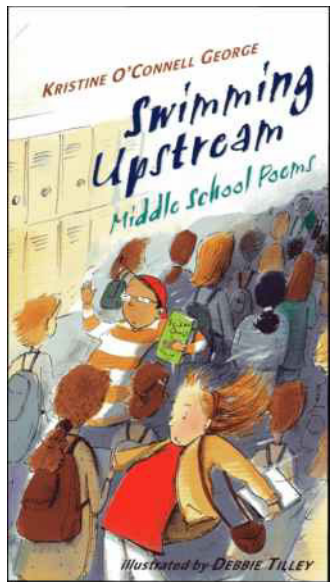


Swimming Upstream

Middle School Poems



Discussion Guide

by
Kristine O'Connell George

Discussion Guide

After you and your students have read aloud some of the poems in *Swimming Upstream: Middle School Poems*, you can use the discussion guide questions below to explore themes in the book. These questions will also help students discover topics for poems about their own middle school experiences.

Also available free of charge from www.kristinegeorge.com is The Companion Guide for *Swimming Upstream* that includes seven poetry-writing activities.

Swimming Upstream

In the beginning, the narrator feels lost at her new middle school; she feels as if she's "swimming upstream."

1. How did the writer show us this girl's feelings? Give specific examples from the poems.
2. How did *you* feel when you started middle school?
3. What advice might you give to upcoming middle schoolers to help them adjust to middle school?

The Other Me

Reread: "School I.D. Card" (p. 19), "Shy" (p. 25), "The Other Me" (p. 27) and "Un-Tied Tongue" (p. 60).

1. How does the narrator feel?
2. What do you do when you feel shy or self-conscious?
3. What advice have you heard adults give to help deal with these kinds of feelings?
4. How helpful have you found the advice from adults?
5. What advice might you give to your friend who is feeling shy or self-conscious?

New Shoes

In "New Shoes" (page 37), the narrator is disappointed because she can't find shoes like those her friends are wearing. She's certainly not happy to have to buy "*these*" shoes when she wanted "*those*" shoes.

1. What are the current fashions at your school?
2. What are the "fashion codes" that distinguish one group from other?
3. In what ways does current fashion affect your buying decisions (clothes, shoes, backpacks)?
4. Explain why you think the following statement is correct or incorrect: Wearing the "right" clothes makes a student feel differently about himself or herself.
5. Should students be required to wear uniforms? Why? Why not?
6. If you could start a popular new fashion, what would it be?

A Running Start

As the school year progresses, the narrator becomes more comfortable in middle school and grows in self-confidence.

1. How did the writer show us that the narrator was becoming more confident?
2. What are some of the things that have happened to you in middle school that have increased your self-confidence?
3. What are your personal goals for middle school?
4. Are there new challenges such as joining a club or a sports team that you would like to tackle in middle school?
5. How do you think your experiences in middle school might help you in the future?

Levitate Off The Planet

“So Much Better Than I Expected” (p. 45) talks about one of those days where everything seems to go right.

1. How would you describe how you might feel if you had a “levitate-off-the-planet” day?
2. List some of the things — large and small — that add up to a perfect day.
3. What are some of the things that can lead to a less-than-perfect or even a truly rotten day?

Worth Hearing

Reread “Margo” (p. 18) and “Worth Hearing” (p. 55). The narrator has a special relationship with Margo and Craig.

1. What can we learn about the narrator’s personality from her relationship with Margo and Craig?
2. How does your middle school help students who are struggling with challenges?
3. How do you see yourself interacting with students who need help in some way?
4. In what ways have people helped you overcome difficulties?

Happiness Exponential

Teachers, the band director, and the librarian mentioned in *Swimming Upstream* are supportive to the narrator.

1. Why do you think people become teachers, librarians, or work in other ways at schools?
2. How has a teacher, librarian, or other school employee helped you?
3. If you were a middle school teacher how would you interact with your students?
4. As a teacher, what expectations would you have for your students?

The Time Of Day

Reread “Zach’s Watch” (p. 56) in which an eighth-grader couldn’t be bothered to give Zach the time of day.

1. How do older students treat the younger students at your school?
2. How do you react to students in upper or lower grades?
3. What would you do if you saw an older student teasing or bullying a younger student?
4. What would you do if another student tried to bully you?

Where Have You Gone?

Reread “Kori” (p. 20) and “P. E. Locker” (p. 71). These poems deal with a friend and an acquaintance who have slipped out of the narrator’s life.

1. Describe a time when you lost touch with a friend or acquaintance.
2. Describe a message you might send to your missing friend or acquaintance.
3. What experiences have you had changing or moving schools?

Ideas from Others

Save the Last Word for Me

Creating Classrooms for Authors and Inquirers by Kathy Gnagey Short, Jerome C. Harste, Carolyn L. Burke. Heinemann, 1996.

I had a fascinating conversation with Dr. Short in which she suggested organizing students into small groups and using a response strategy, *Save the Last Word for Me*. Within these groups of four or five, each student reads *Swimming Upstream* and chooses two or three poems which he/she finds most meaningful. Students bring those poems to the group and select one of the poems to share. (Asking students to initially choose two to three poems allows flexibility in case several students have chosen the same poem.)

Each student reads aloud the poem he/she has chosen. The group discusses the poem and what they found meaningful about that poem. Note: The original student who selected that particular poem listens, but does not participate in the group discussion until all members of the group have expressed their views. The presenting student has “the last word” and shares the reasons why he/she chose that particular poem. The discussion of the poems continues until the group has heard and discussed one poem chosen by each member.

According to Dr. Short, this format encourages students to consider alternative perspectives and interpretations and that is why the presenting student waits until the last word – to provide space for hearing other perspectives. *Save the Last Word for Me* promotes inquiry, encourages in-depth reading, and helps students understand that poetry can have different meanings for different readers and that there is no one *right* way to respond to or interpret a poem.

If you have ideas you would like to share, send them to me at: KGeorge123@aol.com.