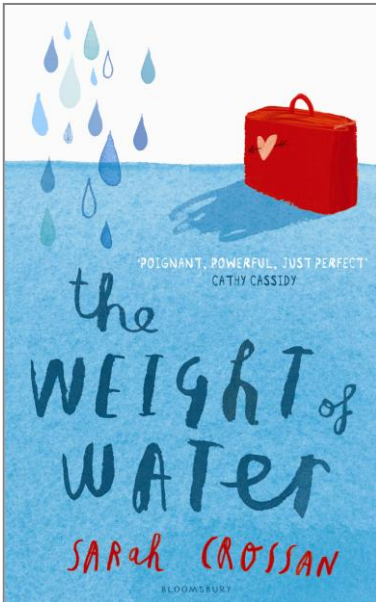


BLOOMSBURY

Teachers' Guide to *The Weight of Water* by Sarah Crossan



In Brief

First love, friendship and quiet courage combine in this spare and beautiful story that will leave you sad, happy and wanting more from this fantastic new voice in children's fiction

In Detail

Armed with a suitcase and an old laundry bag filled with clothes, Kasienska and her mother head for England. Life is lonely for Kasienska. At home her mother's heart is breaking and at school friends are scarce. But when someone special swims into her life, Kasienska learns that there might be more than one way for her to stay afloat. *The Weight of Water* is a startlingly original piece of fiction; most simply a brilliant coming of age

story, it also tackles the alienation experienced by many young immigrants. Moving, unsentimental and utterly page-turning, we meet and share the experiences of a remarkable girl who shows us how quiet courage prevails.



About the Author

Sarah Crossan is Irish. She graduated with a degree in Philosophy and Literature before training as an English and Drama teacher at Cambridge University and has been working to promote creative writing in schools since. She teaches English at a small private school near New York. She completed her Masters in Creative Writing at the University of Warwick in 2003 and in 2010 received an Edward Albee Fellowship for writing.

The Weight of Water, published by Bloomsbury in January 2012, is a spare and beautiful story about leaving your home to start life in another country.

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Pre-reading Activities

- ✓ As a class, look together at the jacket design for the novel and ask students to guess what some of the themes from the novel might be. Draw attention to the suitcase, the raindrops/tears as well as the symbolism of the colours used.

- ✓ Ask students to flick through the book. What is unusual about the way in which the novel has been written? How does this make them feel? Some students may be nervous about poetry. Why do they feel this way? Encourage students to bring in poems from home and share them with the class or a small group. Alternatively, ask students to bring in songs which could be played aloud. What is it about the way in which poetry/verse is written that makes it different to prose? What makes it fun? What makes it frightening?

- ✓ Immigration can be a contentious issue and there may be students with very different views in the class. Before reading, ask students to write a short paragraph on they think it would feel like being an immigrant and having to join a new school in a new country with new people. Keep these paragraphs and ask students to add to them once the class has finished reading *The Weight of Water*. If there are immigrants in the class, they might write about their own experience.

Discussion Questions

1. In 'First Day', Kasienska describes her first day at school. Does she have a positive experience? What is Mrs Warren's attitude? For what reasons might Mama caution Kasienska not to contradict Mrs Warren? Describe your first day at a new school? What were your feelings and fears? What is Kasienska feeling?

2. Reread 'Pale', 'What I Try Not to Hear', 'Disco', and 'Mistaken'. Kasienska is at school with other children, but she is unable to connect with others. Why?

3. Mama and Kasienska are in Coventry to find Tata. What is Kasienska's attitude to finding her father? What is Mama's attitude? How would you describe Kasienska's home life in Poland before and after her father leaves? Look especially at 'Before England', 'Road Atlas', 'The Odyssey', and 'Wanted'.

4. Why does Kasienska love to swim? How does it make her feel? Can you think of something you do that makes you feel completely yourself?

5. William is the one person Kasienska feels connected to. What is it about William and the way he treats Kasienska that she likes? Is William a sympathetic character? Do you like him?
6. Clair is a popular student. Why? Would she be popular in your school? Why does Clair eventually shun Kasienska after initially befriending her? Can what Clair is doing to Kasienska be described as bullying? Does bullying have to be physical? Describe a time when you bullied someone else: Why did you do this? Alternatively, describe a time you were bullied: How did this make you feel?
7. Kasienska seems to believe that girls and boys fight and bully in different ways. Do you agree? Describe some of your experiences.
8. Do you agree with Kasienska in believing that teachers try to ignore bullying because they do not have time to deal with it?
9. When Kasienska finds her father, she does not tell her mother immediately. Why not? What would you have done?
10. Sylvia Plath was a very famous poet who committed suicide. Kasienska reads Plath's novel and begins to wonder whether she could do this too. Why is Kasienska thinking this way? Do you think she really is suicidal?
11. Why does Kasienska feel guilty about her relationship with Melanie and Briony? Have you ever experienced a time when you were friendly with someone even though you believed this friendship could hurt someone else? Was the friendship worth it? Is Mama justified in being so angry with Kasienska?
12. A friendship between a young Polish girl and an older Kenyan man may seem like an unlikely one. What is the basis for the bond between Kasienska and Kanoro?
13. Reread the poem 'Split'. Why is it difficult for Kasienska to find herself? In what ways are you different people with/for different people? Is this an untruthful way to live or a natural way in which we communicate and relate to different people in our lives? Describe the different facets of your personality and how they relate to others.

14. Kasienska decides to disobey Mama and travel to London for the swimming competition. Is she right to do this? Can it ever be right to disobey one's parents/teachers/guardians? Give examples of situations when disobedience would be the best course of action?
15. Clair eventually stops bullying Kasienska. Can you explain this? Does Kasienska play a part in defeating her?
16. By the end of the novel, it is clear that Mama and Tata will never be reunited. Does this make it a sad novel? Did you expect this ending? How satisfied were you with the ending?
17. *The Weight of Water* is written in verse. Describe your experience of reading this kind of novel. Did you find that the writing style made it more or less affecting than if it had been written as non-versed prose? Would you read other novels in verse?

Beyond the Book

Cross-Curricular Activities

English

- ✓ *The Weight of Water* is a novel about a difficult time in a young girl's life and how she overcomes it. Ask students to think of a difficult time in their own lives and write poems responding to their feelings. If students feel hesitant about beginning, they might find it helpful to adopt Kasienska's voice or a few of her words.
- ✓ Ask students to choose their favourite poems from the novel and analyse the way in which Crossan has used poetic devices in these poems as well as layout. Students can look for alliteration, rhyme or half-rhyme, symbolism, repetition and rhythm.
- ✓ Help students to gather poetry from Eastern Europe and spend some time listening to this poetry being read aloud.

Art

- ✓ After analysing the novel's book jacket, ask students to design book jackets to illustrate their own life stories by using appropriate symbols and colours. If there is enough trust within the class, students might share their covers and allow others to guess the stories behind these pictures. Display the covers.

Citizenship and PSHE

- ✓ Begin a discussion on bullying, focusing on the ways in which boys and girls often find different ways to hurt one another. A good resource would be Rachel Simmons's excellent non-fiction book *Odd Girl Out*.

Music

- ✓ Mama is an opera singer. Play some songs from *Madame Butterfly* or another opera. Ask students to devise a soundtrack to go with *The Weight of Water* using opera or any other types of music.
- ✓ Ask students to write an original song to accompany the novel, using some of the words in the poems as lyrics.

Food Technology

- ✓ Celebrate difference by having a World Party. Have students dress in their national costumes and bring in traditional foods from home for others to taste. Help students cook some of the Polish dishes mentioned in the book.

History

- ✓ Kasienka loves Kenilworth Castle. Ask students to research the history of the castle, including Queen Elizabeth I's visit there 400 years ago.

Further Reading

- *Hate That Cat* by Sharon Creech
- Books by Jacqueline Wilson
- *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* by Mark Haddon
- *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* by John Boyne
- *Cloud Busting* by Malorie Blackman