

A TEACHERS' GUIDE TO THE BREAK

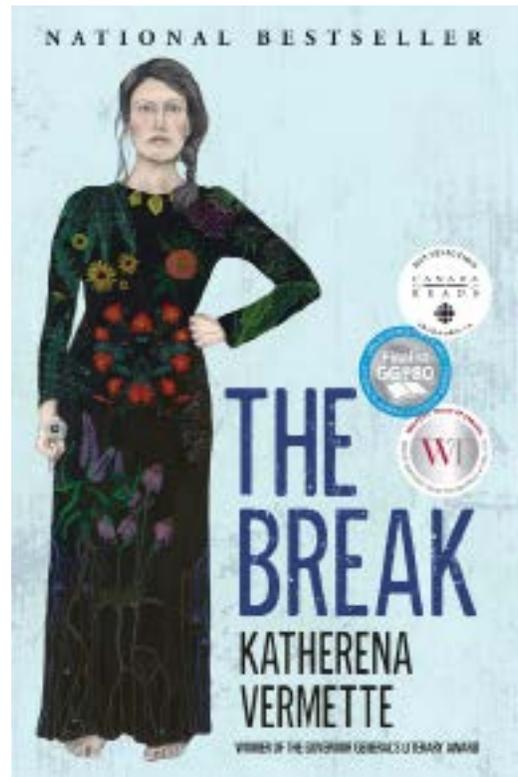
Written by Katherena Vermette

ABOUT THE BOOK

When Stella, a young Métis mother, looks out her window one evening and spots someone in trouble on the Break — a barren field on an isolated strip of land outside her house — she calls the police to alert them to a possible crime.

In a series of shifting narratives, people who are connected, both directly and indirectly, with the victim — police, family and friends — tell their personal stories leading up to that fateful night. Lou, a social worker, grapples with the departure of her live-in boyfriend. Cheryl, an artist, mourns the premature death of her sister Rain. Paulina, a single mother, struggles to trust her new partner. Phoenix, a homeless teenager, is released from a youth detention center. Officer Scott, a Métis policeman, feels caught between two worlds as he patrols the city. Through their various perspectives a larger, more comprehensive story about lives of the residents in this North End neighborhood are exposed.

A powerful intergenerational family saga.



The Break

Written by Katherena Vermette
FICTION

9781487001117

Trade paperback

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Katherena Vermette is a Métis writer from Treaty One territory, the heart of the Métis nation, Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada. Her first book, *North End Love Songs*, won the Governor General's Literary Award for Poetry. Her NFB short documentary, *this river*, won the Coup de Coeur at the Montreal First Peoples Festival and a Canadian Screen Award. Her first novel, *The Break*, is the winner of three Manitoba Book Awards and the Amazon.ca First Novel Award, and it was a finalist for the Governor General's Literary Award for Fiction, the Rogers Writers' Trust Fiction Prize, and CBC Canada Reads. She has also recently published *river woman*, a second work of poetry.



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IDEAS FOR GETTING STARTED

- Have students investigate the Métis Nation, its origins, its history and current information. Inquiry questions can include: Who are the Métis people? What is the ancestry of someone with Métis status?
- Ask students to research the Red River Resistance. Compare the location of the resistance including locations of important events and battles, to a current map of Winnipeg and the extended Red River area. Use the map to locate “the Break” in current-day Winnipeg.
- Have students investigate the Métis Nation and residential schools. Inquiry questions can include: How many Métis children is it estimated went to residential and day schools? From where were most Métis rounded up by Indian agents?
- Explore residential schools in Canada with students; investigate residential school syndrome in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 5th edition (DSM-5). (This is the source that most psychologists/psychiatrists in North America use to define, identify and diagnose mental health disorders.)

Who Are the Métis?

The Métis emerged as a distinct people or nation in the historic Northwest during the course of the 18th and 19th centuries. This area is known as the “historic Métis Nation Homeland,” which includes the three Prairie Provinces and extends into Ontario, British Columbia, the Northwest Territories and the northern United States. This historic Métis Nation had recognized Aboriginal title, which the Government of Canada attempted to extinguish through the issuance of “scrip” and land grants in the late 19th and 20th centuries.

The Métis National Council consequently adopted the following definition of “Métis” in 2002:

“Métis” means a person who self-identifies as Métis, is distinct from other Aboriginal peoples, is of historic Métis Nation Ancestry and who is accepted by the Métis Nation.”

<http://www.metisnation.ca/index.php/who-are-the-metis/citizenship>

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IDEAS FOR GETTING STARTED

- With the class, investigate maps that show the First Nations who occupied Winnipeg and surrounding areas prior to settler contact. Further the investigation by examining the reserves and treaties that were created by the Canadian government after contact. Compare with modern-day Winnipeg and explore the ideas of loss of land, home, culture, language and agency.
- Have students research Anishnaabe, Inninew and Métis languages and culture. Look for familiar words and activities referred to in the text, such as Kookum (Kookoo), Moshoom, sweat lodges, summer homes and trapping.
- Have students research the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (MMIWG). Inquiry questions can include: Why is it necessary? What prompted the government to finally agree to begin? What actions have been taken to date? Who are the MMIWG in Canada?

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IDEAS FOR DISCUSSION OR WRITING EXPLORATION

Chapter 1

- Where is the story set? What is important about where Stella lives, on the edge of “the Break”?
- Why is Stella angry after speaking with the cops as they begin to leave?
- What does it mean on page 14, when it says, “She hears them half laugh politely, the way white men say goodbye, and it only makes her more furious”?
- Why do you think the police and Stella’s husband are dismissive of her story?

- *The story is set in the city of Winnipeg in various neighborhoods. It is winter. Stella represents a character who has seemingly “escaped” the cycle of poverty and violence. Her living on the Break represents how she sits on the edge between two worlds: Métis and white.*
- *Stella is angry because the cops dismiss her story; she believes this is because she is Indigenous and they think she is hysterical. It is an example of the constant racism that is prevalent in the novel and city.*
- *Stella’s observation and emotion lay bare the void between settler and Indigenous people in the city, even between her and her spouse.*
- *The police and her husband’s dismissiveness are further examples of the inherent racism and sexism against Indigenous women. Not only are they dismissed for being Indigenous, but they are also dismissed as being “hysterical” because of their sex and femininity.*

Chapter 2

- Describe Emily’s character at this point in the book.
- Why is it important to her that she attend this party?

- *Emily is a typical 13-year-old who is caught in between being a child and a woman. She wants to be like “other girls” and go to parties, like boys and be a teenager.*
- *The party is important because she wants to appear grown-up and attractive to Clayton, a boy she likes from school.*

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IDEAS FOR DISCUSSION OR WRITING EXPLORATION

Chapter 3

- Where has Phoenix escaped from?
- Why does she choose to go to her uncle's house and how is she received?
- Describe Phoenix's character at this point in the book.

- *Phoenix was in a residential treatment and incarceration center for youth. She was there because of previous crimes and is a foster ward.*
- *Her uncle is family. Regardless of his violent past, he is the only solid connection she still has to family. He also has community status because of his leadership in a gang. Phoenix is not welcomed by her uncle because he knows the authorities will come looking for her there and they may look closely at his illicit activities. She is once again rejected and unwanted.*
- *Phoenix is an angry, damaged teenager. She has been in and out of foster homes, feels unloved and uncared for and has turned to violence and substance use in order to cover her feelings of rejection and her belief that society has shunned her. She still has residual memories of the past and her sisters that she uses for protection at times.*

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IDEAS FOR DISCUSSION OR WRITING EXPLORATION

Chapter 4

- Why does Lou see Gabe's leaving as her fault?
- Why is it important to Lou that Gabe tell her he doesn't drink or smoke?
- Why does Lou think Gabe went back "home"? Why does Rita?

- *Lou blames herself for the men in her life not staying. This is directly related to her self-esteem, her past and the events of violence and abandonment that she and her family have experienced.*
- *For Lou, very few men in her life don't drink or smoke. Her experience with men, particularly Indigenous men, is that they drink and smoke and leave. It is a sign of systemic violence and the legacy that colonialism and residential schools have left in the community.*
- *Lou wants to believe that Gabe left in order to get back in touch with his home and self, that the "rez" provides some connection for him. Rita believes he has gone back because he is unfaithful. The truth is somewhere in between; however, he still represents "good" to Lou because he is the lesser of two evils.*

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IDEAS FOR DISCUSSION OR WRITING EXPLORATION

Chapter 5

- How do Cheryl's dreams bring Rain back? Why does she wish to hang on to them?
- Who are Cheryl's daughters? How are they connected to the story at this point?
- Stella is brought up in this chapter. How is she related to Cheryl?
- Why does Rita say that the full moon is a time to drum?

- *Cheryl's dreams are of a time when she lived in the bush with her partner, Joe. When she was there, she was connected to nature, culture and family. Rain loved to visit there, but the chase at the end demonstrates how Cheryl has lost Rain and how she couldn't save her.*
- *Cheryl's daughters are Louisa (Lou) and Paulina (Paul). Paul's daughter is Emily, the protagonist of the story and the victim of a violent crime. Lou is her aunt and a social worker.*
- *Stella is Cheryl's niece, her sister Rain's daughter.*
- *In Anishnaabe, Métis and Inninew cultures, the full moon is a very powerful symbol that should be celebrated. Women celebrate and sing with the hand drum in Anishnaabe culture.*

Chapter 6

- How does the "party" go very wrong?

- *It's a gang party with drugs and alcohol. Clayton's ex-girlfriend, Phoenix, shows up to the party and takes issue with Emily and Ziggy. She confronts and threatens Emily, then chases them.*

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IDEAS FOR DISCUSSION OR WRITING EXPLORATION

Chapter 7

- Describe Officer Christie's attitude toward Stella and the alleged crime she witnessed. Why do you believe he acts this way?
- Why did Tommy not want to acknowledge that he was Métis on his application? Why does his girlfriend want him to?
- Discuss the following statement by Christie: "I hear you're May-tee. ... Well, young buck, your special treatment ends here."
- How does Tommy describe his home life? Why is this important to the story?
- *Officer Christie dismisses Stella as hysterical because she is an Indigenous woman. He is a racist. He demonstrates his racism covertly and in a passive-aggressive manner rather than overtly. This dictates how he conducts police investigations and his treatment of Tommy, his Métis partner.*
- *Tommy has spent his life denying that he is Métis, or at least not acknowledging it. This is because he knows that racism runs very deeply in the city and particularly in the police force. His girlfriend, who is white, believes it will help him get onto the police force if he puts his race on the application. He now regrets it because Christie uses it against him regularly.*
- *Christie clearly believes that Tommy got onto the force because of his Métis status. He continually derides him for it and is putting him on notice.*
- *Tommy, like Stella, is also partners with a white person. He has a difficult time connecting with her, and though he enjoys the company, he feels like all she wants is to get married and that she is only concerned with her class status.*

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IDEAS FOR DISCUSSION OR WRITING EXPLORATION

Chapter 8

- How does the story that Stella keeps about Lou and Paul relate to how she feels about herself and her past?
- Why do you think Stella has not seen her family in a long time?
- What does her Kookoo provide for her?
- Why doesn't Jeff want her to go see her Kookoo any longer?

- *Stella's story traces a history of violence, abuse and sexual assault. This feeds her self-esteem issues and the belief that she is "less" than others who have not been through these types of incidences. She believes that it colors her relationship with her husband and is also the reason he wishes her to stay away from her Kookoo and her family.*
- *Stella has stayed away because she believes she is getting "away" from the checkered past and that she will "rise" above her status.*
- *Her Kookoo is her grounding. She feels safe, protected and valued with Kookoo.*
- *Stella believes Jeff does not want her associating with her family because of their past and because they are "Native" and they represent all that he is not.*

Chapter 9

- What happens to Emily?
- Why is Paul suspicious of Pete?

- *Emily is attacked and gang raped with a beer bottle in the Break.*
- *Paul is suspicious of Pete because she does not trust men, even men she is with or "loves," because of the past abuse she has suffered at the hands of other men.*

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IDEAS FOR DISCUSSION OR WRITING EXPLORATION

Chapter 10

- How does Lou feel about the two men she has been partner with? How does she feel they are similar, and how are they different?
- Again it is mentioned that Gabe does not drink or smoke. Why is this important to Lou and her son, Jake?
- *James, Lou's first partner, was "no good." He drank, smoked and was violent and left her and Jake. Gabe is a "good" man, despite his need to return to the rez and womanizing. She primarily thinks this because he doesn't smoke or drink.*
- *This is important to both Lou and Jake because James did so much damage with his drinking and leaving that Gabe becomes a kind of "savior" to them.*

Chapter 11

- Why is Cheryl's dream about snowshoeing in the bush significant?
- What animal does Cheryl wish to cloak Emily in? Why?
- *Once again, Cheryl dreams of being back in the bush and snowshoeing. However, there is someone urging her to follow, to catch up, but she can't see who it is. The person varies between Emily and Rain; they both represent unresolved violence and the feeling that Cheryl was powerless to help or save them.*
- *Cheryl chooses to cloak Emily in the guise of a wolf. The wolf represents resistance, resilience, and fierce family protection and loyalty. All things she wishes for Emily as she heals.*

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IDEAS FOR DISCUSSION OR WRITING EXPLORATION

Chapter 12

- Why is Officer Christie reluctant to believe there is a connection between Emily's and Stella's incident report? What effect would this have on the case?
- Why is Officer Tommy insistent on following through with the case and determining if there is a connection?
- Based on his treatment of Tommy, how do you think Christie feels about him? About "Natives" or Métis?
- *At his core, Officer Christie simply believes that "Natives" are violent drunks and that they beat up or rape each other all the time. He does not believe that this is a "crime" worth investigating; it is just the way it is.*
- *If it were not for Tommy's voice in the investigation, the connection would likely never have been made and the case would have remained unsolved. Tommy knows that most cases involving "Natives" in Winnipeg are chalked up to the stereotypical belief that they are all drunks and do this to each other. This is a commentary on how differently the police treat cases involving Indigenous people versus white people and how it is a product of inherent systemic racism.*
- *Christie's continual comments and racist jibes at Tommy reveal that he feels he got his job because he had "status" as a Métis. This colors his view of Tommy's capabilities negatively. He also believes Tommy has a weak spot for Natives and need to learn "how it really is." However, he also makes it clear that Tommy is "better than other natives," which is also a comment on the depth of his racism.*

Chapter 13

- Why does Zegwan (Ziggy) want to be with her Moshoom in the bush?
- *With her Moshoom is a place and space in which she feels culturally and physically safe.*

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IDEAS FOR DISCUSSION OR WRITING EXPLORATION

Chapter 14

- Why does Phoenix like the quiet times?
- Why do you think Cedar-Sage is so important to Phoenix?
- On page 151, Phoenix thinks, "She never felt cleansed though." What does she mean by this?
- *The quiet times remind Phoenix of when she was a girl, of times when she still had family and was innocent.*
- *Cedar-Sage is all Phoenix has left of family. She feels connected to her and the need to protect, and Cedar-Sage gives her a reason to keep going, a feeling of self-worth.*
- *Phoenix took part in a smudging ceremony, which was meant to cleanse her and her past and the space around her. However, the "ceremony" was conducted in the residential treatment/detention center, where she did not believe that those conducting it cared for her or came to the ceremony with good thoughts.*

Chapter 15

- Why is Stella's husband dismissive of the event?
- Why is Stella angry after the police leave?
- How is Stella's dream connected to the incident with Emily?
- Why did Stella not go to Emily when she was in the snow?
- *Stella's husband does not want to be connected with incidents like this. He believes that Stella is making some part of it up in her head because of her past.*
- *Stella is angry because she knows that they don't believe her, that they feel as if she is hysterical and overdramatizing the event.*
- *Her dream is related to a real event in which Lou, Paul and Stella were stalked by a white man when they were young, but unlike Stella, her aunty Cheryl was able to make the police listen.*
- *Stella was afraid to involve herself as well; her past and the belief that it is something to be ashamed of kept her from going to the girl in the snow. The event was too close to the violence she had experienced as a child with Lou and Paul.*

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IDEAS FOR DISCUSSION OR WRITING EXPLORATION

Chapter 16

- Lou describes two of the children she supervises in foster care. How are they connected to the story?
- Why does Cheryl not trust the hospital?
- *One of the two children is Phoenix's sister Cedar-Sage.*
- *Cheryl does not trust the hospital because of how they treated her sister, Rain, who ultimately died from being treated as "just another drunk Native."*

Chapter 17

- On page 184, what does Pete mean by the statement "They will grab on to anything you say. Things can get messy real fast"?
- Why does Paul regret identifying Clayton Spence to the police?
- Why do you think Paul struggles with trusting men and Pete?
- *Pete is referring to the systemic racism that is prevalent among the police force and the notion that they will use anything you say to look for a reason to blame you (the victim) rather than look elsewhere.*
- *Paul regrets identifying Clayton because she believes that the police will decide that he is the one who must have done it, without looking further into the crime. She also believes they are eager to "pin" the crime on a Native male.*
- *Paul has difficulty trusting men because of her history of abusive relationships with men as well as the fact that all the important men in her life have left. Additionally, she and her sisters were victims of a male relative who sexually abused them.*

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Chapter 18

- Why does Stella need to go to her Kookum's?
- What does Kookum mean on page 199 by the statement "It never feels like home until you are here"?
- How does Elsie's rape affect Stella?
- *Stella's Kookum's home is where she grounds herself. This is the woman who raised her (both when her mom was alive and dysfunctional — abusing drugs/alcohol and gone all the time — and after her mother died). With her Kookum she feels accepted, whole and at peace. Kookum's is a place where she does not have to explain herself or her past.*
- *Kookum's statement is a universal truth about the concept of home for most people. Most young people are typically in a hurry to leave "home," and we usually only appreciate the full concept of home after we leave, something we do not recognize fully until we return.*
- *Because Stella has experienced and witnessed sexual violence against herself and her cousins, Elsie's rape causes her to lose the thin veneer of "normalcy" or adaptation in the "white world." It reminds her viciously that she has abandoned her roots and is living a lie in a white man's world.*

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Chapter 19

- Why does Ziggy's Moshoom speak to her in their language?
- Why does Ziggy feel ashamed?
- How does Sunny describe the gang scene in Winnipeg?

- *Ziggy grew up knowing the language because her Moshoom taught it to her. By speaking in their language, her Moshoom takes back the power that the attack and white culture have impressed upon Ziggy and the family. It is a means of comfort and connection.*
- *Ziggy feels ashamed because she knows she should not have been at the house or allowed her friend to go, and she believes that the attack is in many ways her fault.*
- *You are either in one ... or you're a target. There are colors to represent each gang in the city and they fight for control of territory, girls and sources of income.*

Chapter 20

- Who do the women — Cheryl, Lou, Paul and Kookum — remind Tommy of? Why?
- What does Tommy mean by the statement on page 222 about Hannah: "She has a lot of opinions about people and places she has never known or been to"?
- What do Tommy and Christie suspect about Michael Hutchinson?

- *All of the women remind Tommy of his own mother, aunts and grandmother. Tommy was raised by his strong but abused Indigenous mother. She likewise was surrounded by hardened but wise Indigenous women. Tommy is Métis, the product of an abusive white man and a Métis mother.*
- *Tommy is referring to Hannah's constant commenting on the Indigenous people in Winnipeg (all negative) and their circumstances. Like many settlers, she believes the Indigenous people should "just get over it," "get a job," etc. Hannah, who is white, offers many ideas and opinions about how Indigenous people live and should live.*
- *Both suspect that Michael may have had something to do with the incident and they maintain a stereotypical view of him as likely a drunk or addict and abusive.*

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IDEAS FOR DISCUSSION OR WRITING EXPLORATION

Chapter 21

- On page 229, why does Phoenix feel that “it’s all her fault”?
- What is the one thing Phoenix takes with her that is the most important?
- How do the pictures and Phoenix’s memories change the reader’s mind about Phoenix’s character?
- Why does Phoenix feel it is important to tell Cedar-Sage about Grandmère?
- *Phoenix is, herself, abused and damaged. Bounced from foster home to foster home because of her mother’s addictions, she has little self-worth, believes that she is to blame for her situation in life and has no hope. She was abused both by relatives and foster homes and has now hardened into believing that the best defense is a good offense. Though she is still just a child herself, she is so damaged from her experiences and the way in which “the world” has treated her that she cannot believe there is any good left.*
- *Phoenix keeps Cedar-Sage, her baby sister, with her always. While they were briefly together, she protected her from the worst of the foster situations and from her mother.*
- *Phoenix was once a child like all others — she believed in love, safety, family and hope. All that has been stripped by her experiences, but she keeps Cedar-Sage in her mind with her as a last piece of light to cling to.*
- *Even as damaged as she is, Phoenix knows that it is important to share with Cedar-Sage the one good thing that she carries: family and culture. She shares this through the stories of her Grandmère. Though she no longer believes, she instinctively knows that for Cedar-Sage to maintain hope, she must know the stories.*

Chapter 22 (Foreword)

- Who is Stella’s dream about?
- *Her mother. Her mother speaks to her to let her know that she has always been with her watching all that has happened to her, that she is stuck in the same neighborhood and that there is no “white light” or passing on — just lingering.*

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IDEAS FOR DISCUSSION OR WRITING EXPLORATION

Chapter 22

- On page 247, what does Rita mean when she says, “It’s rough denying who you are, hey?”
- Why couldn’t Cheryl stay in the bush with Joe?
- What happened to Cheryl’s sister (Stella’s mother), Rain? On page 254, why does Cheryl say, “Rain would have made a good real wolf. Wouldn’t they all”?
- *Rita is addressing Stella. She is chastising her for abandoning her family to go and live in the “normal, white man’s world.” Stella hides her past and culture and stopped talking to her family after she went to live with her white husband. Rita is reminding her that you can’t hide forever from what you are.*
- *Cheryl couldn’t run away from reality. She knew she needed to be present for her children, her sisters, her mother; running away wasn’t a way to cope.*
- *Rain was raped and beaten after leaving with a man from a bar. She was left by a dumpster in the cold and then at the hospital she was left to wait until she died. No one treated her as they viewed her as “another drunk Indian.” Cheryl believes that they all had a strength buried in them, the same as a wolf; they were all protective, instinctive and brave. But life beat it out of Rain, literally.*

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IDEAS FOR DISCUSSION OR WRITING EXPLORATION

Chapter 23

- On page 256, what does Stella mean by the statement “And yet, here she is, the exact same kid, even on the exact same couch, with the same pictures looking down on her from the wall”?
- What story did Rain always tell Stella? Why is it important?
- What is Cheryl’s reaction when Stella tells her that she witnessed the attack on Emily?
- Why does Stella believe her mom’s death is her mom’s fault?
- Where does Stella go in her dream?

- *Stella means that despite how far she had “risen” above her mother’s circumstances (having a family, husband, home and no addictions), she is and will always be the same little girl who came to live finally with her Kookum.*
- *“Sleeping Beauty”; it is important to Stella because her mother, Rain, always changed the ending and details so that the princess was the heroine, not the prince.*
- *Cheryl forgives her and comforts her. She reassures Stella that, though it is difficult for her, she ultimately understands the wreckage left behind by the stormy and difficult lives they have all had.*
- *The reports of her death, the statements of the man who beat her, the people at the hospital who ignored her, the police and the newspaper article all made it seem as if it was her mom’s fault she was dead; her fault for going out, for drinking, for running her mouth, for getting into a truck with a guy, for not waiting at the hospital.*
- *Stella returns to the Break, but it is clear now and there is a path that leads out — out of the city and out of their troubled lives.*

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IDEAS FOR DISCUSSION OR WRITING EXPLORATION

Chapter 24

- How does Lou feel Tommy and Christie treat the family?
- On page 286, what does Cheryl mean when she says, “It’s too much. It’s all too much”?
- On page 288, why does Paul say, “We’re so fucked. ... We’re fucked, we’re all fucked”?

- *Lou feels that they are patronizing and not really interested in solving the case. She feels they understand nothing and don’t really care.*
- *Cheryl is referring to Stella seeing the rape and attack and doing nothing except calling the police because she was scared. Their whole family is sucked into a downward spiral from which it seems they can never escape. Just as they think they are clear, something terrible happens and it unbelievably touches even those family members (such as Stella) who they haven’t seen in a long time.*
- *Paul is overwhelmed by all that she and her sister, cousins, aunts and Kookum have had to deal with and what they continue to deal with — tragedy heaped upon tragedy. She is out of hope and feels that it will always be this way and everything good will either leave or turn bad.*

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IDEAS FOR DISCUSSION OR WRITING EXPLORATION

Chapter 25

- What is Tommy afraid will happen to Emily's case? Why isn't Christie helpful?
- What is Christie's response when Tommy finally tells him to stop calling him May-tee?
- How does Tommy's mom describe rape?
- How does Marie explain why Tommy is "different"? Why did Tommy let people believe he was white when he was young?

- *He is afraid that the case will become "unresolved" and Emily just another number or statistic. Christie ultimately maintains the belief that Natives deserve what they get; they are all drunks, addicts and/or gang members. They don't contribute to society and therefore don't deserve the amount of time necessary to fully investigate acts of violence against them.*
- *When Tommy asks Christie to stop calling him May-tee, Christie makes light of it and acts as if he doesn't mean anything by it; after all, he says, on page 296, "It's not like I think of you like you're those Nates out there ... You're different."*
- *Tommy's mom says rape is about power and that people who want power are capable of committing such atrocities.*
- *Marie explains that Tommy is different because he is Métis and he never spent time with his mother's Métis family, only his father's family, who always looked down on him. Tommy let others believe he was white because it was easier and everyone treated him normally. It wasn't until they found out he was Métis that they treated him differently.*

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IDEAS FOR DISCUSSION OR WRITING EXPLORATION

Chapter 26

- How does Emily feel about being a “victim”?
- Why does Emily want to keep the details from everyone?
- On page 310, what does Emily mean by “Now everything’s Before and After”?

- *For Emily, all of life is defined as Before and After, and to her, being a “victim” sounds ugly. She describes After as sleeping and crying.*
- *Emily feels like if she lets all the details out, they will only get bigger and swallow her. By keeping the details in, she believes she can keep them contained.*
- *Before and After is how Emily now sees her life; everything is defined is defined this way.*

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IDEAS FOR DISCUSSION OR WRITING EXPLORATION

Chapter 27

- How does Phoenix feel about her mother, Elsie? Why?
- What happened to Phoenix's sister Sparrow?
- What new information do we find out about Phoenix?
- What does Phoenix say of Elsie's visit? On page 323, why does she describe Elsie's words as "the words are flat, though, like all Elsie's words"?
- How did the system fail Phoenix? What is the collateral damage?

- *Phoenix feels her mom is weak, pathetic and useless. Her mother has no idea where Phoenix's little sister Cedar-Sage is, and she is addicted and can't even care for herself. Phoenix believes her mother is only there for the "show" of it and confirms it when her mother asks her how she could do this to her.*
- *Her little sister Sparrow died in foster care.*
- *We find out that she is pregnant. We also find out that her mother, Elsie, is the friend that Cheryl talks about who was gang raped at the party when they were 14. Everyone is connected through trauma.*
- *Phoenix believes her mom is there only for herself. She has, over the years, promised many, many things that have never come true. She has never been there for Phoenix, and Phoenix knows she won't be now. Nothing will ever change; her mother's a strung-out junkie to Phoenix and always will be.*
- *Phoenix is as much a victim as Emily in many ways. Her mother is a drug addict, and she and her sisters had been passed from foster home to foster home, some abusive. Her mother is damaged and that is why she's addicted; no one did anything for her and thus her children are damaged. Phoenix was passed from system to system and finally incarcerated. No one thought to address the trauma she experienced, and the result was what she did to Emily.*

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IDEAS FOR DISCUSSION OR WRITING EXPLORATION

Chapter 28

- Why is Flora's (Kookoo's) story important to the novel? Where does she go in the end?
- How does Flora describe the women of the novel, of her family?
- *Flora's story pulls all the elements, all the characters' stories, together. Through her we understand the connections forged through trauma, but also the recognition that family is a strong and unbreakable bond. Flora joins Rain, her daughter who died and Stella's mother, and they fly away into the clouds.*
- *Flora describes the women as strong; as long as they have one another, they will thrive despite all their challenges and the past.*

Chapter 29

- Why do they all travel to the sweat lodge? How does this affect the reader's understanding of culture, healing and survival?
- *The sweat lodge is a place of healing, a place to reconnect and go back to culture and traditions. The reader gains a sense that this connection to culture is critical to the survival and healing of the characters in the book.*

A TEACHERS' GUIDE TO THE BREAK

IDEAS FOR CULMINATING ACTIVITIES

- Art and culture are woven throughout the book. Students can explore Anishnaabe, Inninew and Métis artists and create a collage of images and art that represents the women or themes of the novel.

Cross-curricular Connections: the Arts, Indigenous Worldviews, Anthropology

- Found word poem: students can select “found” words from the novel to create a found word poem that demonstrates one of the themes of the novel (racism, feminism, culture lost and found, language, etc.).

Cross-curricular Connections: English, Civics and Careers, Indigenous Worldviews

- A significant influence on the novel is the real-life crisis of violence against Indigenous women and girls in Canada. Students can investigate the number of unsolved cases involving violence, murder or missing Indigenous women and girls in their communities. They can create a presentation about the cases and the themes in the book to present to the class.

Cross-curricular Connections: English, Civics and Careers

Found Word Poem

Ask readers to select one page of text. They then select words at random that they feel are important to that page of text, that chapter or the entire novel. They record the words in a poem on a separate page.

A TEACHERS' GUIDE TO THE BREAK

IDEAS FOR CULMINATING ACTIVITIES

- Students can investigate the Indian Act and create a presentation or work of art about the inherent racist factors that are brought up in the book (blood quantum, Métis determination, disenfranchisement of Indigenous women, foster care/child protection system).

Cross-curricular Connections: Civics and Careers, History

- Dreams figure prominently throughout the novel. Ask students to make a mind map of the dreams and depict how they connect to the various themes and characters in the book (i.e. racism, survival, violence, culture, family).

Cross-curricular Connections: the Arts, English

Mind Map

A mind map is a visual representation of images of the main ideas depicted in the text.

The images are linked in the mind map as determined by the reader's understanding of the author's message.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mind_map#Mind_map_guidelines