl’ by Jamaica Kincaid first appeared in the *New Yorker* in 1978. It might be interesting to read this and compare it to Indigo Mudbhary’s poem published in 2020 in order to discuss what has or hasn’t changed.

• You might want to discuss the nature of political poetry and question what impact is created by prefacing the poem with President William McKinley’s words ‘The mission of the United States is one of benevolent assimilation.’

• Similarly, the poem might lead to a discussion of feminism, and gender as a social construct. How would the poem be altered, for example, if the narrator was male?

• The poem also lends itself to a discussion of the relationship between parents and children and the concept of literature that deals with and comments on ‘coming of age.’

• To many, the poem may simply appear to be prose. This can lead to a discussion of the difference between prose and poetry and an attempt to define prose poetry. Ask the students to research and then write their own definition of prose poetry. You might also ask them to find more prose poems that they enjoy and can share with the class.

**Glossary**

- bindi: a coloured dot worn in the middle of the forehead
- curry muncher: offensive slang term for an Asian person
- dal: a dish made with lentils
- dal bha: a Nepalese dish made of lentils and rice
- diya: a small cup-shaped lamp made of baked clay
- Ganesha: an elephant-headed Hindu god
- Hindi: a language
- Hinduism: a religion
- mandala: a circular geometric design with spiritual meaning in Hinduism and Buddhism, often drawn with sand
- mattr paneer: a vegetarian dish
- momo: a dumpling filled with meat or vegetables
- namaste: a respectful greeting
- prayer wheel: a metal or wood cylinder that contains prayers and is regularly revolved as part of meditation or prayer
- thukpa: a Nepalese noodle soup
- tikka: a dish with small pieces of meat or vegetables marinated in a spicy sauce
Indigo Mudbhary
Brown Girl

practice your Nepali three times a day; don’t ever forget your mother tongue; always speak English outside the house or people will think you’re a terrorist; here’s how to fold dough into a samosa; here’s how to make mattr paneer; here’s how to make the perfect momo; here’s how to make the perfect momo sauce; here’s how to make a peanut butter sandwich for school so the other kids don’t make fun of you; here’s how to wrap a sari; here’s where to put your bindi; here’s how to cry during a Bollywood movie; here’s how to smile and nod when a white boy makes jokes about eating with your hands; here’s how to get good grades; always tell your relatives you want to be a doctor even if you don’t want to; never have sex or do drugs until you’re at least thirty-five; here’s how to fulfill your father’s big American dream; don’t worry about slurs because even though they say Paki here they don’t do it too often; here’s how to be an American; here’s how to be Nepalese; always be more Nepalese than American but don’t be too Nepalese or people will think you’re a fucking curry muncher and we can’t have that; here’s how to say namaste to your auntie; here’s how to say namaste to your uncle; here’s how to say namaste to someone you want to be friends with; here’s how to say namaste to someone you don’t like at all; here’s how to make thukpa; here’s how to make a mandala; always buy sand for a mandala from Michael’s because they have the best colored sand in America at least; here’s how to not seem too American when you visit your relatives; here’s how to not seem too Nepalese at school; always laugh politely when someone confuses Nepal with Naples even if it annoys you; here’s how to point out Nepal on a map for white people; here’s how to turn a prayer wheel; never give food to a monkey even if it’s cute; this is where you put your statue of ganesha when friends come over; this is how you pray to a god; this is how you pray to multiple gods; this is how you ask a god for something; this is how you light a diya; here’s how to be a good Auntie; here’s how to be a good cousin; don’t be mean to white people who say Nepal is basically India, they don’t know any better; don’t be mean to white people; don’t be mean to white men; don’t be mean to powerful white people; just don’t be mean to white people; here’s how to place an offering at a temple; here’s how to receive tikka; don’t wipe your tikka off your forehead even if it itches; stay calm during airport security screenings or else you’re essentially a terrorist; here’s how to explain the difference between hinduism and hindi to a white person but it’s better if you don’t at all; don’t dye your hair it never looks good on brown people; here’s how to whiten your skin just a little bit; here’s how to approach an elephant; here’s how to approach an elephant in the room; here’s how to make the perfect dal; here’s how to make the perfect dal bhat; always finish your food; here’s how to be a brown person in America but really you should just try to be more white because we don’t want anyone thinking that you’re some fucking terrorist.

Indigo Mudbhary is a top 15 winner in the Foyle Young Poets of the Year Award 2020. She is seventeen years old and lives in San Francisco, California.
Enter the Foyle Young Poets of the Year Award 2021

Indigo Mudbhary’s poem was a winner of the Foyle Young Poets of the Year Award 2020. Now your students are writing their own poetry they can enter the competition themselves.

The Foyle Young Poets of the Year Award is the most prestigious award for writers aged 11-17. It is an annual competition that welcomes poems on any theme and entry is completely free.

Since it began in 1998, the Award has kickstarted the career of some of today’s most exciting new voices. Past winners include Sarah Howe, Helen Mort, Jay Bernard and Caroline Bird.

Winners receive a fantastic range of prizes, including mentoring, a week-long Arvon writing course, Youth Poetry Society membership and books. The Poetry Society also continues to support winners’ development with performance, publication and internship opportunities.

To find out more, or to request free copies of the most recent winners' anthology, You Speak in Constellations, along with the beautiful competition poster for your classroom or library, simply email fyp@poetrysociety.org.uk

Be sure to enter your students’ work by 31 July 2021 at foyleyoungpoets.org