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A Jigsaw of Fire and Stars

By Yaba Badoe

Book Summary:

Sante was a baby when she was washed ashore in a sea-chest laden with treasure. It seems she is the sole survivor of the tragic sinking of a ship carrying refugees. Her people.

Fourteen years on she's a member of Mama Rose's unique and dazzling circus. But, from their watery grave, the unquiet dead are calling Sante to avenge them:

A bamboo flute.

A golden band.

A ripening mango which must not fall . . . if Sante is to tell their story and her own.

Rich in the rhythms and colours of Africa and glittering circus days. Unflinching in its dark revelations about life. Yaba Badoe's novel is beautiful and cruel and will linger long in the memory.

Key Learning Outcomes

ACELT1619, ACELT1626, ACELT1807, ACELT1633, ACELT1635, ACELY1742

Themes

Performance, African folklore/magical realism, refugees/migrants, technology

Recommended Ages: 12+

Characters

Sante

Cobra and Cat

Captain

Language

Themes

Circus

Family

African folklore/magical realism

Refugees/ Migrants

Technology

About Author

Characters

Sante:

“May your spear arm be strong, my daughter,” the tall man adds. “Your legs swift as a gazelle’s, and your heart the mighty heart of a lioness protecting her cubs.” Page 2

Sante’s parents leave her with this blessing.

Discuss in which ways throughout the book Sante exhibits these traits.

Think about:

‘spear arm’ - in which ways does Sante fight and show courage?

‘swift as a gazelle’ - when does Sante display her speed and movement?

‘mighty heart of a lioness protecting her cubs.’. Who does Sante protect and why?

Does she protect others more than she protects herself? Is this a good thing?

What’s in a name?

Sante discovers that she is named for Asantewaa, the Queen of the Ashanti people who fought against British colonialism.

Research and Discuss:

Who are the Ashanti people?

Who are Sante’s people in the book? And what freedoms does she fight for? Is people-trafficking a form of modern-day slavery?

The Ashanti people were said to be ‘gold-rich’ before British colonialism, and one of their symbols and sacred objects is the Golden Stool. As a baby, Sante is set adrift in a chest full of treasure.

Research and Discuss:

What are the key objects in Sante’s treasure chest?

How are they important to Sante, and in what way are they representative of her culture?

What is the significance of the Golden Stool to the Ashanti people? And how does it link to Sante’s parents?

Cobra and Cat:

“Found them in the forest,’ she says. ‘Would have turned out wilder than polecats if I hadn’t fed and clothed them. Same goes for you, Sante,’ she tells me.” Page 8

In much of children’s literature, an animal is anthropomorphised. I.e. it takes on human characteristics. Eg. The Little Red Hen. In *A Jigsaw of Fire and Stars*, Yaba Badoe plays with this by reversing it - she uses zoomorphism - the humans take on animal characteristics. This gives them an animal instinct - superior senses - to sniff out danger, to highlight their desires. Cobra and Cat are named for the animals they most represent, and they act like them too.

Cat is sometimes fierce like a wildcat: “Cat likes to hiss and spit and scratch,” page 12 but also:

“tender tabby Cat with kitten; unusually touchy-feely...Cat nuzzles against her, patting and caressing.” Page 62

Write:

If you were an animal, what would you be and why? Think about the characteristics of your animal; how does it move, use its senses, adapt to its environment?

Think about how Badoe uses animal imagery to portray the characters throughout the text.

Exercise:

What do the following phrases mean:

“When she hugs me, I realise that I’m shaking like a terrified pup,” page 27

“I’m more beast than fowl” page 70

“we sprint fast as foxes,” page 67

“huge bear of a man,” page 118

“like two polecats in heat” page 80

“Man’s madder than a ravenous hyena” page 120

“Shiver and shake like a fox in a trap” page 132

“black-boots were over us like ‘roaches in a sack of sugar” page 240

Discuss:

Why do you think it is the child characters who are portrayed as most animalistic?

Think about the expression of emotion, basic needs, and the concept of being ‘wild’.

Sante isn't named after an animal, but she does say: **"Before I had memory, I had Priss."** She can talk to Priss. Have you read any other books in which children have a close bond with animals? In *The Last Wild* by Piers Torday, the protagonist Kester can talk with the animals. In *Northern Lights* by Philip Pullman, the protagonist Lyra has a daemon - a morphing animal companion who is an extension of herself.

Extension work:

Compare and contrast Sante's relationship to Priss to a similar relationship in another book.

"I talk to my bird, and as I do so, her pulse beats in time with mine, and we merge. Her gold-brown feathers swaddle my skin, her beak seals my mouth, and before I have time to blink and take stock, I'm seeing the world as Priss does."

"I am Priss and Priss is me and we're flying free!" page 169

Think about what it means to be 'eagle-eyed.' Can you write or draw a description of your town as if you have an eagle-eye view of it.

Think about the phrase 'flying-free'. If you could fly free anywhere, where would you go and why? Write a short passage describing your destination.

But, by the end of the novel, Sante admits that she is **"a creature that will never fly."**
Page 294.

Discuss:

Do you agree with her? What else could flying mean, other than the physical sense of it?

The Captain

The Captain has **"eyes that could freeze a corpse"** page 143, **"a row of sunken teeth"** page 144, **"a voice as cold as the grave,"** page 144 and **"the power of his intent oozing like poison from a boil"** page 145. He also twirls his cane, but other than that Badoe doesn't describe him with specifics. His real name isn't revealed until much later in the book.

Discuss and Activity:

Can you think why the author has described him so little and why she hasn't given him a name. Can you try and draw a picture of what you think the Captain looks like.

Does he remind you of any other villain?

If you were inventing your own villain, what would he/she be like?

Language

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The language in *A Jigsaw of Fire and Stars* is very distinctive.

Activity:

Look at the following passage and see how Badoe uses movement and rhythm in her language. Highlight different aspects of the grammar and language that suggest the people she is describing are on the move:

"I stamp out the embers of the fire and jump in the front of the truck with Cat. Mama Rose is at the wheel, Cobra behind. Redwood and Bizzie Lizzie, Midget Man and Mimi – the rest of our crew – bring up the rear, while straight ahead Priss blazes a trail on a hot current of wind. The way I am with her, I can almost feel the wind whistling through her feathers. What she sees she tells me with tremors of her wing, an upward jerk of her beak, a dip of her head. Beyond the fir trees are rolling hills of olive groves, silver leaves whispering to the breeze. And in the far distance, fields of sunflowers clamour at the sun. We're in the foothills of southern Spain, on our way to the city of Cadiz to ply our trade." Page 9

Activity:

Take Chapter 3 and imagine you are filming it. Spell out some directions for the film crew - what music would you use, what lighting, which camera angles? Write some direction notes.

How does the author use the senses in passages of description? Compare the following passages:

"In the late afternoon haze it looks like an ornate bowl of candied fruit rising from the sea. A dazzling bowl that whispers: 'Come closer. Taste me. Take a bite out of me.'" Page 13

"The sky, a pale simmering blue, crouches over us, licking up whispers of heat from the tarmac." Page 66

"We're carried by trade winds across the Straits of Gibraltar to Africa. Priss soars and glides, swept by currents over mountain ranges, then purple valleys seeded with date palms, grapes and guava... We journey over savannah: grassland and stubble, hobbled acacia trees. Baobabs, giant scarecrows, dangle bulbous fruit on their arms. We veer west and parched savannah turns into tropical forest: silk cotton trees, mahogany, ebony, teak. And in-between forest spaces, adobe thatched villages give way to zinc-roofed towns and sprawling cities with buildings that scrape the afternoon sky." Page 168-170

"I closed my eyes and breathed deep to gauge the scent of the building and hear the echo of past lives that once lived in it. The perfume of wood-smoke laced with a whiff of wild rosemary wafted out of warm ancient brick, built and extended by generations of farmers. A farmhouse baked in the swell and glow of a rolling landscape of hills. Someone's home, as well as a dwelling place for animals: for behind the reassuring smells and sounds of the house – the footfall of someone walking down stairs, the bark and snuffle of a dog – was the snort of animals roaming in fields, the whinny of stabled horses." Page 203

But one of the strongest tropes running throughout the book is the use of eyes. From the phrase of the title, "A Jigsaw of Fire and Stars reflected in her eyes," page 3, to the references to Cobra as 'Green Eyes', the villain called 'Grey Eyes', so much of the emotion of the book is conveyed through eyes; "we glean from the banter of our eyes – those glances and winks we use to communicate in the ring – what we're going to do next" page 230

Discuss:

How important is sight in connection with the circus?

"No need to throw daggers, when she's already hurling 'em with her eyes." Page 75, and "my eyes embraced his," Page 162

Discuss:

How important is eye contact in learning how someone is feeling?

Exercise:

1. Without talking, take a partner and ask them to hold a piece of paper over their mouth. Without speaking they must use only their eyes to try to convey an emotion to you. Can you read what it is?
2. Collect a group of people into a circle. Place one person in the middle of the circle. In silence, that person must make eye contact with one other in the circle. See if everyone can work out who they've made contact with.

Themes:

Costumes

Sante and her fellow performers dress up for their circus acts at the beginning and the end of the novel. And the importance and preciousness of Sante's tutu's is revealed halfway through the novel. But the costumes do more than just dazzle.

"There's no better hiding place,' she says, 'than what the eye can see and dismiss in a blink as vulgar circus glitter." Page 84.

"I put on the dress. Concha zips me up, turns me around. Red silk pinches so tight, my bum sticks out. I stare at the reflection before me. I twist and turn. My likeness twists and turns as well. My reflection echoes me and yet isn't wholly mine. Arms on hips, I look over my shoulder at the apparition staring back at me. Something doesn't fit. And I don't mean the peel-me-off dress I'm wearing. I dress up every day when I'm working, and at times, playing with Cat, I pretend to be older. This is different, disconcerting, as though I'm looking at a version of myself I'd rather not see; a presence that's revealing itself at the same time as it draws me in." page 135

Think about the different outfits in the book, from

"Mama Rose's thinking flows freely when she dresses as a geisha." Page 79

to

"Concha, complexion parchment white, in the black-and-pink costume of a matador; Concha, followed by endless images of boys and girls of all ages and races in a variety of skimpy costumes and seductive poses. Their faces, every one of 'em, expressionless." Page 210

What is the power of costumes? Can they change how a person feels? Or hide an emotion underneath? "**she puts on a circus smile,**" page 145.

Research:

Explore what a geisha is. How has the role changed over time? Why do you think dressing as a geisha helps Mama Rose to think freely?

Discuss and Activity:

Think about the different outfits you wear. Pick one outfit. How does it make you feel? Does it disguise who you really are? Think about school uniform. Does your behaviour change when you wear it?

Design an outfit that would display your personality.

Badoe describes the police as '**black-boots**' throughout the novel.

Pick one accessory that defines you.

Circus

Sante and her adopted family are travelling performers. One of Sante's tricks is to perform acrobatics on the back of a horse.

"An evening of incredible tricks and daring feats created for your delectation alone.' She brings down her whip, a dash of sawdust mixed with gravel leaps into the air, and I'm on. Since before I could walk, she's been training me. Bareback riding. Me and Taj in the ring together. Me in a turquoise tutu studded with luminous stones. Taj's mane a shower of silver ribbons. Drew the crowds when I was younger, still got the crowd where I want 'em today. A shining black girl on a white stallion, his flanks rippling and gleaming like seashells in moonlight. I'm bigger than I used to be, but Taj's back remains broad and strong. I stand on his rump and, as he trots, flip forwards and land on his back, arms outstretched, a smile on my face. I execute a whole heap of flips in quick succession, then a handstand. I steady myself and slowly bend over backwards. Taj begins to canter, calm as you please, his rhythm steady, sure of every beat. Slows down as I straighten up, and then using his body as I would a wooden bar, slip under and over him. Legs straight, toes pointed, hips flexed, moving this way and that. After a final somersault, I'm on the ground again, arms open wide, embracing applause. 'Bravo! Encore!' I strut around the circle, back arched, Taj nodding and bowing with me. I wrap my hand around his ear and he snuffles my cheek. 'Good boy, Taj,' I say, and the crowd yell for more." Page 20

Sante also plays music for Cobra's circus act, and performs on the trapeze at the end of the novel.

Discuss and Activity:

Which circus act do you think Sante is best suited to and why?

Can you design a programme for Mama Rose's Circus?

Imagine you are a circus performer. Which act would you perform? What would your costume be? Could anything go wrong?

Look at other books about travellers, such as *The Dreamsnatcher* by Abi Elphinstone, and other books about the circus, such as *Wild Boy* by Rob Lloyd Jones. You might like to compare and contrast the above passage with Emma Carroll's *The Girl Who Walked on Air*, p 9.

African folklore/magical realism

The publishers describe this book as being within the magical realism genre. It means that a book has a primarily realistic view of the world, and is set in the real world, but has elements of magic.

Research and Discuss:

Do you think it's necessary to temper the horrific realities of people-trafficking with 'magic' in a children's book?

How in the book is 'magic' expressed?

Look at some Anansi tales, of the folklore character associated with slave resistance.

What parallels can you find with Sante?

The Ashanti people believe that the realm of the dead lies within the real world, but is hidden. Badoe expresses this in the text with the **"shuffle of ancient footsteps inching closer" page 99**, **"the pitter-patter of the restless dead who insist on walking with us" page 115**, and the **"hazy silhouette" that "grazes the edge" page 154** of Sante's vision and flits away.

Research and Activity:

Explore how the spirits turn from shadows into moths. Compare with the 'soul butterfly' in Burmese mythology.

Look at the illustration on page 236-237. How does it make you feel? What do you think it is portraying?

Family

Sante is an orphan, and is adopted by Mama Rose:

"The woman lifts me up: 'Little one,' she says. 'My precious...' Her dark, pebbled eyes loom over me. Sticky-out ears, stringy hair. She's no beauty, but Priss can see she cares. I stop crying as she holds me tight to her chest, the way mothers are supposed to."

Page 6

Discuss:

How does Badoe show that Mama Rose is a 'motherly' figure in the novel?

Sante describes how none of her 'new' family look like her. And the other two children were also 'found' by Mama Rose:

"'Found them in the forest,' she says. 'Would have turned out wilder than polecats if I hadn't fed and clothed them. Same goes for you, Sante,' she tells me." Page 8

Discuss:

Do you think this is true? How do you imagine things would have turned out for Sante if Mama Rose hadn't found her? Would Sante still have been a circus performer? How much do your parents influence what you do?

"She [Priss] found me in the water. There was a mist next morning. One of those

whirling sea-fog days that makes it hard to tell where shoreline begins and sea ends. A sort of blurring where time seems to stop. It was like that when Priss, flying beneath a cloud, sees this big chest. She sees it, then hears a baby crying. Swoops to take a closer look. Lands on me, almost tipping me over, so tries again. Second time round, she steadies herself, and settles just below my feet. Talons scratch me and I squeal. She could tell I needed feeding, 'cause after I squeal, I start shrieking louder than a banshee. Priss doesn't know what do. She's a bird, a bright golden eagle. Eats rabbits and rats, and, when she's lucky, small flying creatures on the wing. There's a whole heap of things she can eat. Could have eaten a baby, I suppose. Fact remains she liked the look of me: black face, big eyes. Just couldn't figure out how to feed me. So she brushes a golden wing over my face. The musty scent of her feathers, the soft swish and tickle of their kiss, quieten me. There are two of us now, Priss and me in the chest, as it drifts to the shore. The tide recedes, wedging us on a slipstream of seaweed. Priss watches over me while, rattled by hunger, I cry myself to sleep." Page 5

Activity:

Write a couple of paragraphs following this one, with a different start to Sante's life, imagining that someone other than Mama Rose found her.

With Cobra and Cat, Mama Rose, Redwood, Bizzie Lizzie, Midget Man and Mimi, Sante has a family: **"a proper family. A real family."** Page 13.

Discuss and Activity:

Is Sante's family real because Mama Rose adopted her 'on paper'? See page 12. What does this mean? What is a real family, a proper family?

Draw a family tree of your family. Look at the different generations - which has the most members?

Would you consider any of your friends to be your 'family'? Where would you add them in your family tree?

What does Mama Rose mean by a 'family circus' on page 19?

Think about the different personalities in Sante's 'family'. Do you have any 'eccentric' personalities in your family?

Sante misses her real parents and longs to know her origins. Once Mama Rose tells her the story of the sea chest, Sante's desire to know more about what happened to her family gets stronger. Sante explores her ability to commune with the spirits of her parents through dreams.

"The baby cleaves to me and her flesh becomes my flesh, and I see my mother as she does: large eyes smiling down at me, fingers tickling ribs, while the sun shines through the leaves of the magnificent tree. Leaves glimmer bright, a halo of dappled light around my mother's head." Page 171

Discuss:

What is the difference between dream and memory?

Can Sante really remember what it's like to be a baby?

"And with the scent of mango on her breath, she kisses me." Page 178.

Activity:

What's your earliest memory? Can you write it down?

Can you keep a dream diary for a week?

Ancestry and 'the Old Ones' is an important concept in the book, both in terms of Sante's inheritance and the wisdom of those around her, and a key element in Ashanti culture.

"Old Ones! Give 'em a chance and they spout riddles at you. Yet there's truth in what he's saying." Page 177

The 'older' members of Sante's family deviate between trusting and giving Sante and Cobra freedom, but also thinking they are too young to cope on their own.

Activity:

What are the freedoms you've been given by your carers, and what are the restrictions? Could you make an argument for any of these to be changed?

Refugees/Migrants

Sante is a refugee, first discovered as a baby floating free from the sinking of a ship carrying migrants to "Greener Pastures." Page 85. *"There we saw brown bodies lying dead on the shore," page 86* and *"Strangers pitch up on our shores and we herd them into camps. They come in broken boats and we let them drown," page 86*

Discuss:

What are the reasons people leave their homeland? Where does the term 'greener pastures' come from/what does it refer to? Are they always greener? If you were leaving your home, and couldn't pack all your things, what would be the one object that you would take with you? Imagine you are a migrant newly arrived in Europe. Can you write a letter home to your parents telling them you are safe? What was the journey like? Were you scared?

Sante is put on a treasure chest with a bamboo flute and floated free in the hope that she's found. It seems she is one of only two survivors. In *Rooftoppers* by Katherine Rundell, Sophie is the sole survivor of a shipwreck, floating free in a cello case.

Discuss:

What is the connection between music and the sea?

What is the connection between music and migration?

If you could inherit one song from your parents, what would it be? And if you could only pass on one song, what would it be?

Look also at the role of music in *A Story Like the Wind* by Gill Lewis, another refugee story set on a boat.

Because she is a refugee or migrant, Sante often feels stigmatised and 'other'.

"If you're not white, your life is cheap." Page 108

Discuss:

What does Isaka mean by that?

What evidence can you find in the text for Sante feeling 'other'? Does she feel like an outsider in more than one way?

Technology

The Mama Rose circus live off grid:

"We live off the grid as much as possible, 'cause the Old Ones and Priss like to breathe clean country air and do things their way. No interference from black-boots. No electricity, no gas bills. No tax to pay. No computers, television or phones. Hand-me-down clothes when we need 'em from thrift shops. Makes us hardy. Survivors. 'Prepared for every eventuality,' Redwood says." Page 9-10

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But later in the novel, Sante and her friends find that technology can be useful in tracking criminal activity. She also finds phones powerful **“whatever’s in those machines is mighty powerful, ’cause it’s drawing me in too.”** Page 208

Activity:

Thinking about all Sante’s comments about technology, and the past lives of some of the ‘Olds’, can you write a list of pros and cons for living ‘off-grid’?

Further Reading:

The Other Side of Truth by Beverley Naidoo

What Sunny Saw in the Flames/Akata Witch (in the US) by Nnedi Okorafor

The Snow Angel by Lauren St John

Gorilla Dawn by Gill Lewis

Beyond the Bright Sea by Lauren Volk

Hell and High Water by Tanya Landman

About the Author

Yaba Badoe is a Ghanaian-British documentary filmmaker and journalist. A graduate of King's College Cambridge, she worked as a civil servant in Ghana before becoming a General Trainee with the BBC. She has taught in Spain and Jamaica and is, at present, a Visiting Scholar at the Institute of African Studies at the University of Ghana, where she is completing a documentary film -The Witches of Gambaga. Her short stories have been published in Critical Quarterly and in African Love Stories: an anthology edited by Ama Ata Aidoo