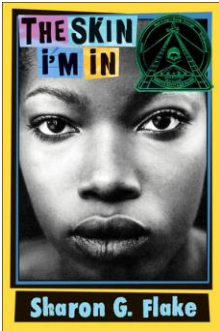


Discussion Guide for Grades 8 & Up

The Skin I'm In

Summary



Seventh-grader Maleeka Madison is tormented by other students because of her dark skin. When Maleeka sees her new teacher, whose skin is blotched from a rare skin condition, she thinks she has finally met someone who is worse off than her. As she watches Miss Saunders refuse to accept the taunts of children, Maleeka begins to explore her response mechanisms to the cruelty of her peers. In rethinking how she defends herself, Maleeka learns that she too often judges people by their appearances. This novel explores the ways in which people's own insecurities can affect how they are treated along with how they behave.

The Skin I'm In © 1998 by Sharon G. Flake
Cover photograph © 1998 by Mark Havriliak
2007, 176 pages, Grades 8–12, Hyperion Books for Children

Requirements

- [The Skin I'm In](#)
- [Definitions Related to Name-Calling, Bullying and Bias](#) (optional)

A Conversation with the Author

[Click here to read an excerpt from a live chat with Sharon G. Flake.](#)

Prompts for Writing and Discussion

Click on one of the following themes of bullying and bias. In each theme, the quotes or passages from *The Skin I'm In* are followed by questions that can be used for small or large group discussion, or to guide reflective writing. All page numbers refer to the First Jump at the Sun paperback edition (2000) of *The Skin I'm In*.

- [Self-esteem and Identity](#)
- [Colorism and Skin Tone Bias](#)
- [Our Self-perceptions and Others' Perceptions of Us](#)
- [The Relationship Between External Features \(e.g., hair, clothing\) and Self-image](#)
- [Surviving and Coping in a Hostile Environment](#)
- [Peer Pressure and Coercion](#)
- [Responding to Bullying](#)
- [Standing Up for Oneself](#)

Theme: Self-esteem and Identity

"...To tell the truth, [Miss Saunders] was a freak like me. The kind of person folks can't help but tease. That's bad if you're a kid like me..." (Page 1)

"...See, I got a way of attracting strange characters. They draw to me like someone stuck a note on my forehead saying, losers wanted here." (Pages 1–2)

"Some of us is the wrong color. Some is the wrong size or got the wrong face. But that don't make us wrong people, now does it?...'Shoot, I know I got my good points, too.'" (Page 119)

Questions for Writing or Discussion

- Why does Maleeka consider herself a “freak” and a “loser”? In what way does she identify with Miss Saunders?
- Maleeka describes herself as “the kind of person folks can’t help but tease.” Do you think her negative attitude toward herself influences the way others treat her?
- In what ways do we all internalize judgments about our appearance? How do these feelings affect our self-esteem and identity?

“Now what’s your name?,” [Miss Saunders] says... ‘Maleeka, Maleeka Madison-the third,’ I say smacking my gum real loud. ‘Don’t let that fancy name fool you,’ John-John butts in. ‘She ain’t nobody worth knowing.’” (Page 2)

“Seems like people been teasing me all my life. If it ain’t about my color, it’s my clothes...It’s bad enough that I’m the darkest, worse-dressed thing in school. I’m also the tallest, skinniest thing you ever seen. And people like John-John remind me of it every chance they get. They don’t say nothing about the fact that I’m a math whiz, and can outdo ninth graders when it comes to figuring numbers. Or that I got a good memory and never forget one single, solitary thing I read. They only see what they see, and they don’t seem to like what they see much.” (Pages 4–5)

“[Caleb] stared at me half the year. I thought he saw what everybody else saw. Skinny, poor, black Maleeka. But Caleb saw something different. He said I was pretty. Said he liked my eyes and sweet cocoa brown skin...” (Page 13)

Questions for Writing or Discussion

- What do you think Maleeka was thinking and feeling when John-John said, “She ain’t nobody worth knowing”? How do others’ comments impact our feelings about ourselves?
- Why do people often focus on weaknesses and negative qualities instead of the positive attributes that we all possess?
- Why did Maleeka automatically assume that Caleb saw the worst in her? What does it say about Caleb that he was able to see beyond the negativity of his peers?

Theme: Colorism and Skin Tone Bias

“My skin starts to crawl before [Miss Saunders] even opens her mouth. ‘Maleeka, your skin is pretty. Like a blue-black sky after it’s rained and rained,’ she says...When she’s far enough away, John-John says to me, ‘I don’t see no pretty, just a whole lotta black.’ Before I can punch him good, he’s singing a rap song. ‘Maleeka, Maleeka-baboom, boom, boom, we sure wanna keep her, baboom, boom, boom, but she so black, baboom, boom, boom, we just can’t see her.’” (Page 3)

“Malcolm is fine. He’s got long, straight hair. Skin the color of butterscotch milkshake. Gray, sad eyes. He’s half and half-got a white dad and a black momma. He’s lucky. He looks more like his dad than his mom.” (Page 17)

“I didn’t used to mind being this color. Then kids started teasing me about it. Making me feel like something was wrong with how I look...I stare at myself for maybe twenty minutes in Daddy’s mirror. I don’t get it. I think I’m kind of nice-looking. Why don’t other people see what I see?” (Page 42)

Questions for Writing or Discussion

- Why do you think Maleeka is ridiculed for being dark-skinned in a school that is predominantly African American? Where do you think such attitudes about skin tone come from?
- Why does Maleeka feel that Malcolm is lucky he looks more like his white father than black mother? Do lighter skinned black people enjoy certain advantages within their own communities and/or the larger society?

“[Sweets] goes to the school across town, the school for smart girls with attitudes...The school is so big. So clean. So fancy. And them girls...they looked like they come out of a magazine. Long, straight hair. Skin the color of potato chips and cashews and Mary Jane candies. No Almond Joy-colored girls like me. No gum-smacking,

wisecracking girls from my side of town. That didn't bother Sweets none. She says she deserves to be in that school as much as anyone. 'You got the right color skin,' I said... 'It's not about color,' she said. 'It's about how you feel about who you are that counts...I'm as good as the queen of England, the president of the United States, and ten movie stars, all rolled into one. So they better let me in that there school or else' ...I guess Sweet's attitude paid off. They let her into that high-toned school." (Pages 39–40)

Questions for Writing or Discussion

- Why do you think Maleeka “changed her mind” about attending the better school? How do her feelings about her color and appearance play into this decision?
- Why is Sweets able to see past color and stand confident? What does it take to remain self-assured in the face of prejudice and cruelty?

Theme: Our Self-perceptions and Others' Perceptions of Us

“[John-John] says his face tells the world he doesn't take no stuff. That people better respect him, or else. I never see nothing like that in John-John's face. He looks more scared than mean. I guess there ain't no accounting for what folks see in their own mirrors.” (Page 18)

Questions for Writing or Discussion

- What do you think your face says to the world? What qualities do you think you project and how do you think others perceive you?
- Is the face you project consistent with your own feelings about yourself?
- How do our own self-perceptions often differ from what others see in us?

“‘Why do you hate me?’ I ask, looking right at John-John...He says since the first time he met me, I acted like I was better than him...Says it was back in second grade when I first moved to the Heights. I walked into class that day with my new pink polka-dotted dress on and black patent leather shoes. The teacher told me to sit in the desk next to his. I said I didn't want to. I wanted to sit in the one up front, next to Caleb. ‘That half-white punk,’ John-John says...‘I didn't even know Caleb back then,’ I say. ‘I wanted to sit up front ‘cause I couldn't see the board....You hated me all these years for something I didn't even do.’ John-John looks at me like I'm dirt or something...I think about what Daddy once said about not seeing yourself with other people's eyes...Then it hits me. John-John McIntyre is jealous of me. But why?” (Pages 63–66)

Questions for Writing or Discussion

- How can others' perceptions and assumptions about us lead to conflict? What can we do to avoid these communication gaps?
- Do you agree with Maleeka's assessment that John-John is jealous of her? What might he see in Maleeka that is different from what she sees in herself?

Theme: The Relationship between External Features (hair, clothing) and Self-image

“...I'm like Superman when I get Charlese's clothes on. I got a new attitude, and my teacher's sure don't like it none.” (Page 4)

“I think if I was wearing my own clothes I would feel like two cents next to [Miss Saunders]. But I'm in Char's stuff, so I'm holding my own.” (Page 77)

“I tell Sweets I'm gonna cut my hair...People gonna see I ain't who I used to be...I don't tell Sweets or Momma the real reason that I'm doing this. That I want a new look like that model in the magazine, so that maybe people will start to see me differently and treat me differently.” (Page 43)

Questions for Writing or Discussion

- How does Maleeka expect that her new clothing and hair style will change things for her? Do others treat her any differently as a result of these changes?
- Can external features such as clothes, hair, make-up, etc. actually improve one's self-confidence? Do these things ultimately affect the way that others view us?

"After that Char started bringing clothes to school for me...But even those hundred-dollar pants suits...can't make up for the hurt I feel when she slaps me with them mean words of hers." (Page 15)

"I don't get it. I look good. I know I do...I go to the bathroom...I look in the mirror and start crying. 'You know, Maleeka,' I hear myself say, 'you can glue on some hair, paint yourself white, come to school wearing a leather coat down to your toes and somebody will still say something mean to hurt your feelings. That's how it goes at this school.'...[I] lean close to the mirror on the wall, and think of Daddy. 'Maleeka,' he used to say, 'you got to see yourself with your own eyes. That's the only way you gonna know who you really are.'" (Pages 48–49)

Questions for Writing or Discussion

- What lesson does Maleeka eventually learn about the importance of external appearances?
- What does it take for us to look beyond our external appearances and really get to know and appreciate ourselves? How can we strive in this direction?

Theme: Surviving and Coping in a Hostile Environment

"I didn't want to go to school after a while, but Momma said I had to. So I came up with a plan. I went to Char and said if she would let me hang out with her, you know, kind of look out for me, I would do her homework and stuff...She gave in after a while, and kids started leaving me alone." (Page 15)

Questions for Writing or Discussion

- Do you think that Maleeka's plan to trade homework for protection is a good one?
- Does the torment that Maleeka experiences justify her decision to cheat?
- Is there anyone else that Maleeka could have turned to for help?
- What does Maleeka sacrifice emotionally in order to gain Char's assistance?

"Lately it's hard to know where Akeelma's thoughts begin and mine end. I mean, I might be starting off with her talking about how she is scared with the smallpox spreading around the ship and killing people. Then I end up the same paragraph with Akeelma saying she's scared that maybe people will always think she's ugly. But I'm really talking about myself. I'm scared people will always think I'm ugly." (Page 96)

"See you later, Midnight,' [John-John] says to me. I can feel myself getting mad, my fists balling up at my sides. Then I remember a poem about midnight that I seen in one of those poetry books at the library. The words of the poem come tumbling in my head, and I start to smile." (Page 133)

Questions for Writing or Discussion

- How does Maleeka's journaling assignment turn into a way for her to deal with her feelings? How can reflective writing be used as a way to cope with one's problems?
- Maleeka uses a poem as a way to anchor herself and deal with her anger. What other strategies can you think of for coping effectively when you are on the receiving end of cruel behavior?

Theme: Peer Pressure and Coercion

"You got to go along with Char if you want to get along with her. You can't be all sensitive. That's what Char says." (Page 12)

"I know Char's plan ain't gonna mean nothing but trouble for me. But I got to go along, anyhow. Nobody ever turns their back on Char. Not unless they're tired of living or something stupid like that." (Page 136)

Questions for Writing or Discussion

- What tactics does Char use to coerce her peers into "going along"?
- Why does Maleeka decide to vandalize Miss Saunders' classroom, and act against her conscience and better judgment? What alternatives does Maleeka have in this situation?
- In your experience, do peer pressure and intimidation play a role in the way that students behave and treat one another? What would it take for you to rise above such pressure and do what you know is right?

[After being relentlessly teased on a bus trip to Washington, D.C.] "I looked at Caleb. He gave me the goofiest smile and said, 'Sorry, Maleeka...' and moved to the front of the bus with his boys. They slapped him five. Everybody laughed and clapped. I sat there with a frozen smile on my face like that stupid Mona Lisa. Till this day, I don't know nothing about Washington, D.C., just that I don't ever want to go there no more." (Page 14)

"...I write: Why bother with that smelly bathroom if no one else cares about it? Caleb writes back: You have to take a stand when things aren't right. I look at him and wonder why he didn't take a stand last year when we was on the bus, and everybody was making fun of how black I am." (Page 107)

Questions for Writing or Discussion

- How did it affect Maleeka when Caleb deserted her on the bus?
- In the story, Caleb prides himself on "taking a stand when things aren't right" and takes actions considered strange by his peers. Why do you think he is unable to stand up for Maleeka on the bus?
- Have you ever been in a situation where you neglected to take a stand against bullying or cruelty because of what others might have said or thought?
- Have you ever been an ally to someone who experienced bullying or cruelty? How did it feel to intervene? What do you think your actions meant to the person you supported?

Theme: Responding to Bullying

"Bad things happen around here to people who can't keep their mouth shut." (Page 29) "I ain't no squealer. Never was, never will be." (Page 131) "Least you're keeping your mouth shut...Squealing on your friends ain't even cool." (Page 153)

"You would think after beating those boys off John-John, I wouldn't be afraid of nothing or nobody. But I'm scared like nobody's business...[but] I don't have no choice, I gotta tell." (Pages 159-160)

Questions for Writing or Discussion

- Do you think Maleeka was right for telling the truth about Char's and the twins' involvement in the vandalism incident?
- When should you report an incident or seek help from an adult? When should you keep a confidence or secret?
- Are there consequences among your peers for "squealing" or "tattling"? What does it take to speak up anyway when you know it is the right thing to do?

"...I spend a lot of time trying to fit in here at McClenton Middle School. I ain't letting nobody ruin it for me, especially no teacher." (Page 2)

"So you see, I got my own troubles. I don't nee no scar-faced teacher making things worse. But I got this feeling Miss Saunders is gonna mess things up for me real bad." (Page 5)

“He’s my color, but since second grade he’s been teasing me about being too black. Last year when I thought things couldn’t get no worse, he came up with this here song. Now, here this woman comes talking that black stuff. Stirring him up again.” (Page 4)

Questions for Writing or Discussion

- Are there times when you think it is worse for a teacher to intervene in a situation than to ignore it? Do adults sometimes act with the right intentions but make things worse?
- What do you want adults in your school to do when teasing or bullying occurs? What would make you feel most safe and supported?

“‘You cleaned the boys’ room?’ I’m frowning up my face...‘Disgusting...Ain’t nobody at this school crazy enough to clean the bathrooms.’...But Caleb, he does seem crazy sometimes. He and his dad go feed the homeless on weekends, and once a month Caleb volunteers at the senior citizens home. Last year, he even got the school to hold a neighborhood cleanup day...‘You should’ve asked the janitor to help.’ ‘He’s doing his job,’ Caleb says. ‘It’s the rest of us that aren’t doing ours.’...I write: Why bother with that smelly bathroom if no one else cares about it? Caleb writes back: You have to take a stand when things aren’t right.” (Page 107)

Questions for Writing or Discussion

- Why does Maleeka see Caleb’s acts of kindness and service as “crazy”? Would these acts be considered “weird” in your school?
- How might helping others and community involvement affect the way you feel about yourself? How might it change your perspective on your peers or social situation?
- Do you agree with Caleb that “you have to take a stand when things aren’t right”? What are the obstacles to taking a stand? What are the opportunities that exist?
- What would it take to change students’ expectations in your school so that compassion was the rule instead of the exception?

Theme: Standing Up for Oneself

“Up till now, I just took it. The name calling. The pushing and shoving and cheating off me. Then last week something happened...That’s when I made up my mind. Enough is enough. I deserve better than for people to treat me any old way they want. But saying that is one thing, making it happen is something else.” (Page 5)

“Up till now, I just took it. The name calling. The pushing and shoving and cheating off me. Then last week something happened...That’s when I made up my mind. Enough is enough. I deserve better than for people to treat me any old way they want. But saying that is one thing, making it happen is something else.” (Page 5)

Questions for Writing or Discussion

- What do you think was the turning point for Maleeka? What brought her to the point where she felt that she deserved better than the bullying she had endured?
- Have you ever resolved to make a change, but had difficulty following through? What small steps can we take to stand up for ourselves and improve our situations?

“Liking myself didn’t come overnight...I took a lot of wrong turns to find out who I really was. You will, too...It takes a long time to accept yourself for who you are. To see the poetry in your walk...To look in the mirror and like what you see, even when it doesn’t look like anyone else’s idea of beauty.” (Page 19)

“You gotta love yourself, baby. If you don’t, who will?” (Page 71)

“‘Call me by my name! I hear Akeelma say, and I scream it out, too. ‘Call me by my name! I am not ugly. I am not stupid. I am Maleeka Madison, and, yeah, I’m black, real black, and if you don’t like me, too bad ‘cause black is the skin I’m in!’” (Page 167)

Questions for Writing or Discussion

- What did it take for Maleeka to finally stand up against Char? Can you imagine yourself standing strong in a similar situation? Why or why not?
- Sometimes we associate with people or situations that are bad for our self-esteem. What things can we do to increase our self-acceptance and help us feel comfortable with the “skin we’re in”?

Extension Activities

See the extension activities that follow for ideas on ways to increase empathy using *The Skin I’m In*.

The Skin I'm In Extension Activities

The extension activities below use *The Skin I'm In* to help students increase empathy and cope with bias and bullying.

Shades of Bias

A prominent theme in *The Skin I'm In* is the teasing and bullying that Maleeka experiences because she is dark skinned. While racial bias is a common theme in literature, it is rare to read about bias based on skin tone either within or from outside the African American community. Use the following readings to engage students in a discussion of the conscious or unconscious bias that exists around skin tone.

- *Get Back (Black, Brown and White)* by Big Bill Broonzy
- Skin Tone Bias: Focus on the Research
- *Harlem Sweeties* by Langston Hughes

The blues song, [Get Back](#), confronts Jim Crow racism by playing upon the old saying, “if you’re white, you’re alright; if you’re brown, stick around; but if you’re black, get back.” Ask students to consider why Broonzy differentiates between black and brown when he sings about the impact of segregation and racism. Ask students if they have observed differences in the way light and dark skinned people are perceived or treated in the contemporary U.S.

Next, read [Skin Tone Bias: Focus on the Research](#), and discuss the stereotypes that exist around skin tone and the consequences of this bias on society.

Finally, have students read Langston Hughes’ [Harlem Sweeties](#), which is a tribute to the varied and beautiful shades of color exhibited by African American woman. Ask students to consider ways to recast negative perceptions of skin tone difference to appreciate the natural variation that exists within all racial groups.

What Does Your Face Say to the World?

In Chapter 4, Miss Saunders asks the class to respond to the question, “What does your face say to the world?” Instruct students to write an essay or poem, or create a self-portrait that answers this question. Have volunteers share their work with the class and discuss the ways in which our self-image corresponds or conflicts with others’ perceptions of us. Follow up this discussion with the “Impressions” extension activity.

Impressions

Divide students into pairs (preferably so that each student is partnered with a classmate s/he doesn’t know very well). Instruct students to make a list with the following information about their partners based solely on their impressions (and no verbal communication): (1) Favorite hobby or activity; (2) Type of music s/he listens to; (3) Job/profession s/he wants as an adult. If you add other items to the list, make sure to choose categories that are not too personal or controversial, and encourage partners to record responses in a way that maintains an atmosphere of respect and safety. After students have completed their lists, have them share with their partners to find out how accurate they were. Discuss the following questions as a class:

- Were your impressions of your partner accurate? What were they based on?
- Were you surprised by your partner’s impressions of you? Does your face say to the world what you think it does?
- What are the dangers of making assumptions about others? How can they lead to stereotypes and other negative behavior?

Seeing the World through Different Eyes

In Chapter 5, Miss Saunders asks the class to pretend they're teenagers living in the seventeenth century and to write a diary chronicling their experiences. She wants her students to know what it feels like to live in somebody else's skin and to see the world through somebody else's eyes. Assign students to interview someone who lives in a "different skin" than they do. This may be someone of a different race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, age group, religion, someone who is differently abled, etc. Ask students to write a report that highlights the ways in which the perspectives and experiences of their interview subject are different from their own. Discuss with students the ways in which "seeing the world through different eyes" can increase our empathy toward others and reduce prejudiced or exclusionary behavior.

Using "Anchors" to Remain Grounded

In Chapter 24, Maleeka's temper begins to flare when she is called an insulting name. She is able to center herself and release her anger by remembering the words to a poem that have a special meaning to her. Maleeka uses the poem as an "anchor"—a way to ground herself, remind her what is most important, and keep control of her dignity. Ask students to identify an anchor that they use or might use in the future in the face of bullying or negative behavior. Anchors may be a physical object (such as a photo or a piece of jewelry), an inspirational quote, a meaningful song, a mental image, a friend, or anything else that helps them to remain positive. Students can be encouraged to describe, visually depict, or physically display their anchors in class, and to describe strategies for keeping positive and composed when teasing or taunting occurs.

Get Back (Black, Brown and White)

by Big Bill Broonzy

Big Bill Broonzy (1893–1958) was probably the most important Chicago blues artist of the Thirties and early Forties. When he recorded *Black, Brown and White* in 1949—which was a powerful attack on racism—most record companies refused to distribute it. Two years later, French writer-critic Hugues Panassié and record company officials in Paris helped him get it in circulation.

This little song that I'm singin' about,
People, you all know that it's true,
If you're black and gotta work for livin',
Now, this is what they will say to you,
They says: "If you was white,
You's alright,
If you was brown,
Stick around,
But if you's black, oh, brother,
Get back, get back, get back."

I was in a place one night,
They was all havin' fun,
They was all buyin' beer and wine,
But they would not sell me none.
They said: "If you was white,
You's alright,
If you was brown,
You could stick around,
But as you's black, hmm, hmm, brother,
Get back, get back, get back."

I went to an employment office,
I got a number and I got in line,
They called everybody's number,
But they never did call mine.
They said: "If you was white,
You's alright,

If you was brown,
You could stick around,
But as you's black, hmm, hmm, brother,
Get back, get back, get back."

Me and a man was workin' side by side,
Now, this is what it meant:
They was payin' him a dollar an hour,
And they was payin' me fifty cent.
They said: "If you was white,
You'd be alright,
If you was brown,
You could stick around,
But as you's black, oh, brother,
Get back, get back, get back."

I helped win sweet victories,
With my plow and hoe,
Now, I want you to tell me, brother,
What you gonna do 'bout the old Jim Crow?
Now, if you is white,
You's alright,
If you's brown,
Stick around,
But if you's black, oh, brother,
Get back, get back, get back.

Skin Tone Bias: Focus on the Research

A 2002 study by Keith B. Maddox and Stephanie A. Gray of Tufts University found that both black and white populations instinctively categorize black people by their skin tone, and both are aware of the stereotype that dark-skinned black people are inferior.

In the first part of the study, subjects were shown pictures of light- and dark-skinned black people, along with neutral statements. The subjects were then asked to match the faces with the statements. In the second part of the study, the subjects were asked to list the traits they believed to be commonly associated with light-skinned and dark-skinned blacks.

The study found that light skinned black people were more likely to be described as intelligent, attractive or wealthy, while dark-skinned blacks were more apt to be described as poor, criminal or tough/aggressive.

The study-which offers some of the first scientific evidence about how racial stereotypes operate in society-was carefully designed to focus on skin tones, resulting in scientific evidence that showed racial bias and prejudice are related to the lightness or darkness of a black person's skin, rather than other features such as hair texture, lip fullness, or nose width.

Kendrick T. Brown, a professor at the University of Michigan, has reviewed other studies that show a significant relationship between skin tone and level of education, personal and family income, rate of unemployment, occupational prestige, and self-esteem. "The effects of skin tone are not only historical curiosities from a legacy of slavery and racism," conclude the Tufts researchers, "but present-day mechanisms that influence who gets what in America."

To learn more, read:

["Cognitive Representations of Black Americans: Reexploring the Role of Skin Tone"](#) by Keith B. Maddox and Stephanie A. Gray, Tufts University, *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 28(2): 250-259.

["Consequences of Skin Tone Bias for African Americans: Resource Attainment and Psychological/Social Functioning"](#) by Kendrick T. Brown, University of Michigan, *The Program for Research on Black Americans, African American Research Perspectives* (Spring 1998).

Harlem Sweeties

By Langston Hughes



Langston Hughes, February 29, 1936
Carl Van Vechten, photographer

Have you dug the spill

Of Sugar Hill?

Cast your gims

On this sepia thrill:

Brown sugar lassie, caramel treat,

Honey-gold baby

Sweet enough to eat.

Peach-skinned girlie,

Coffee and cream,

Chocolate darlie

Out of a dream.

Walnut tinted

Or cocoa brown,

Pomegranate-lipped

Pride of the town.

Rich cream-colored

To plum-tinted black,

Feminine sweetness

In Harlem's no lack.

Glow of the quince

To blush of the rose.

Persimmon bronze

To cinnamon toes.

Blackberry cordial,

Virginia Dare wine—

All those sweet colors

Flavor Harlem of mine!

Walnut or cocoa,

Let me repeat:

Caramel, brown sugar,

A chocolate treat.

Molasses taffy,

Coffee and cream,

Licorice, clove, cinnamon

To a honey-brown dream.

Ginger, wine-gold,

Persimmon, blackberry,

All through the spectrum

Harlem girls vary—

So if you want to know beauty's

Rainbow-sweet thrill,

Stroll down luscious,

Delicious, fine Sugar Hill.

Reprint with permission from Langston Hughes, "Harlem Sweeties" in *Collected Poems*. Copyright © 1994 by The Estate of Langston Hughes. Reprinted with the permission of Harold Ober Associates Incorporated.

A Conversation with the Author of *The Skin I'm In*

Excerpt of Live Chat with Sharon G. Flake (July 18, 2002)

Sharon G. Flake is the author of *The Skin I'm In* (the 1999 Coretta Scott King/John Steptoe Award for New Authors winner) and *Money Hungry* (a 2002 Coretta Scott King Honor book).

NYPL: Perhaps you've read about Maleeka Madison or Raspberry Hill? Maleeka is so desperate to be accepted at school that she will do anything to be part of the "in" crowd. Raspberry is starved for money so she and her mom won't ever have to live on the streets again. Both Maleeka and Raspberry are heroines in books by today's guest author, Sharon Flake. In just a few moments you will be able to ask Ms. Flake about her books, "The Skin I'm In" and "Money Hungry" and find out from her the stories behind her books.

Student: What inspired you to write ["The Skin I'm In"]?

Sharon Flake: I have a beautiful dark-skinned daughter, and when she was little I started telling her stories about incredible dark-skinned girls who did wonderful things. And, as a black woman I know that if you're dark in our communities, people don't always say nice things about you, so I wanted to deal with that issue. So no, it's not about my daughter, who was 7 when I wrote this book. That's why I wrote it, just to help people learn to like themselves, no matter what other people say.

Student: Does "The Skin I'm In" reflect your own experiences as a teenager?

Sharon Flake: Yes, and no. Yes in the sense that when I was in middle school I felt very small and insecure and, like Maleeka, I didn't think I was pretty or smart enough. I would stay in my house a lot, and read books and watch TV rather than going out. Even though I got fairly good grades, that's just the age when you get messages from the people around you—especially others the same age—that you don't have it going on; that there's some problem with you. So in that respect me and Maleeka are alike. That has stayed with me for a lot of my life. I still have insecurities. There's a chapter in the book where Maleeka and Charlese destroyed a classroom. That also happened in a class when I was in school, although they didn't do as much as damage as Maleeka and Charlese did, but I still got called down to the office. But that's as close as it came to what Maleeka went through. In my life I think I sometimes feel too much, and so I can relate to what my characters are going through.

Student: Why do you think Maleeka was friends with Charlese? Couldn't she see she was being used?

Sharon Flake: Yes. Maleeka knew she was being used, but she thought it was the best she could do to get what she wanted, which was to be like everybody else. To dress the way they dressed. To be popular like everybody else, or at least hang out with the popular kids. Sometimes even grown-ups do the wrong things for what they think at the time are the right reasons. But usually that just ends up making a big mess out of everything, which Maleeka found out.

Student: Is it your experience that teens can rise above their surroundings?

Sharon Flake: Yup, absolutely! Sometimes life is hard, and that could mean that you're poor, and you live in an area that's not nice, or it could mean that you're rich and you live in the suburbs, but your parents don't pay you any attention. But no matter what, there are usually people around you—a teacher, a rabbi, a preacher, a friend—who will help guide you and give you some good advice if you're willing to listen and work hard. Sometimes young people just need to know they're here on the planet for a purpose. It might not be to be an author, or a doctor, but to be a really loving mother, or a man on the street who decides he really wants to lead the boy scout troop. Young people have to know, even when times are hard, that they're here to do some important business.

Student: Who was your childhood hero or idol?

Sharon Flake: To tell the truth, it could just be my bad memory, but I don't remember having one! I really didn't particularly to my knowledge. My mom and my dad. My father is so very smart, and I still call him up to ask him about things. If it's the Middle East he'll tell me the history of the region, and how everyone ended up fighting. And my mom, who scrubbed floors for

a living when we were growing up. As a writer, Langston Hughes who writes about black people, giving them a lot of dignity and wisdom, and I think that's what I do with my characters. I don't think you always have to look outside your own family or your church or your neighborhood for your heroes.

Student: How does an upcoming storybook writer get started, or what steps must I take first?

Sharon Flake: When I was in college I had a professor who said "Writers write." And I always thought that was the dumbest thing I ever heard. But since I got published I know what he means. I have a lot of people who tell me they want to be an author, but they don't write. Or they finished a manuscript 3 years ago, and it's in a drawer. And I thought "Oh, writers don't TALK about writing. They write." So my advice is to write. Write short stories, and if you don't finish one, that's okay, start another one. Take a photo from a magazine, and write about what's happening to that person in the photo. Just make it up! A lot of young people talk about being published, and I just say this is America; everyone can be published once. But if you want to be published more than once, and have a career in writing, you need to learn to do it well. Go to the library and get books about writing. How to tell build a plot. How to write dialogue.

Student: Do you think that your books have universal appeal, or can they only really be understood by African Americans?

Sharon Flake: I think the surprise to me as an author was how universal people see them. I received an email a couple of months ago from a college student in Japan who had picked up "The Skin I'm In" in London, and loved it. I get black boys who loved both books, which surprises me because most of my characters are girls. I hear from white girls and women, Asian college students. Somebody's picked on all of us, apparently.

Reprinted with permission from the New York Public Library. For the full transcript visit www.nypl.org/author-chat-sharon-g-flake.