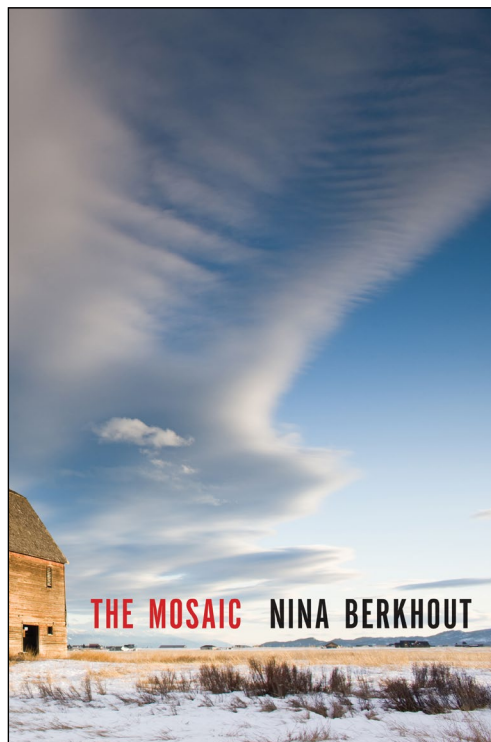




GROUNDWOOD STUDY GUIDES

The Mosaic

Written by
Nina Berkhout



A teenaged pacifist and a PTSD-afflicted Marine form an unexpected bond over a secret buried in a decommissioned nuclear missile silo.

CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS

Ages 14 and up / Grades 9 and up

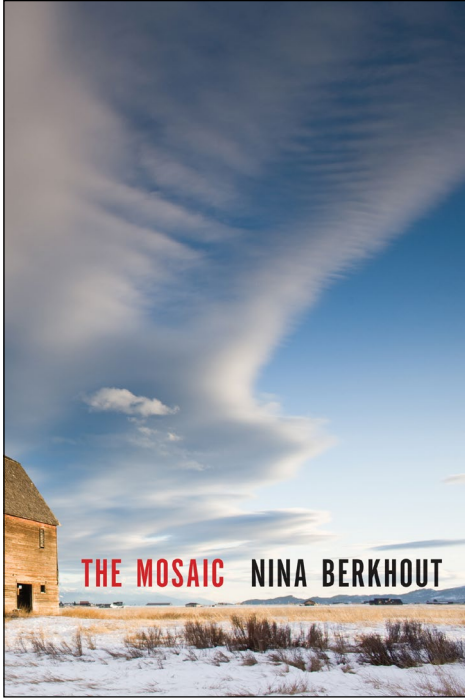
YOUNG ADULT FICTION / Coming of Age

5.5 x 8.25 / 272 pages

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BOOK DESCRIPTION

Twyla Jane Lee has one goal. To finish senior year so she can get out of her military hometown of Halo, Montana. But to graduate, she needs to complete forty hours of community service, and that means helping out a rude and reclusive former Marine named Gabriel Finch.

A young veteran of the conflicts in the Middle East, Gabriel spends his days holed up in a decommissioned nuclear missile silo on his family farm. Twyla assumes he's just another doomsday prepper, readying his underground shelter for Armageddon. But soon she finds out the truth, and it takes her breath away.

Gradually the two misfits form a bond, and Twyla begins to unearth the secrets that have left the Marine battling ghosts. Her discoveries force her to question her views on the wars until she realizes that even if she gets out of Halo, she won't ever be able to leave Gabriel Finch's story behind.

A beautifully written and thought-provoking novel about a teen facing the collision of love, ideals and uncertainty about her own future.

PRE-READING QUESTIONS

If this discussion is taking place as a class, designate a student to act as secretary to take notes on answers to these questions. If students are reading the novel individually, recommend they write a journal entry using the below questions to guide their anticipations of the novel.

As a class, consider the title of this novel. Ask students what topic might this book be about? What does the term “mosaic” evoke? Are students familiar with or have they seen any famous or historical mosaics?

How do these expectations align with the cover of the book? What sort of setting do students expect this novel to take place in? How familiar or unfamiliar does this kind of setting feel to students? Do they have experiences with this kind of setting? What other books have they read that take place in a similar setting?

Now read the dust jacket description. Ask students who they expect the main characters of this novel to be? From this small portion of text, have them describe their first impressions of the characters’ personalities or tendencies. What do they anticipate the main theme of this novel to be?

Finally, read the author’s bio. Have students read anything else by Nina Berkhout? What do we learn about the author from this brief description?

POST-READING DISCUSSION QUESTIONS AND ACTIVITIES

RE-EXAMINING PREDICTIONS

After finishing the novel, revisit the notes made in response to the above pre-reading questions. Which predictions most aligned with the story as it unfolded? What items strayed most from the actual story? In general, what were the most surprising elements of this novel and why?

LOCATING URUK

In his mosaic, Gabriel seeks to create an image of a Middle Eastern city, Uruk, where he experienced trauma in his military service. In the novel, this city is depicted as the oldest city in the world that was still around at the time of Gabriel's tours. Have students use internet or library resources to research the city of Uruk. Where is it on a map? Students can make a Venn diagram to compare the similarities and differences between the real Uruk and the Uruk in the novel. Ask them why might the author have chosen this city to play such a prominent role in this story? Finally, have students spend some time looking up ancient mosaics that have been recovered from the archeological sites in Uruk. What stands out to them about these mosaics?

TALENTS

Creative talents and aptitudes play a significant role in *The Mosaic*. Some characters pursue and develop their talents others do not. The protagonist, Twyla, seems to view talent as a way to get out of Halo — both for herself and Gabriel. Yet she also seems to believe that for a talent to lead to success, it must be practiced and strengthened. This is one reason she practices photography so much and helps Gabriel finish his mosaic. Have students make a list of the characters in this novel and the different talents they are associated with. Who among them makes an effort to develop their skills further? Who gives up? What are students' own talents? How can you intentionally develop them?

As a class, organize a talent show to which each student contributes either a talent or behind-the-scenes support. This may be informal and put on during a single class period, or it may be open to the community to raise money for an important cause — such as medical care for veterans.

GILGAMESH

Gabriel derives much of his inspiration and sense of purpose from the ancient epic of Gilgamesh. Based on depictions in the novel or students' own research, what was this epic about? Ask students, why do you think the author chose to weave it into *The Mosaic*? What, if any, connections can they draw between the story and setting of Gilgamesh and those of *The Mosaic*?

EKPHRASIS

“Ekphrasis” is a term that describes an author’s attempt to describe physical works of art (like paintings or sculptures) in words in the context of a literary work. This convention features prominently in *The Mosaic*. Find passages in the book that describe works of art — most notably Gabriel’s mosaic, but also Twyla’s and her grandfather’s photographs. Ask students, how does the author create a picture in your mind of these pieces of art? Have students select a partner who has also read this book, and each partner can try to draw a picture of Gabriel’s mosaic based on the author’s descriptions. How are their depictions similar or different from one another?

“STILL LIFE”

On p. 223 of *The Mosaic*, Gabriel makes an observation about “still life” paintings, an artistic genre that typically features a collection of objects at a specific point in time. He comments, “I’ve never understood what they mean by still life. . . . Does it mean life’s gone still and all the stuff in these pictures is dead or dying? Or is it saying, here’s life frozen for a bit? Or does it mean more, like, even with all the crap going on in the world, still, there is life, and here it is?” We know that this is significant, because the entire novel ends with the phrase “still life” (p. 267).

Ask students, what does Gabriel mean by this statement? Can one interpret *The Mosaic* as a “still life” in the form of a novel? If so, by which thread(s) of Gabriel’s definition does *The Mosaic* constitute a still life? Have students use examples from the text to support their answers.

THE EFFECTS OF WAR

In *The Mosaic*, Twyla gains a firsthand glimpse of the aftershocks of war in the form of Gabriel’s trauma, anxiety, evidence of substance abuse and other issues. By fostering a friendship with him, she learns to practice compassion and understanding even though she identifies as a pacifist. Why do students think this is a significant part of her transformation? Ask students: In your own life, what issues have you learned to be more sensitive and understanding about?

Have students research an issue related to war and veterans that surfaced in this book, such as PTSD, art therapy for veterans, mental healthcare for veterans, re-assimilation of veterans, etc. “Research” can take various forms, including a personal interview with a veteran in a student’s own life. Students can communicate what they’ve learned through this research by writing an essay, creating an infographic, podcast episode, public service announcement video or some other creative project.

AUDIO TOUR

Many museums hand out headphones for patrons to listen to audio tours as they walk through the exhibits. Based on all the descriptions of Gabriel’s mosaic, have students write and record an audio tour, giving visitors a behind-the-scenes glimpse into how the mosaic was made. As with any good tour, the objective is to keep people both interested and informed, so encourage students to describe things in a way that is not only true to the mosaic but also entertaining.

DYSTOPIA, UTOPIA OR SOMEWHERE IN BETWEEN?

With students, discuss the hallmarks of dystopian literature. In what ways could *The Mosaic* be described as a dystopian novel? There are many elements that paint the future of Halo — and the world — in bleak terms. Ask students if by the end of the book, are readers left with hope or despair, a sense of purpose or meaninglessness?

MOSAIC

What is a “mosaic” in artistic terms? Ask students why do they think the author based her novel on a mosaic as opposed to another form of art, like a painting or sculpture? What is special about a mosaic?

In the book, Gabriel’s mosaic is made from bullets, but mosaics can be composed of any particles — from beads to glass tiles to pieces of paper, shells, pixel-sized photographs, etc. Using a medium of their choice, students can create a mosaic picture of one image, character, or scene from the book. Encourage students to read the scene closely to maximize accuracy and detail.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY



Nina Berkhout's debut adult novel, *The Gallery of Lost Species* (Anansi, Thomas Dunne/St. Martin's, Éditions XYZ) was acclaimed by the *Toronto Star* ("Berkhout does a masterful job") and the *Globe and Mail* ("deeply moving"). The novel was named an Indigo and Kobo Best Book and a *Harper's Bazaar* Hottest Breakout Novel. Berkhout is also the author of five poetry collections, including *Elseworlds*, which won the Archibald Lampman Award.