

Reading Group Guide for

Once Upon a Camel

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About the Book

As the last camel in Texas in the early 1900s, Zada has lived a long life rich with experiences, and she has stories to tell. Without her beloved fellow racing camel Asiye by her side, she finds companions in a family of American kestrels. That is, until a dust storm blows their little family apart, leaving Zada with two tiny kestrel chicks whose parents are missing. Zada must harness the power of her past adventures to keep the fluffy chicks safe. Using her experiences and her stories—camel racing for the Pasha of Smyrna, crossing the ocean on a boat, army missions, adventures under the stars—she takes on one of the most difficult and important adventures of her life.

Discussion Questions

1. The story's action begins with Pard and Perlita telling Zada that a mountain is eating everything and is soon going to eat them. Zada cannot comprehend this. Why do you think that is? How do you handle things you don't understand? In truth, the mountain is a great sand-and-dust storm coming their way. How does knowing this change your perspective of the situation? How does Zada react?
2. The author explains how a camel has adapted to the desert, and how American kestrels are built for flight. All animals have adaptations: evolved physical and behavioral traits that help their species survive and thrive. Can you think of any other examples of this? What about cultural adaptations? Are there ways in which groups or individuals adapt for their own safety, comfort, or survival?
3. As Zada tries to outrun the storm, she wishes she could fly. This is not the first time in her life she has wished this. Why do you think she has continued to yearn for this ability? Thinking about your life and the environment in which you live, what other animal adaptations would come in handy for you? Explain your answers.
4. As Zada worries about Pecos de Leon, she reflects on the fact that she and the mountain lion have "both traveled a lot of miles and traversed a lot of country. That was worth something." How can having many experiences help you? Do you think it's important to experience situations similar to and different from your own life? What might you learn from someone who has lived a long time and done many things? Explain your answers.
5. As Zada moves through the storm carrying the chicks, an enormous old tree comes down behind them. "The wind had yanked it up by its roots. A hundred years, that old tree had stood there, watching over the creek, keeping generations of bird families safe. Now it lay in a heap on its side." How does the falling tree make Zada feel? How did it make you feel? Do you think generations of bird families will be able to find a new home?

6. As the storm spins Perlita and Pard around, they call out, “Keep them safe!” This is described as the “universal prayer” of parents. What does it mean for something to be universal? Do you have knowledge, ideas, or habits that are universal?

7. Zada’s and Asiyeh’s motto is “En parlak yıldız ol.” This means “Become the brightest star.” What do they mean by this? How do you see them striving to do this throughout the story?

8. When Zada and Asiyeh are young and Teodor is grooming them to become racing camels, he visits the metalsmith for something special to adorn the camels' bridles. The smith gives him a single sheet of gold and asks him to take a walk and note the things that bring him joy. What brings you joy? How have you come to realize this? Do you think we notice joy as we feel it, or do we realize later that we had a moment of joy? Explain your answers.

9. The three basic states of matter are solids, liquids, and gases. Water can take the form of all three of these in ice, flowing water, and steam. This makes it a very powerful substance. When is water important in this story? Does it appear to be powerful? Can you think of other substances that can exist as solids, liquids, and/or gases?

10. A haboob is a sandstorm with very strong winds. What role does a haboob play in the story? How do the animals feel about it? Have you ever experienced an extreme weather event? Can you ever prepare for a situation like this?

11. According to the book, the most basic definition of a miracle is this: a good thing happens at the exact moment it is needed. Do you agree or disagree with this definition? Do you think all miracles are this simple? If not, how do you define a miracle?

12. When Pecos de Leon is young, Zada protects him from wild ponies. In that moment, they strike an unspoken bargain in which the cat will not eat the camel. What does this say about their personalities? Do you think these sorts of impulsive, unspoken bargains last forever? Should Zada be afraid of Pecos de Leon? Explain your answers.

13. While Zada and the chicks are sheltering in a cave, they encounter the old mountain lion. Zada is certain the old cat would love to eat the chicks, so she decides to tell him a story. Her story reminds Pecos of what Zada did for him; however, in this telling, she makes him a hero. Why do you think this version of the story lessens the dangerous situation? How does it affect Pecos?

14. As Zada travels with the chicks, they begin to ask questions she can’t answer about when they will arrive, where they are going, and how much longer they have to travel. She asks them if they are ready for a story instead, noting, “And not for the first time, it seemed that responding to a question with a question was a good answer.” What does she mean by this? Have you ever responded to a question with a question? When might that be helpful, and when might it make things difficult?

15. As they finally near the mission, Zada sniffs the air and smells water. What does water smell like? What descriptive words explain the smell and taste of water?

16. While Pard is freeing Perlita from the tumbleweed, Perlita thinks about her family: Beulah, Wims, and Zada. Beulah and Wims are her babies, but birds and camels aren’t related by blood. Instead, Zada is the kestrels’ chosen family, and she feels the same way about them. The animals find a family in one

another despite their differences. Can people do this too? What makes someone family? Explain your answers.

17. Throughout much of the story, Zada doesn't know where Pard and Perlita are. She refers to this as "the biggest mystery in that moment." Of course, this mystery is one that fills her with worry and fear. Do you think life's mysteries are sometimes too difficult to think about? What does she mean by "in that moment"? Will there be other mysteries for Zada? Explain your answers.

18. Read the description of the Pasha's grand home and grounds, and then read the last paragraph in chapter 52 that begins with "Hey now, hey now." What similarities do you find in these descriptions? Do you think there are many ways to be rich, and many versions of beauty and splendor?

19. Zada gives a description of witnessing Saint Elmo's Fire. This is a real weather phenomenon that happens during storms. It is a blue glow that appears between pointy objects during storms; this is due to extra electrons in the ground creating a powerful electric field that can break the air down into plasma. This rare phenomenon can be scientifically explained and understood, but does not seem so easily defined when witnessed. Have you ever seen anything natural that seemed magical or unreal, or was difficult to describe in words? Like Zada, do you remember that moment with the same wonder you felt when you first experienced it?

20. Stories sustained Zada when she lost Asiye, and they sustained the birds during their time of fear and hardship, including protecting them from Pecos de Leon. What makes a story powerful enough to sustain and protect? Which kinds of stories do you find to be most powerful?

21. At the end of the book, Zada begins a new story that starts with "Once upon a time, there was a pair of baby kestrels." Throughout the book, Zada gives her stories to others, including Pecos and the chicks. Why do you think she does this? What do stories mean to her? Why does she start a new story?

22. In the book, there are illustrations of the characters and their environment sprinkled throughout the pages. What role does the artwork play in this story? How does the art enhance the reader's experience, and how do these illustrations add to the reader's understanding and connection to Zada, her story, and her friends?

Extension Activities

Art and Imagery

1. As a class, read aloud the passages that describe the Pasha's mansion.

"First, they'd see the imposing red dome of the mosque, which sat right in the middle of a huge walled complex. Four minarets that reached into the sky graced the compass points—north, south, east, west. Surrounding the whole affair was a tall stone wall with round watchtowers on the corners."

"Outside the mansion's walls, the pasha's orchards were filled with apricots and figs and sumac. Their sweet and spicy aromas intertwined with the salty fragrance of the sea, and altogether—sweetsy, spicy, salty—those luscious smells wafted up and down the streets. They permeated all of the buildings, including—ta-da!--the camel nursery, which sat behind the mansion and opened onto a large field."

After reading aloud, ask students to sketch the image their mind forms without looking up any unfamiliar words or terms or discussing the scene as a class. Give them an allotted time to sketch. Then allow them to look things up or discuss the imagery in the passage, and give them time to revisit their sketches. Use these questions for a follow-up discussion: How did the sketches change? Do we sometimes form images in our mind without fully understanding the item or concept we're imagining? How do the images in our mind affect our understanding of particular places?

Descriptive Writing

Throughout the book, the author uses words to create vivid images. Review descriptive passages from the book with your students. Tell them that a strong descriptive passage uses words to evoke multiple senses as well as emotions. Sensory details in shorter form also appear throughout the book. Below are four exercises to use with your students to practice descriptive writing.

1. Discuss sensory experiences and how we can have a sense of taste even when we're not eating, and how touch does not only happen through hands. Then ask students to take a moment to think about where they are right now. Have them note the day, date, weather, time, and location before finishing these sentences:

Right now I . . .

See _____

Feel _____

Smell _____

Hear _____

Taste _____

2. Ask students to choose a descriptive passage from the book. You may want to offer parameters regarding the length of the passage and how many senses are detailed. After students have selected their passages, ask them to write two paragraphs. In the first paragraph, they will explain what's actually happening in the passage. In the second paragraph, they will explain how the figurative language and descriptive writing make the reader feel as if they are having the experience themselves.

3. Distribute pictures from magazines, postcards of locations, or pastoral works of art that are rich in sensorial imagery. Ask students to imagine themselves in the scene and write a paragraph that describes their experience and includes descriptions of all five senses. What do they see? What do they feel? What does it smell like? What do they hear? What do they taste?

4. Ask students to write a narrative paragraph that uses details and the five senses to transport their readers to the location or experience they are describing. Some suggestions are:

An outdoor experience.

A meal.

A celebratory or holiday event.

A storm.
An emergency situation.
The first time you saw a certain place.

Figurative Language

1. Explain to students that alliteration is a literary device in which initial consonant sounds of successive or closely related words are repeated. This book contains tons of alliteration. Some examples include “arches and arroyos,” “moving mountain,” “posh Pasha palace,” “Pasha’s princess turns a little pale,” and “best beloved babies.”

Using game tiles with letters or small pieces of paper with letters written on them, allow each student to draw a letter and write five alliterative sentences using that letter. Each sentence must contain a subject, verb, and describing words. Once everyone has written their sentences, each person should share their best alliterative sentence with the class.

2. Discuss the following types of figurative language, and ask students for examples of each type.

Idiom - A common phrase people use that has a commonly accepted meaning that’s different from what the words literally say.

Personification - Human characteristics that are assigned to nonhuman objects, animals, or ideas.

Simile - A comparison of two things, using the words "like" or "as."

Metaphor - A comparison of two things without using the words "like" or "as."

Hyperbole - An extravagant exaggeration that emphasizes a point.

Imagery - Engages any of the five senses and evokes a mental image.

Ask students to find an example of each of these six types of figurative language in the story. After they find examples, they can give the literal and figurative meaning of the words. Then they’ll create their own examples of figurative language that relate to the story. These can be organized into a table, which can be done in a document or poster form. This table can include page numbers, quotes, literal and figurative meanings, and student’s own example of that type of figurative language.

Stories over Time

1. Zada has had a long life filled with experiences and relationships. Her story in the book moves in time as she shares memories while continuing present experiences. Ask students to create a time line for Zada. There are online resources such as Adobe (<https://www.adobe.com/express/create/timeline>) and TimeGraphics (<https://time.graphics>) to help with organization. They may also do this in a slideshow format. Have them include dates, locations, and important experiences.

Exploring Words

1. Share with your students that verbing, or denominalization, is the act of converting another part of speech into a verb; this is usually done with nouns. The word “fledged” is most commonly an adjective that means “having wing feathers large enough for flight.” Fledged is also used as a verb, as in “the act of acquiring feathers necessary for flight.” In the book, we learn that Beulah and Wims have not fledged yet.

Like fledged, there are other words commonly used as verbs, such as “tabled,” “messed,” and “authored.” We have seen changes in social media create new verbs like “friended,” “Googled,” or “Skyped.” Even if they sound funny, there are some words commonly used because they effectively communicate what we want to say. In some of the questions and exercises included in this guide, students are sciencing, and in a few years they will be adulting. Lead a class discussion about these ideas, posing these questions: Are there words that you turn into verbs? If not, can you think of some?

Ask students to make a list of ten nouns that they can turn into verbs, and have them write a sentence for each one. Provide class time for sharing lists and some of the sentences.

2. Beulah licks Wims, and he is upset. He is described as being “incensed. Put out. Piqued.” Discuss with students how this alliterative and repetitive approach to communicating his feelings is an effective way to convey the strength of those feelings as well as a lyrical way to engage the reader.

Ask students to choose one emotion and make a list of synonyms or short expressions that express that emotion. Next, ask them to express the emotion in as many ways as possible in short sentences. Finally, ask them to use their list and sentences to write a paragraph that first explains why their character is feeling that emotion and that then elaborates on how they are feeling in as many ways and with as much creative imagery as possible.

3. Chapter twenty begins with a short list of pairs, or things that go together. Review this page as a class and then ask students to create their own lists of pairs. Do this as a fast-write exercise. Give them sixty seconds to create as many pairs as possible. After time is up, share and discuss as a class.

STEM Exploration

Like humans and all other members of the animal kingdom, camels and kestrels have been classified based on shared characteristics. Looking at the list below, you can see that camels, kestrels, and humans are classified together in their kingdom and phylum, but begin to diverge at class groups and fully diverge in orders. Ask students to review the table and have a class discussion about classification. Give students the opportunity to consult some sources, if necessary, to answer their questions.

Camels: Animalia (Kingdom) / Chordata (Phylum) / Mammalia (Class) / Artiodactyla (Order) / Camelidae (Family) / Camelus (Genus) / Dromedarius or Bactrianus (Species)

American Kestrels: Animalia (Kingdom) / Chordata (Phylum) / Aves (Class) / Falconiformes (Order) / Falconidae (Family) / Falco (Genus) / F. tinnunculus (Species)

Humans: Animalia (Kingdom) / Chordata (Phylum) / Mammalia (Class) / Primates (Order) / Hominidae (Family) / Homo (Genus) / Homo Sapiens (Species)

After review and discussion, ask students to write short answers to the following questions:

Why do we classify animals and other living things in this manner?

What characteristics do all living things have in common?

Do camels, kestrels, and humans have the same basic needs?

Do humans understand more about animals than animals know about humans?

Even though humans and camels are both mammals, do humans or camels have more in common with kestrels than they do with one another?

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