

Book Backgrounder: **AMERICAN WAR** by **OMAR EL AKKAD**

Note for teachers

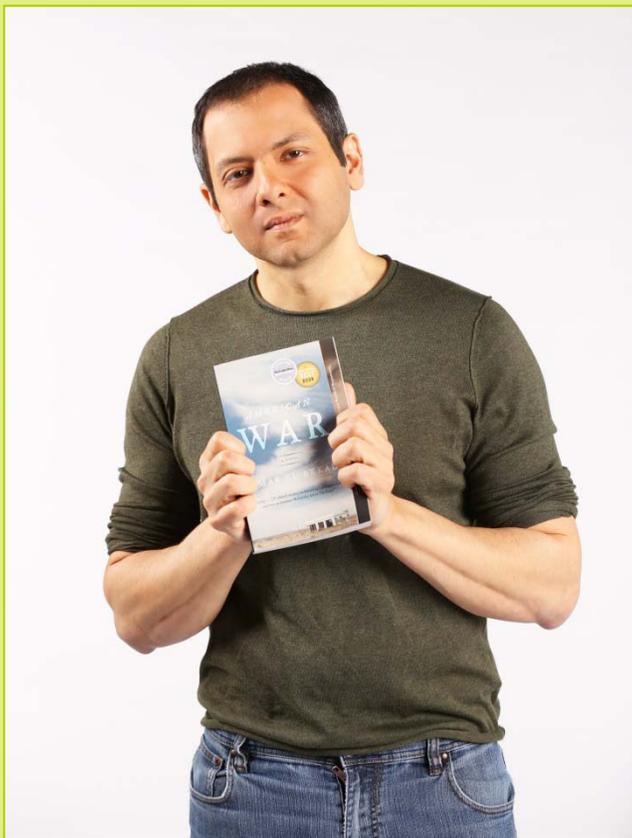
PLEASE NOTE: This document contains spoilers!

If you intend to read only the book excerpt provided on Curio.ca with your students, this document gives a fuller picture of the book content.

If you intend to read the whole book with your students, you may wish to remove spoilers before sharing the document with students.

Literacy strategy

If you are using this book backgrounder directly with students, have them review the document for new vocabulary. They can highlight new words they find and research their meaning.



Watch Omar El Akkad discuss his book:
www.curio.ca/canadareads

Book Description

Set in the American South beginning in the year 2074, *American War* tells the life story of Sarat Chestnut, a girl growing up in the context of a Civil War triggered by climate change. The story begins at Sarat's childhood home near an encroaching Gulf of Mexico. Her parents are eager to move north to take her and her siblings, Dana and Simon, to safety. After her father Benjamin is killed, Sarat's mother takes the children to a refugee camp known as Camp Patience. In Patience, Simon becomes a rebel fighter. Not long after, a man named Albert Gaines begins grooming Sarat to become a fighter too — so that when northern militiamen come and massacre the occupants of Camp Patience, Sarat quickly retaliates by turning into an insurrectionist rebel leader for the South. In the years that follow, Sarat's actions — narrated posthumously by her nephew, Benjamin — come to shape the fates of millions across North America.



uncommonly strong adult. At Camp Patience, she shaves her head and learns to fight. The attention of Albert Gaines emboldens her, and ultimately makes her embrace the South's cause following the massacre of the camp's residents by northern militiamen. Sarat becomes a fearsome rebel militant, until her sister's death in an accident involving one of the rogue drones that stalk the southern skies. In her grief, Sarat allows herself to be captured by northern forces, who torture her brutally. After her release, she exacts her final revenge: the release of a plague that kills millions—Northerners and Southerners alike.

Structure

Divided into four parts, *American War* follows Sarat through four periods in her life:

- (1) Her childhood in St. James, Louisiana;
- (2) Her adolescence at Camp Patience in Iuka, Mississippi;
- (3) Her young adulthood as a rebel leader in Lincolnton, Georgia; and
- (4) Her final evolution into a mass murderer when she is freed from torture by Northern forces and given a biological weapon by an agent of the Bouazizi Empire.

Dana Chestnut. Sarat's twin sister, who refers to Sarat as "beautiful girl." Comparatively girlish and carefree, Dana's death signifies a turning point in Sarat's life. After enduring so much loss, Sarat is finally undone.

Albert Gaines. A Northerner who fought for the South and radicalizes Sarat by bringing her books, giving her a knife, and eventually the gun ("Templestowe") that she uses to kill a prominent Northern general. In the end, Gaines betrays Sarat to Northern forces, revealing her location to them after his own family's safety is threatened.

Benjamin (Jr.) Chestnut. Sarat's nephew (the son of her brother Simon and his wife Karina) and, we eventually learn, our book's narrator. Part of him despises his aunt for the evils he knows her to have committed, but part of him loves her too.



Primary Characters

Sarat Chestnut. When her kindergarten teacher accidentally merges her first name Sara and middle initial T., Sarat allows the moniker to stick. A curious and tomboyish child, she matures into a tall,

Secondary Characters

Simon Chestnut. Sarat's brother, Simon becomes a rebel fighter when their family is living in Camp Patience, before the massacre. During the attack on the Camp, Simon suffers a head wound that affects his cognitive abilities, but he survives.

Benjamin (Sr.) Chestnut. Sarat's father. Benjamin Sr. is killed early in the book, while trying to secure his family's passage north.

Martina Chestnut. Sarat's mother, Martina is killed during the northern attack on Camp Patience.

Layla Denomme Jr. Sarat's lover, Layla manages to survive the biological scourge Sarat unleashes on North America, thanks to a warning from Sarat that allows her to stock up on provisions, and remain sequestered until the worst is over.

Joe (aka Yousef Bin Rashid). A friend of Albert Gaines, Joe gives Sarat the biological weapon she uses to unleash death upon millions. He seeks to secure the primary of his Bouazizi Empire, by ensuring America destroys itself utterly.

Marcus. Sarat's childhood friend, who defects to safety in the North, and remains a testament to Sarat's ability to care for people, across ideological divides.

Karina. Simon's caretaker after his injury, and eventually his wife and Benjamin Jr.'s mother. She and Simon are killed by the plague Sarat unleashes on the continent.

The Ending

After Dana is killed and Sarat is captured, Sarat returns home to her brother Simon — who is now married to his one-time caregiver Karina, with whom he has a son, Benjamin Jr. Sarat grows to love Benjamin Jr. deeply and shares some of her last tender moments with him. Upon deciding to unleash a terrible virus upon North America as a final act of destruction and vengeance, Sarat's last mercy is to secure Benjamin Jr.'s safe passage to Alaska, where he is spared the death that awaits millions to the south (Sarat included).



Key Themes



WAR

American War is first and foremost about just that: war. This is a book where conflict and violence are the foundation of everything. Sarat comes of age in a displaced persons camp — like the hundreds of camps in the real-life war zones Omar El Akkad covered in his work as a journalist. The book is a testament to the universalizing ways in which war affects everyone living under it. In what seems to be a central message of the book, Akkad at one point writes: "The universal slogan of war [Sarat] had learned, was simple: if it had been you, you'd have done no different."



IDEOLOGY

Sarat grows up in a world where North and South stand on opposite sides of a stark ideological divide that begins when southerners' reject northern efforts to curb fossil fuel consumption, but evolves into something much more all-encompassing. The book is, among other things, a look at how a difference of opinion can evolve into the kind of ideological chasm that defines a generation.



CLIMATE CHANGE

Omar El Akkad has spoken about the fact that he chose climate change as an analogy that would mirror the causes of the first Civil War to some extent. Fossil fuel extraction serves as a partial metaphor for slavery, he claims, because it will ultimately be perceived as existing on the “wrong side of history,” but it currently fuels a massive commercial empire.

Contextual Information

- Published in 2017, *American War* is the first novel Omar El Akkad has published.
- It is important to note that Omar El Akkad has written three previous books, but was never motivated to publish any before this recent effort.
- In his words, this is “the first one [he’s] ever shown to anybody outside my best friend.”
- Omar previously worked as a journalist.
- He spent years reporting in Afghanistan, Guantanamo Bay and other conflict situations that significantly influenced the setting of *American War*.



Notable Quotes from Reviews

“In recounting Sarat’s emotional evolution — and the dreadful choices she will be asked to make — El Akkad has written a novel that not only maps the harrowing effects of violence on one woman and her family, but also becomes a disturbing parable about the ruinous consequences of war on ordinary civilians.” – Michiko Kakutani, *The New York Times*

“*American War* is Omar El Akkad's first novel and it is masterful. Both the story and the writing are lucid, succinct, powerful and persuasive. Most of the novel focuses on Sarat and her family, but occasionally El Akkad offers fascinating tidbits — media stories, academic studies, government reports and the like — about the war, the plague and the refugees. Over the course of the novel, we will discover how the narrator came to know and love Sarat, how he suffered to see her suffer and how he witnessed good and evil do battle for her soul. But, more importantly, we come to reflect once more on the egotism and idiocy of war, and on the millions of people it makes homeless, and on the unfortunate way that those who still have the means to live inside locked homes tend to hate others who show up en masse at their doorstep, shoeless and hungry and desperate.”

– Lawrence Hill, *The Globe and Mail*

“El Akkad’s formidable talent is to offer up a stinging rebuke of the distance with which the United States sometimes views current disasters, which are always happening somewhere else. Not this time.”

– Jeff VanderMeer, *LA Times*



CBC / Other Links

Why Omar El Akkad deleted his entire novel once — then scrambled to save it (CBC Books: Magic 8 questionnaire):

www.cbc.ca/books/why-omar-el-akkad-deleted-his-entire-novel-once-then-scrambled-to-save-it-1.4349378

How a bad day at work was the push journalist Omar El Akkad needed to turn to fiction (CBC Books: How I Wrote It blog post):

www.cbc.ca/books/how-a-bad-day-at-work-was-the-push-journalist-omar-el-akkad-needed-to-turn-to-fiction-1.4079627

How war reporting inspired Omar El Akkad to write his debut novel (The Next Chapter interview):

www.cbc.ca/radio/thenextchapter/antanas-sileika-leanne-betasamosake-simpson-jen-agg-1.4141079/how-war-reporting-inspired-omar-el-akkad-to-write-his-debut-novel-1.4141166

How Omar El Akkad unintentionally mirrors the U.S. political climate in his new book (The Next Chapter interview):

www.cbc.ca/1.4556275

Critical Thinking Questions

Students may need to do some research to help them create and organize an answer.



1. Look at the title of the novel. What could the story be about?
2. Do you believe in climate change? Are you a climate change skeptic? What role do individuals

play in the prosperity or the decline of the environment? What role do you play? Are your actions environmentally friendly or not? What is your relationship to the environment?

3. One quality that is reflected by the protagonist in the novel, Sarat Chestnut, is power and strength. Sarat's power and strength evolves through numerous obstacles and tragedies that she faces. How do you define power and strength? What are examples of power and strength that you've seen in the world we live in today, and in yourself?
4. What are the connections between wars fought in the past and wars being fought currently? What can this kind of conflict tell us about wars and other similar tragedies that we may experience in the future?
5. Describe examples of ideologies. Political ideologies? Religious ideologies? How can a large group of people impact the world just by the way they think?
6. One idea that permeates the novel is reflected in the following quote: "*The misery of war represents the world's only truly universal language.*" What do you think about this statement? Why would someone make this statement?

Activities

1. Students can create a KWL (i.e. **K**now, **W**ant to Know, **W**ill Look/Learn) chart on the subject of the American Civil War.
2. Students should be aware of the following terms: climate change, terrorism, Guantanamo Bay, militia, rebel fighters, and insurrectionist rebels.
3. Students can watch video clips about the American Civil War, and the wars fought in the Middle East after 9/11. These can be found on websites such as CBC.ca and YouTube. Teachers will monitor and filter the use of websites and devices in accordance with school board policies. Students can organize their ideas and their learning about what they are seeing according to a *Think-Pair-Share*.
4. Students can find a piece of poetry or music that reflects their ideas about war, and share their ideas about those pieces in small groups. The pieces that the students find can be posted in the classroom, but teachers should assess the student selection for appropriateness for public display.
5. Students can create a T-Chart outlining positive and negative impressions of the content in the backgrounder, as well as any questions the backgrounder inspires them to ask.

