

# EDUCATOR GUIDE

## AGES 12 AND UP

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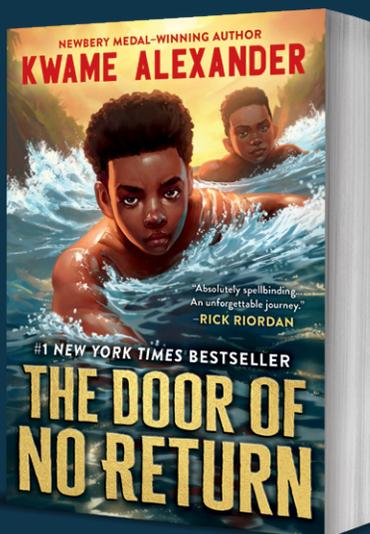
# DEAR EDUCATORS,

You are in for quite an adventure. Think of this as the first chapter in the retelling of a story you've only ever partially understood. Rarely does a book written for young people so intimately capture a uniquely individual experience within the larger narrative of a collective history. In the Americas, and around the world, people of African descent have shaped nations and changed the course of human history. Though this story begins in a world that is geographically and temporally far away from the one many of us inhabit today, readers will see themselves in its protagonist, Kofi Offin.

As you read with students, consider what you think you know about the African continent, Ghana and its people, and the traditions of the global African diaspora. Kofi's story is one to which anyone can relate. It is a journey of innocence to experience, one that begins as all of ours do, with family, tradition, and community. A wise person once said, "There is a universalism to be found in specificity," and for a long time, Chinua Achebe's seminal work *Things Fall Apart* has presented an opportunity for students to analyze the impact of colonization on civilization and the individuals within it. Through Kofi's voice, his relationships, his tribulations, and his triumphs, *The Door of No Return* continues that tradition with a story every bit as riveting and revelatory.

Along the path to *The Door of No Return*, readers will travel with Kofi as he goes further and further away from what is familiar, forcing himself to reconcile his past with his present and potential future. Through poetry that resonates, vivid imagery, and unforgettable characterization, Kwame Alexander rebuilds a world that is at once long gone and all around us. I've always seen education as a means to attain enlightenment, and an invitation to engage in social transformation if one decides to take it. However, throughout human history, education has also been used as a means of oppression and a tool for colonization. My hope is that this guide will help educators, librarians, caregivers, students, and anyone else interested in reading this work hold important conversations and engage in meaningful activities so that we can transform the way young people have traditionally engaged with books. As I write this, education systems are under unprecedented pressure. Change is necessary, even if we are slow to accept it, and I think this is a tremendous opportunity to create reparative educational spaces. Consider this your invitation to let this book guide you as you open *The Door of No Return*.

Yours in Solidarity,  
Julia E. Torres  
Librarian, Educator, Scholar



### THEMES TO WATCH FOR AND CONSIDER

- Family
- Food
- Storytelling
- Identity
- Love
- Fate vs. Free Will
- Coming of Age
- Betrayal vs. Loyalty
- Courage
- Tradition



Continued on the next page . . .



## ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

1. How does the past influence the present?
2. What makes one group of people believe they have the right to dominate another?
3. Where do traditions come from and why are they important?
4. Why are initiation ceremonies such an important part of many cultures?
5. What is the relationship between power and violence?
6. Why and how do humans dehumanize one another?
7. What is the remaining legacy of colonization and the slave trade?
8. How can poetry be used to tell a dramatic story?

## JOURNAL PROMPTS

Note: Please keep in mind best practices for trauma-informed teaching (<https://www.understood.org/en/articles/what-is-trauma-informed-teaching>) when reading and discussing Kwasi's character.

1. What have you learned about Europe or European colonization in school? What do you think about what you were taught?
2. What rivalries exist in your community? How did they start? Are they ongoing, or have they ended?
3. Who are some characters in the story you can relate to? Why? Make a comparison between people you know and those in Kofi's life. How would you cope if you were separated from them forever?
4. Do you believe that violence only perpetuates more violence? Why or why not?
5. Have you ever made a mistake and felt you couldn't make things right? Tell the story in as much detail as possible.
6. What kinds of psychological prisons do we find ourselves in? Do you think we know we are in them? Ex. Checking social media every day.
7. What does Kofi lose as he passes through the door of no return? Where do you think he is headed? Write one chapter consisting of five to seven poems detailing the next stage of Kofi's journey.

### Additional Resources:

"Poetry is the piano of literature" —Jason Reynolds Interview

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=37RPB9jg4dc>

Poetry Lessons from *The Write Thing* | Teacher Created Materials

<https://www.teachercreatedmaterials.com/kwame-poetry/>

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS AND ACTIVITIES

### CHAPTER 1

1. How did Kofi get his name? (pp. 1–2)
2. What do you think Mr. Phillip means when he says, "Queen's English, please"? Why did the students need to learn and speak it? (p. 7)
3. Are you expected to listen to the elders in your family? (p. 22)
4. What do you know about precious gems and minerals found in Africa? (p. 31)
5. Why do you think yams might be considered such a precious resource? (p. 36)
6. What do you know about Anansi the trickster spider? (p. 37)

## ACTIVITIES

### What do you know about precious gems and minerals found in Africa? (p. 31)

Using your resources, search for a map of Africa pre- and post-colonization. What do you notice about the European powers and the way they divided up the African continent? What minerals, precious gems, and other resources were they after? Choose an African country and research its resources using CultureGrams or any other database you have access to. Then create a presentation for those in your learning community that explains the 5Ws, Who, What, When, Where, and Why. How does this information change the “single story” you thought you knew about resources and wealth (or poverty) in African countries?

### What do you know about Anansi the trickster spider? (p. 37)

Read *Anansi the Spider, A Tale from the Ashanti* by Gerald McDermott, then choose one other text that has been written for young people about Anansi. Compare the two stories, then share findings with those in your learning community. What did you learn about Anansi? In which African countries and cultures has he been found? How do you think stories about him came to the Caribbean and the Americas? Consider creating your own folktale using the following resource for inspiration: <https://untoldafrica.com/mobile-apps-creator-seeks-to-preserve-african-folk-tales/>

## CHAPTER 2

1. What are treaties and why do you think they exist? What happens if they are broken? (p. 41)
2. Why do you think communities at war dehumanize one another? (p. 43)
3. Who are “the wretched of the earth”? Look up the phrase and share your findings.
4. Begin reading act 1, scene 1 of Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and stop after the line “The course of true love never did run smooth.” What do you think it means? (p. 49)

## ACTIVITIES

### What are treaties and why do you think they exist? What happens if they are broken? (p. 41)

Read about settler colonialism (<https://globalsocialtheory.org/concepts/settler-colonialism/>) and consider what colonization looked like in the area where you live. Research the history of treaties that existed between groups of people in your area and whether those treaties were kept or eventually broken. Then, through a library or archive, see if you can identify the primary source document. If that is not possible, take a look at some of these examples: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_United\\_States\\_treaties](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_United_States_treaties)

- Consider the fact that trade agreements between African nations and European powers have not always been fair, with many priceless cultural artifacts and treasures winding up in US and European museums without the permission of the societies from which they were stolen.

Option A: Read a treaty carefully and annotate it, looking for areas that reveal an unequal relationship between the two parties. Revise the language to explain how you would make things more fair.

Option B: Visit a museum’s website to find out which famous African artifacts are part of its collection. Choose one artifact and research its history. Curate a fact sheet or virtual exhibit using Google Slides or annotate an image of the artifact using ThingLink. Provide as much information as you can about the artifact’s origins and its journey to the place where it is now.

#### Additional Resources:

[https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/aftr/hd\\_aftr.htm](https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/aftr/hd_aftr.htm)

[https://trade.ec.europa.eu/doclib/docs/2022/february/tradoc\\_160053.pdf](https://trade.ec.europa.eu/doclib/docs/2022/february/tradoc_160053.pdf)

<https://artsandculture.google.com/usergallery/african-art/4ALCVZX7Rc3NKA>

## CHAPTER 3

1. Do you know of any games like Oware? Have you played them? (pp. 80–81)
2. What do you think of Nana Mosi’s words, “...we dream to heal our memory or to face the unimaginable truth. Dreams are hints from the beyond, but they can also be warnings”? (pp. 88–89)
3. Have you ever tried to talk to someone you liked, only to have the words come out all wrong? (pp. 99–100)
4. What do you think of the naming traditions Kofi describes in “Names”? Do you have any similar naming traditions? What do you notice? What do you wonder? (pp. 104–105)

## ACTIVITIES

### Do you know of any games like Oware? Have you played them? (pp. 80–81)

Read this document explaining the rules of Oware: <http://worldnomadgames.com/media/images/2018/08/30/29-oware-rules-en.pdf>. Then host an Oware tournament in your community. Don’t forget to create a bracket so you can identify the Oware champion!

### What do you think of the naming traditions Kofi describes in “Names”? Do you have any similar naming traditions? What do you notice? What do you wonder? (pp. 104–105)

Write a short story, create a picture book, or make a video explaining the history of your name. What cultural influences are present? Who, if anyone, does your name honor? Consider whether you have any shared traits with people who share your name.

## CHAPTER 4

1. What happened that wasn’t supposed to happen at the annual Kings Festival wrestling contest? Make a prediction about what you think will happen now. (p. 134)
2. What would the punishment for such a crime look like in your community? (pp. 138–139)
3. Research Henry VI, Margaret, and Richard, the Duke of York. Who were they and what was their story? What other stories did they influence? (p. 142)
4. Based on what you’ve read so far, do you think chaos and revenge will be the outcome in this story? (p. 142)
5. In your community, do you learn the history of colonization, or of Native people, or both? Why or why not? (p. 147)
6. What do you think Ebo means when he says, “The lion’s power lies in our fear of him” and “Once you carry your own water you will know the value of every drop”? (pp. 156–157)

## ACTIVITIES

### What would the punishment for such a crime look like in your community? (pp. 138–139)

Create an infographic with facts and statistics about crime and punishment in your community, or offenses and disciplinary actions in your school system. Use the following resources for additional information. What do you notice? What do you wonder?

Additional Resources:

<https://www.wcasa.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/STPPgraphic.jpg>

<https://piktochart.com/formats/infographics/>

Watch this video of a traditional wrestling championship from Ghana: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nqBtW\\_UTpUI](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nqBtW_UTpUI). Then create viewing questions for an Edpuzzle. Then, with a partner or a group, create a second video about the sport and accompanying questions. Share your Edpuzzles with one another.

### In your community, do you learn the history of colonization, or of Native people, or both? Why or why not? (p. 147)

What is the history of colonization in your area? Who were the original inhabitants of the land where you live? Do any of their people remain today? Once you identify the answers to these questions, come up with a short list of questions and conduct street interviews to ask people in your community what they know about the area’s first inhabitants. Remember to learn the correct pronunciations of peoples, names, and places. Share your findings with those in your learning community.

*Continued on the next page . . .*

Additional Resources:

<https://native-land.ca>

<https://collections.lib.uwm.edu/digital/collection/agdm/id/22910/>

**What do you think Ebo means when he says, “The lion’s power lies in our fear of him” and “Once you carry your own water you will know the value of every drop”? (pp. 156-157)**

Using your resources, choose an African proverb that resonates with you. Research its country of origin, then explain its significance in your life. Consider working with others to create an illustrated book of African proverbs. Often, humans in different geographic locations have similar thoughts. Nobody knows how or why this happens, other than the fact that our shared human experience should unite us more than it divides us. Take special note of whether there are matching proverbs that come from countries or languages in diverse locations, or different ways of communicating the same ideas. Make sure to describe any origins and connections. Use the following chart if it’s helpful:

Proverb	Country of Origin	My Interpretation
“The lion’s power lies in our fear of him.”	Ghana	Lions don’t have to show violence for us to be aware of their ability to harm humans. We fear and respect them based on reputation alone.

## CHAPTER 5

1. Why does Kwasi have a heavy heart? What do you think can be done to make things right? (p. 169)
2. What do you think was beneficial about the “new traders from other lands”? What was harmful? (p. 173)
3. Why does Kwasi want to leave Upper Kwanta? Do you think that’s the right decision? (pp. 198–199)
4. What types of initiation ceremonies exist in your society? Ex. Bat mitzvah, Confirmation. In your opinion, does initiation have to be dreadful? (p. 201)
5. Research Julius Caesar, Cassius, Brutus, and the Tiber River. How is their story similar to Kwasi’s and Kofi’s stories? (p. 208)

## ACTIVITIES

**Have you heard of the food kenkey? Do you use pepper sauce or anything like it? How are the foods you eat similar to or different from those mentioned by Kwasi and Kofi in “Conversation with Kwasi” (pgs. 66–68) or “Red Red Stew” (pp. 176–177)?**

Watch the Netflix documentary *High on the Hog* and respond to the discussion questions here: <https://share-mylesson.com/todays-news-tomorrows-lesson/fighting-erasure-and-honoring-influence-black-cuisine>.

Option A: Work with peers to create a cultural foods night for those in your community.

Option B: Make a cookbook with recipes of African diasporic people.

Option C: Make a TikTok showing yourself preparing one of the recipes from the documentary.

Additional Resources:

<https://oldwayspt.org/traditional-diets/african-heritage-diet>

## CHAPTER 6

1. What is the purpose of the initiation ceremony? (pp. 223–224)
2. What is a monsoon? Why does Alexander use this metaphor? (p. 259)
3. What do you think is the significance of Kofi’s dream in “In This Dream” (pp. 264–265)? How does it connect to the warning from Chapter 3?
4. What do you think Mr. Phillip means when he says, “There is nothing more confining than the prison we do not know we are in”? (p. 265)
5. What happens to Kwasi? How does this change Kofi’s life? (p. 277)
6. Who is trading what in “The Transaction” (pp. 307–308)? What do you think is happening to Kofi?

### ACTIVITIES

#### Who is trading what in “The Transaction” (pp. 307–308)? What do you think is happening to Kofi?

The Middle Passage is the name for a horribly violent and traumatic journey enslaved Africans took from Africa to the Americas. Some sources say that over 50% of the humans stolen from Africa and brought to the Americas did not survive the journey.

Option A: Visit the Middle Passage Project website (<https://www.middlepassageproject.org>) and create a remembrance ceremony for those in your community.

Option B: Create a virtual Google Maps tour of one of the documented arrival sites (<https://www.middlepassageproject.org/documented-sites-gallery/>) in the US or your country. Explain important landmarks and give as much detail as possible about what happened there.

## CHAPTER 7

1. What is the door of no return? (p. 347)
2. Why do you think Kofi is thinking about the enslavement of his will and his beliefs? (p. 364)
3. What do you think of Afua’s curse? (p. 384)
4. Do you agree that “a family tie is like the river”? (p. 396)
5. How does Kofi’s story end?
6. Make a prediction about where he is headed.

### ACTIVITIES

Work with your peers or on your own to create a short presentation or video about colonization in West Africa. You may find it interesting to compare with colonization in the Americas or any other part of the world. Use the following graphic organizer to get started planning. Be sure to cite your sources.

	West Africa	The Americas
Who were the groups colonized?		
Who were the groups doing the colonization?		
What areas of life were impacted? Ex. Education, language, family structure, religion, clothing.		

	West Africa	The Americas
What natural resources were exploited?		
How did the government change?		
How did land "ownership" change? (In many cultural practices belonging to People of the Global Majority <sup>1</sup> , neither land nor people can be owned.)		

<sup>1</sup> The phrase "People of the Global Majority" originates with Montessori for Social Justice.

One of the central themes from *The Door of No Return* is tradition. What are some traditions that you feel connected to? Research these traditions and create a vlog or other visual representation of where they originated. Explain their importance and how they have had a part in shaping your identity.

### LITERARY ANALYSIS ACTIVITIES

- In the poem "Consequence" (p. 57), Mr. Phillip teaches young people to read Shakespeare aloud. Many of the poems throughout *The Door of No Return* contain allusions to other works. See if you can find them, then take notes as you read about what the allusions reveal. Then write a poem (or several poems) including an **allusion** to a work you think readers will be able to identify. Remember, one of the most important things about allusions is to know your audience, or the reader(s). What contemporary works do they know that you could reference?
- The poem "Ama" (pp. 99–100) is written in **couplets** and with lines that repeat. Try a **pastiche** by imitating the poem's syntactical structure, or create a blackout poem by blacking out some of the words in "Ama."
- "Humility" (pgs. 126–127) is a story told in the form of a poem, as is the entire novel. Think of a story from your own life and tell it in the form of a poem, including **dialogue** and remembering to capture **sensory detail**.
- The poem "A History" (pp. 173–175) tells the history of an entire people through a conversation between individuals. Oral storytelling is very important in the many thousands of cultural traditions that exist on the African continent, and many that exist throughout the world. Think of a story you were told orally and try to capture it in the form of a poem. Italicize the parts that might be heard and leave your reaction in plain text.
- In the poem "Alarm" (p. 216), much of the pacing is evoked through **onomatopoeia**. Try writing a poem in which you speed the action up or slow it down using the sounds of the words.
- The poem "Sentence" (p. 252) is one long sentence. Consider the weight of each word, and write a poem that is one long sentence. What is the ironic part about the name of this poem and its subject matter? Take some words from a treaty the US has made with a group or nation and embed those words into your poem. Italicize the original words from the treaty, and if you add words of your own, consider leaving them on a line or two, alone.
- Part of the writer's craft in *The Door of No Return* revolves around developing rich characterization through poems with connections to cultural elements. Write your own series of three (or more) poems, telling a story in three stages. Try to include allusions, or onomatopoeia, experiment with sentence structure, or create a conversation between two characters.

**Additional Resources:**

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/learn/glossary-terms>

<https://poets.org/glossary>

**Further Reading:**

<https://www.lbyr.com/titles/jason-reynolds/stamped-for-kids/9780316167581/>

<https://www.lbyr.com/titles/sonja-cherry-paul/stamped-for-kids/9781549108365/>

<https://www.simonandschuster.com/books/Wake/Rebecca-Hall/9781982115197>

<https://www.littlebrown.com/titles/clint-smith/how-the-word-is-passed/9780316492935/>

<https://www.sharondraper.com/library/copper-sun>

<https://nikki-giovanni.com/works/poetry/the-100-best-african-american-poems/>

[https://openlibrary.org/books/OL5440439M/Black\\_folktales](https://openlibrary.org/books/OL5440439M/Black_folktales)

<https://www.gutenberg.org/files/66923/66923-h/66923-h.htm>

**CCS ELA Reading 8.1.2**

Determine a theme or central idea of a text and analyze its development over the course of the text, including its relationship to the characters, setting, and plot; provide an objective summary of the text.

**CCS ELA Reading 8.1.3**

Analyze how particular lines of dialogue or incidents in a story or drama propel the action, reveal aspects of a character, or provoke a decision.

**CCS ELA Reading 8.2.4**

Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone, including analogies or allusions to other texts.

**CCS ELA Reading 8.3.9**

Analyze how a modern work of fiction draws on themes, patterns of events, or character types from myths, traditional stories, or religious works such as the Bible, including describing how the material is rendered new.

**CCS ELA Writing 8.1.3**

Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, relevant descriptive details, and well-structured event sequences.

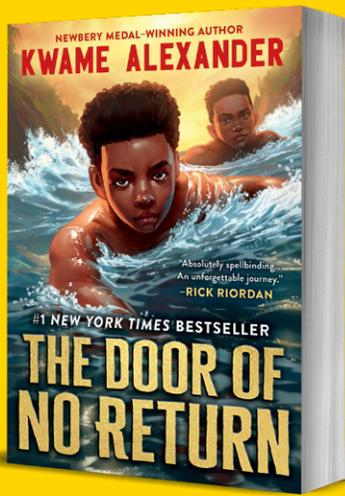
**CCS ELA Writing 8.2.6**

Use technology, including the Internet, to produce and publish writing and present the relationships between information and ideas efficiently as well as to interact and collaborate with others.

**CCS ELA Writing 8.7–9**

Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects based on focused questions, demonstrating an understanding of the subject under investigation. Gather relevant information from multiple print and digital sources, assess the credibility and accuracy of each source, and integrate the information while avoiding plagiarism. Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

This guide was prepared by Julia E. Torres, a nationally recognized veteran language arts teacher and librarian in Denver, Colorado. Julia facilitates teacher development workshops rooted in the areas of anti-racist education, equity and access in literacy and librarianship, and education as a practice of liberation. Julia's work has been featured on NPR, Al Jazeera's *The Stream*, PBS Education, KQED's *MindShift*, *Rethinking Schools*, *Learning for Justice*, and many more. She is a current Amelia Elizabeth Walden Book Award committee member, a member of both the Book Love Foundation and ALAN boards of directors, an EduColor steering committee member, an Educator Collaborative Book Ambassador, and a co-founder of #DisruptTexts. You can find her at [juliaetorres.com](http://juliaetorres.com).



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## ABOUT THE BOOK

In his village in Upper Kwanta, 11-year-old Kofi loves his family, playing Oware with his grandfather, and swimming in the river Offin. He's warned, though, to never go to the river at night. His brother tells him, *There are things about the water you do not know.* Like what? Kofi asks. *The beasts,* his brother answers.

One fateful night, the unthinkable happens, and in a flash, Kofi's world turns upside down. Kofi soon ends up in a fight for his life, and what happens next will send him on a harrowing journey across land and sea, and away from everything he loves.



## PRAISE FOR THE DOOR OF NO RETURN

- #1 *New York Times* Bestseller
- #1 Amazon Best Book of 2022
- #1 Indie Next List Pick
- Horn Book Fanfare
- Kirkus Best Book of 2022
- Barnes & Noble Best of 2022
- Publishers Weekly Best Books of 2022
- Shelf Awareness Best Books of 2022

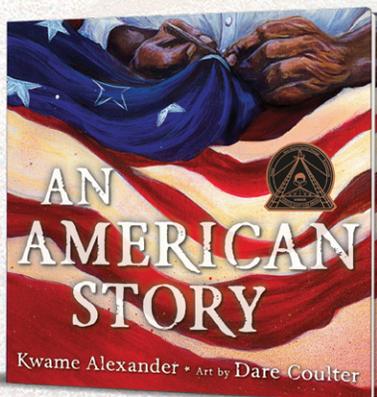
- New York Public Library Best Book of 2022
- Chicago Public Library Best Book of 2022
- Center for the Study of Multicultural Children's Literature Best Book Pick
- ★ *Bookpage* ★ *Booklist*
- ★ *The Bulletin* ★ *Horn Book* ★ *Kirkus*
- ★ *Publishers Weekly* ★ *School Library Journal*
- ★ *Shelf Awareness*

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**KWAME ALEXANDER** is the *New York Times* bestselling author of over forty books, including his Newbery Medal-winning novel *The Crossover*; *The Undefeated*, winner of the Caldecott Medal and Newbery Honor; *The Door of No Return*; and *Becoming Muhammad Ali*, which he co-wrote with James Patterson. An Emmy Award-winning Producer and the Michael I. Rudell Artistic Director of Literary Arts at Chautauqua, he invites you to visit him at [kwamealexander.com](http://kwamealexander.com) and on Instagram and X @kwamealexander.



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