



EMC Teaching a Novel:
Phoenix Brothers



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Publications

Phoenix Brothers – Sita Brahmachari

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For Teachers

Phoenix Brothers is a powerful story about refugee children (and associate adults) starting afresh after fleeing from war. Some of the material needs handling sensitively, with the teacher judging what is appropriate for their class and how much wider discussion there needs to be before, during and after reading. For example, flashback scenes describe the death of family members in a bombing, people trafficking, death while travelling by boat and by lorry, and sexual assault. This list, though, makes the book sound more traumatic than it is. The issues are dealt with sensitively and in an age-appropriate manner. They are also off-set by the positive, inspiring interactions of the majority of the characters.

Keeping a Journal

The aim is to get through the reading of *Phoenix Brothers* fairly quickly. However, it's important that you get to explore your thoughts about the story as it unfolds. A fantastic way to do this is by keeping a writing journal as you go along. After reading clusters of chapters, your teacher will advise you about how to discuss your reading in groups. You can then draw on your discussions, along with your own ideas, to write down your thoughts about the book.

Here are some of the distinctive features of a typical reading journal. You can, of course, record your thoughts in different ways too. You might, on occasion, for example, want to create a sketch inspired by events in the book.

Typical features of a reading journal

- Written in a personal voice and style
- Focuses on what you find interesting
- Adds in other people's ideas
- Explores ideas about how the book relates to you – how it links to your own life and experiences, to your own reading, viewing, interests, and so on
- Explains how your thinking about the book changes during reading. For example, you might have new thoughts about a character, be surprised about the plot, and so on
- Unconcerned with whether what you are saying is right or wrong – a journal is an exploration of your thinking about a book at a given point in time.

You do not have to write a journal entry after every break in the reading suggested in the pages that follow. Your teacher will let you know when to add to your journal.

Ongoing activity – Words that catch your eye!

Throughout *Phoenix Brothers*, the main character, Amir, writes lists of words he is unfamiliar with.

- At the end of each chapter cluster, take a few minutes to make a list of anything unfamiliar or new to you that you noticed while reading. Like Amir, these could be uncommon words, but it could also be anything that catches your eye.

Before Reading

Discussion - generating ideas, clarifying thoughts

- In small groups, take a look at a copy of the book and discuss your thoughts about:
 - ▶ The front cover
 - ▶ The title
 - ▶ The blurb
 - ▶ What you think the book will be about
 - ▶ Who you think the book is written for
 - ▶ What genre you think the book belongs to.
- Now look at the paragraph below, which gives some background to the phoenix myth, along with the images on page 8. Discuss in your groups what this adds to your thinking about the book.

The phoenix is a legendary bird found in ancient mythology, most famously associated with themes of rebirth, immortality, and renewal. Originating in ancient Egyptian mythology about creatures such as the heron-like Bennu, the bird later appeared in Greek and Roman legends/folklore as a radiant creature that lives for several centuries before dying in flames and rising again from its own ashes. The myth symbolises the cyclical nature of life, where death is not an end but a transformation. Over time, the phoenix has become a powerful emblem across cultures and religions, representing hope, resilience, and the triumph of life over destruction. The enduring appeal of the phoenix lies in its ability to capture the human longing to start afresh in the face of suffering or loss.

Starting your journal

- To get your journal started, write a paragraph summarising the discussions you've just had.
- Share examples of journal entries around the class, or in small groups.

During Reading

Chapters 1 and 2 – Journal entry

Discussion – generating ideas, clarifying thoughts

- In small groups, discuss the first two chapters. You might like to think about:
 - ▶ What you found interesting
 - ▶ How the main characters, Amir and Mo, are presented
 - ▶ What we learn about the background of Amir and Mo
 - ▶ The use of italics for different parts of the narrative
 - ▶ Amir's narrative voice – how does he come across? What is distinctive about his use of language?
 - ▶ The characters of Nila and Mr Shaw
 - ▶ References to a phoenix
 - ▶ References to 'home'
 - ▶ What you liked
 - ▶ What you want to know more about
 - ▶ What you think will happen next.
- Share some of your ideas around the class.

Writing your journal entry

- Drawing on your discussion and ideas of your own, write your journal entry for this section.
- Share examples of journal entries around the class, or in small groups.

Activity – Amir's memory

- During Chapter 2, Amir remembers his experience at a refugee detention centre. On your own, write two to three paragraphs extending this memory. Think about how Amir would have felt as a stranger in a new country. What kinds of emotions would he be feeling? Is he scared or elated?

After Reading

Once you have finished *Phoenix Brothers*, your teacher will direct you to the activities that are most suited to your study.

Initial Responses to the Novel

Revisiting your first journal entry

In the Before Reading section, you thought about how the mythical phoenix bird might be significant to the story.

- Remind yourself of your original thoughts.
- How have your thoughts changed now that you have finished the book?
- Write a paragraph explaining the significance of the title in relation to the whole book.

The whole novel

Your first response

- In your journal, write your response to the whole novel, using the prompts below if you find them helpful.

My overall impression of *Phoenix Brothers* is ...

My favourite character is ...

The most memorable bit for me is ...

One thing I will take away from this novel is ...

The biggest surprise for me was ...

The best thing about this novel is ...

I would recommend this novel to ...

This novel reminds me of other books and films like ...

One thing I'd change about this novel is ...