ABOUT THE BOOK

Olivia had always heard stories about Algeria from her maternal grandmother, a Black Foot (a “Pied-Noir,” the French term for Christian and Jewish settlers of French Algeria who emigrated to France after the Algerian War of Independence). After her grandmother’s death, Olivia found some of her grandmother’s journals and letters describing her homeland. Now, ten years later, she resolves to travel to Algeria and experience the country for herself; she arrives alone, with her grandmother’s postcards and letters in tow, and a single phone number in her pocket of an Algerian, Djaffar, who will act as her guide. Olivia’s quest to understand her origins will bring her to face questions about heritage, history, shame, friendship, memory, nostalgia, fantasy, the nature of exile, and our unending quest to understand who we are and where we come from.

RATIONALE FOR USING ALGERIA IS BEAUTIFUL LIKE AMERICA FOR SOCIAL STUDIES GRADES 9-12

*Algeria is Beautiful Like America* is a fascinating journey of a search for identity from the point of view of Olivia Burton who was born in France of a French settler family from Algeria. Her family were known as Pieds-Noirs (“Black Feet”); this is the name for French settlers and those born to French settlers in Algeria. This engaging English translation of the original French story discusses several generations of Olivia’s family from 1898 to 1962 and their lives in Algeria. She explores her family's roots in France and Algeria, their decision to flee Algeria for France, and the remarkable hospitality she received during her search of family identity in Algeria four decades after her grandparents and mother left Algeria for France. This engaging story prompts questions about identity and cultural place, who decides who belongs where, and intriguing intercultural comparisons between the frontier expanse of Algeria beyond the Mediterranean coastline with the frontier expanse of the inland American West during colonization.
DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Common Core Connections for Discussion Questions
These questions correlate to Common Core Literacy in History/Social Studies Standards for Key Ideas and Details RH.9-10.3, RH.11-12.2; Craft and Structure RH.9-10.5, RH.9-10.6; Integration of Knowledge and Ideas RH.9-10.8.

1. On pages 10-15, Olivia discusses her French family’s place in Algeria. Why do you think she captions a photo on page 13 with the following question: “In Corneille, in the Aurès, 1949. My mother as a child, dressed as a woman of the East. What did the goodly Algerian woman beside her think?”

2. Why do you think people created pejorative terms and stereotypes in Algeria? Olivia brings this up on page 15.

3. Who were the Pied-Noir (“Black Foot”)—French-born Algerians—and what was their role and identity?

4. Why does Olivia’s grandmother say: “My life simply ended in 1962?” (page 15). She does not mean that literally, but she is referring to something symbolic.

5. Why do you think Olivia mentions hearing of “heroic stories” on page 16 of French colonists who wanted to maintain French Algeria and Algerian Arab pro-independence individuals helping each other?

6. Discuss the section that begins where Olivia says: “It was on one of those nights that I started feeling like the daughter of a Black Foot” (p. 21-37). How was Olivia’s self-awareness of her family’s history developing?

7. Discuss the analogy on page 31 in which Olivia makes a cross-cultural comparison between French colonists in Algeria and an indigenous group in North America.

8. Why was Olivia’s grandmother so emotionally attached to her town in Algeria? (see story from beginning to page 39)

9. Discuss what Catholic priest Leclerc says on page 54: “I have no desire to go back to the insane individualism in Europe. I’ve found common ground with Islam here, where sharing and helping your neighbor are respected.” Does this surprise you? What are the implications about European culture today that he is criticizing?

10. Why does Djaffar refer to the Museum of Martyrs as “propaganda”? (p. 61)

11. Why do you think Djaffar says the following to Olivia: “You can’t just show up out of nowhere out there [the Aurès]. You have to know someone. That’s how things work around here” (p. 63). Also, in reference to this, discuss Olivia’s grandmother’s letter excerpted on page 65 where she refers to herself as a pioneer.
DISCUSSION QUESTIONS CONTINUED...

12. How do the photos and imagery on pages 72-75 begin to support the theme that “Algeria is beautiful like America”?

13. Why did Olivia’s ancestors (great grandparents) move from France to Algeria around 1900? (see pages 76-77 to begin conversation)

14. On page 79, Olivia’s grandfather says that he refused to leave “his” (she uses quotes) country Algeria despite the war in Algeria, though he does ultimately leave for France with his family for safety. Do you think Algeria was his country? (Note: On page 82, Djaffar says, “Black Foots are Algerians.”)

15. Who were the Algerian independence movement? What did they want? And why were they attacking the French settlers in the 1950s and 1960s?

16. Djaffar says that the Pied-Noir (Black Foot) identity is a “made-up identity. It covers a lot of very different experiences” (p. 81). What does he mean by this?

17. Djaffar says, “But really, you couldn’t be pro-independence if you were a colonist. Unless you had some exceptional political consciousness, it was unthinkable” (p. 116). Discuss this in the context of the following questions: What is a colonial mentality? Were settlers, including their children born and raised in Algeria, legitimate residents? What are the implications of yes or no to that question?

18. Olivia says on page 138, “there was at least one thing that no one misrepresented or idealized: the beauty of this part of the world.” What was idealized?

19. Discuss Olivia’s questions that she philosophically poses on page 138 referencing her French settler grandparents from Algeria: “When you’re fifty years old, how do you accept the fact that you’ve been on the wrong side of history? That your entire life has been built on a deep injustice?” Also, do you agree with Olivia’s assessment of her grandparents as Pied-Noir?

20. On page 151, Olivia is talking to an individual in her family’s former Algiers apartment about why she is visiting Algeria to see where her family came from, and the individual replies: “I understand perfectly. We have a proverb that says: ‘When you don’t know where you’re going, take a look at where you came from.’” Consider this as you answer the question: Why is studying or exploring history important for individuals?

21. Consider the statement by the native Algerian woman in Olivia’s family’s former apartment: “It was the war. It made everyone crazy. Neither you nor I are to blame for any of it. We must simply move on. And you were right to come back” (p. 153). How is her understanding of history informing her conciliatory and magnanimous acceptance of Olivia?

22. What is the connection that Olivia is making between Algeria and America? (reference pages 31 and 165).