

## A Curriculum Guide to

### ***Red Butterfly***

By A. L. Sonnichsen

#### **About the Book**

Kara never met her birth mother. Abandoned as an infant, she was taken in by an elderly American woman living in China. Now eleven, Kara spends most of her time in their apartment, wondering why she and Mama cannot leave the city of Tianjin and go live with Daddy in Montana. Mama tells Kara to be content with what she has . . . but what if Kara secretly wants more? Told in lyrical, moving verse, Kara’s story is one of a girl learning to trust her own voice, discovering that love and family are limitless, and finding the wings she needs to reach new heights.

#### **Prereading Discussion**

China has a long-standing policy that married couples may only have one child. For cultural and financial reasons, parents often prefer to have boys. As a result, many girls are abandoned as infants, just like Kara. After introducing this background information, discuss the following:

1. Do you think it’s fair for a government to restrict the number of children in a family? Why or why not?
2. What reasons do you think China has for their one-child policy? How would you feel if your country’s government started to implement this policy?

#### **Discussion Questions**

The questions below correlate to the following Common Core Standards: (RL.4–7.1, 2, 3, 4) (RL.5–6.5)

1. Early in the story, Kara thinks: “Sometimes I want normal. Whatever that is.” What is *normal*? Discuss the aspects of Kara’s life that don’t seem normal to her, including her hand. Why does she wish things were different? Talk about the idea of being “normal” and whether or not it’s a valuable goal to strive for.
2. Kara realizes that Mama is keeping important secrets about her identity and adoption. How does Kara figure these secrets out? Why didn’t Mama tell Kara?
3. Why does getting the Jane Austen books matter so much to Kara? Talk about the role of reading in her life.
4. Kara has mixed feelings about her sister, Jody. Describe Jody and how she is different from most Chinese people. Why does Kara find her annoying? When does Jody prove to be helpful? Discuss how you think Jody feels about Kara, based on her words and actions.

5. Mama's upset when Kara agrees to teach English to Zhao Bin, which makes Kara angry. But Kara also feels proud and excited by her "Jane Eyre bravery." Where else in the text does anger propel Kara's actions? Find specific examples of other places in the story where Kara is brave.
6. Kara calls herself "a girl caught between two worlds." Discuss what she means at this point in the story. How else is she caught between two worlds throughout the novel? Analyze whether the book's conclusion resolves this problem for her.
7. It hurts Kara that her father didn't reach for her in the hospital room to prevent the police from taking her away. Why do you think he acted the way he did? Neither Jody nor her husband helped, either. Discuss what their reasons may have been for not interfering with the police.
8. Toby turns out to be important to Kara and how she adjusts to changes in her life. Describe him in terms of background, work, appearance, and personality. Give examples that show how he treats Kara and the other children. Why is it so hard for Kara to say good-bye to him?
9. Describe Kara's relationship to Xiao Bo. What is he like and how does she interact with him? Discuss Xiao Bo's role in how Kara changes. What effect does it have on Kara when Toby sends her a photograph of Xiao Bo?
10. When she is in Florida, Kara finds this written in her mother's book: "There is no secret to happiness except learning to be content. And wearing the badge that says This Is My Unique Life and no one else can live it." How can Kara apply this statement to her own life? How does it relate to her feelings about Em and Rosalie?
11. Why does Kara think that she has very little in common with Em and Rosalie? Does this perception ever change? Compare and contrast the personalities of the three girls.
12. Kara's life in Florida is very different than her life in China with her mother. Compare the two environments in as many ways as possible, giving examples from the text.
13. Discuss the importance of a piano in the novel. What does playing a piano mean to Kara and her mother? What part does the piano play in Kara's new life in Florida?
14. Describe each of Kara's two mothers and analyze their differences. Then explore what they have in common and how they feel about each other in the Epilogue.
15. Where does the image of a butterfly occur in the story? Relate that image to the theme of change in the story and to the section titles. Why do you think the author chose *Red Butterfly* as the book's title?

### **Extension Activities**

#### **Fill in the Missing Year**

A year takes place between the end of the third section and the beginning of the Epilogue. Have students imagine some events in Kara's life during that year and write verse entries about them,

modeled on the book's style. Before starting, gather the class and make a list together of some of the similes and metaphors in the book. Ask students to incorporate similar figurative language in their verses. Have students share their writing orally or on a bulletin board.

### **Armchair Travelers**

As students read, have them take note of places mentioned in the book, located in China or elsewhere, and including rivers and monuments. Compile a list as a class and find the locations on a map. Have pairs or small groups choose one of these places to research, using and citing print and Internet sources. Have them share a multimedia presentation with the class about what they learned.

*Guide written by Kathleen Odean, a former school librarian and Chair of the 2002 Newbery Award Committee. She gives professional development workshops on books for young people and is the author of Great Books for Girls and Great Books about Things Kids Love.*

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