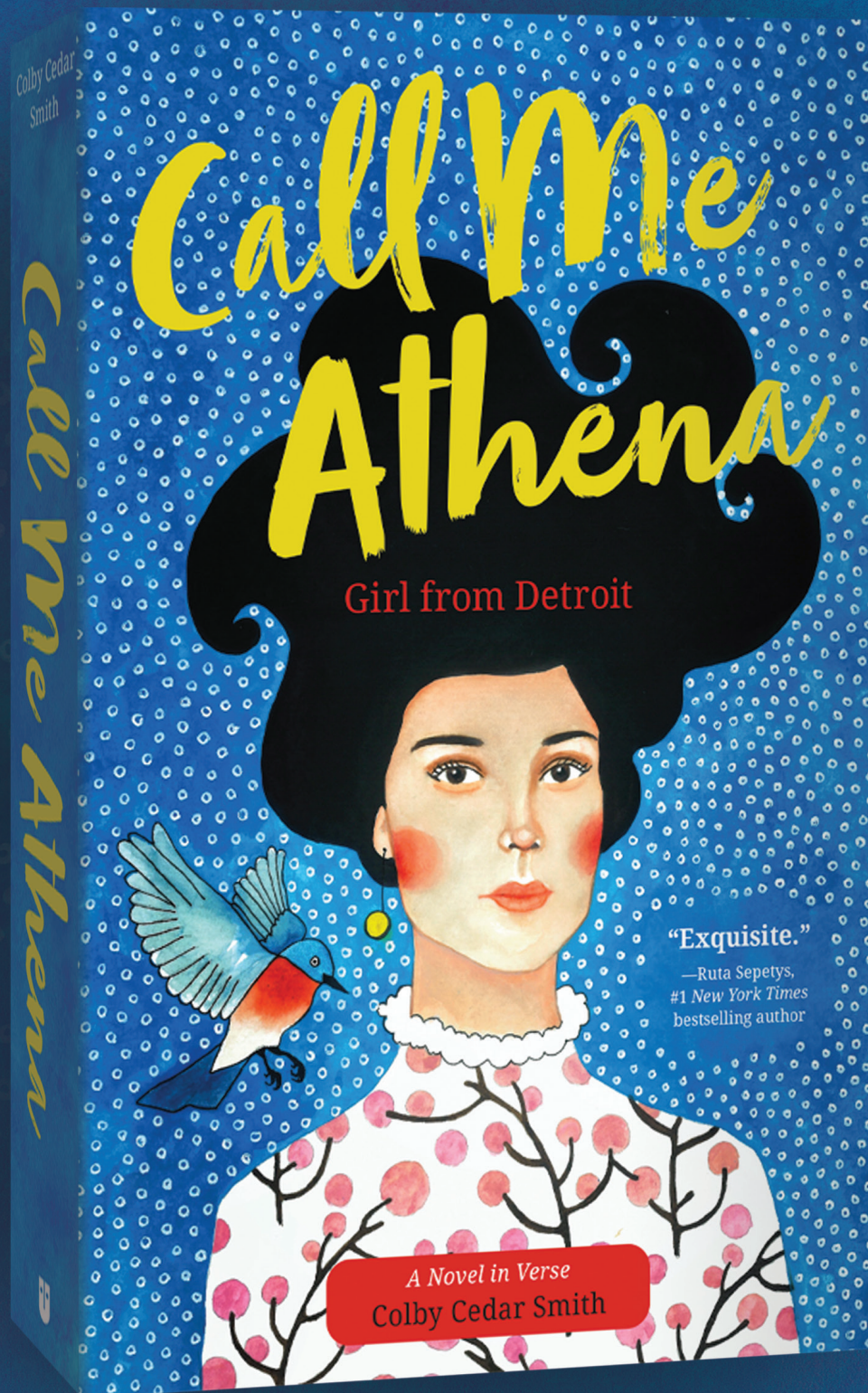


READING GUIDE



Call Me Athena: Girl from Detroit

Call Me Athena: Girl from Detroit is a historical novel written in verse. The main character, Mary, is the daughter of a Greek father and French mother who came to America to begin a new life after World War I devastated their homes. As a first generation American growing up in Detroit during the Great Depression, Mary finds herself questioning her identity and longing for more—the freedom to choose her own husband and to have a job outside of the home. She feels at odds with her parents until the discovery of a packet of WWI-era letters gives her a glimpse into her parents’ past and shows her there is more that connects them than she ever knew. Epic in scope and rich in historical detail, this is a beautifully written novel about the complexities of family, love, identity, and the American Dream.

Discussion Questions:

1. While this book is a work of fiction, the author includes footnotes and backmatter that provide historical context for the story. How does it change the way you read the book to know that many of the scenes in the book are based on real events? How important do you think it is for historical fiction to be well-researched and documented?
2. The first word in the book is *grief*. What role does grief play in the narrative? Specifically, how do experiences of grief and loss both isolate the main characters (Gio, Jeanne, and Mary) from each other and connect them to each other?
3. On page 9, Mary asks, “Why did my parents come to America?” By the end of the narrative, how has she answered this question? If you have parents, grandparents, or great-grandparents who immigrated to America, ask your family what influenced their decision.
4. Examine the author’s use of figurative language on page 15. What does this metaphor reveal about cultural ideas regarding gender roles? After growing up in America, how are Mary’s ideas about gender different? What was Mary’s mother, Jeanne, taught about gender roles as a girl in France? Why do you think gender roles differ from culture to culture?
5. According to Mary, what does it mean to be a “Good Greek Girl”? (pages 29-30) By these standards, would the goddess Athena be considered a “Good Greek Girl”? Why do you think Mary identifies with Athena?
6. How does Colby Cedar Smith reveal that the letters Mary finds were written by her parents (Gio and Jeanne)? Why do you think she does not reveal the identity of Petit Oiseau and Loup earlier in the book? (Note: See pages 244 and 332)
7. Why does Mary want to have a job? Why are her parents resistant to this idea? How does she convince her parents to let her work in her father’s store?
8. Contrast Jeanne’s life in France and Gio’s life in Greece before the war with their lives during the war. How does living through the war change each of them?
9. Consider the advice given by Gio’s childhood priest: “Life is work. Life is duty. / The important part / is to enjoy the small pleasures” (111). Do you agree with this philosophy? Do the characters in this book (Gio, Jeanne, and Mary) seem to follow this advice?

10. Explain the symbolism of the leaving and wedding rituals on page 116-17. Why do you think traditions and rituals are important to people? What purpose do they serve in society? To answer this question, you may want to reflect on traditions and rituals that were cancelled during the pandemic (weddings, graduations, etc.)
11. Look at the verses on page 121-4. How did roles for women change as a result of WWI. Did women appreciate these changes?
12. Consider the letters on pages 126-7 and the verses on pages 128-9. Why do you think the author juxtaposes these two sections?
13. The author uses allusions to Greek mythology to express the way characters feel. Choose one of these passages and explain how the allusion expands your understanding of the text. Some examples are on the following pages: 6, 131, 170- 171, 240.
14. Explain how the verses on pages 133-38 and pages 176-80 help develop the character of Mary's mother, Jeanne.
15. Analyze Mary's relationship with her twin sister Marguerite. Why do you think Marguerite tells their father about Mary's relationship with Billy?
16. Look closely at pages 205-17. How does volunteering at the soup kitchen change Mary's perspective?
17. Explain the meaning of this simile: "Speaking a new language / is like wearing a new / pair of glasses" (245).
18. An epiphany is a sudden insight or revelation. Explain Mary's epiphany when she realizes that the letters she found were written by her parents (514-17)

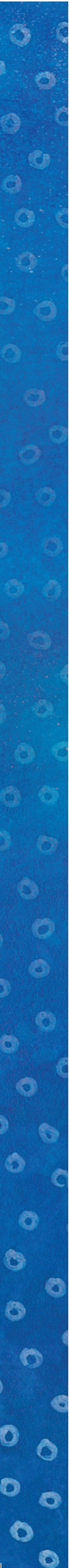


Activities:

1. Mary's mother tells her that her "eyes are the colors of cultures clashing" (14). Mary struggles with ambivalence about her cultural heritage, wondering "What would it feel like/ to have great-grandparents / who arrived on the Mayflower? (36). People who grow up in a different culture from the one their parents grew up in and who live in a country different from the one their parents grew up in are referred to as Third Culture Kids (TCK) or Third Culture Individuals (TKI). Research the challenges and benefits of being a TCK and write an essay examining Mary as an example of a Third Culture Kid.
2. Examine the verses on pages 18-19, 86, and 442. Use the city of Detroit to research the impact of industrialization on communities. What has happened to Detroit since the 1930s? Debate whether or not you would want a large factory to open in your community.
3. Mary's narrative takes place during The Great Depression (See pages 21-23, 205-213, 344-6). Research this period of American history, paying particular attention to contrast between Herbert Hoover and Franklin Delano Roosevelt's response to this economic crisis. *Call Me Athena* ends in 1934, at the very start of FDR's presidency. Based on your research, write an epilogue that reveal what you think happens to Mary during the next 10 years (1935-1945).

Note: You may want to start your research by looking at <https://dupuisdepression.weebly.com/>

4. Jeanne and Gio's sections of the narrative take place during World War I. Based on this book, generate a list of questions you or your class has about WWI and research the answers. The Imperial War Museum (<https://www.iwm.org.uk/>) is a comprehensive resource about the war and has online archives with primary sources.
5. Mary's mother Jeanne works as a nurse during WWI. During this war, many soldiers and volunteers wrote poetry to document their experiences. Compare Jeanne's verses about working in the hospital with poems by WWI nurses such as Winifred Letts, Eva Dobell, and Vera Brittain. <https://warpoets.org.uk/worldwar1/>
6. The women in *Call Me Athena* (Violetta, Jeanne, and Mary) are connected by a desire to work. Why is working important to each character? What obstacles stand in their way? Write an argumentation paper about whether or not the challenges that Violetta, Jeanne, and Mary encounter are still an issue for women in the workplace. How are the challenges different for married women? How are they different for women with children?
7. Examine the author's description of the labor uprising on pages 228-233 and research the labor movement in America, in particular the rise of the UAW (United Auto Workers Union) and the USW (United Steel Workers Union). What is a labor union? Why did labor unions form? If you had an opportunity to join or form a union, would you want to do it? Debate this as a class.

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8. *Call Me Athena* is a novel written in verse. Examine the book for the author's use of different elements of poetry (ex. metaphor, simile, imagery, personification, repetition, alliteration) and create a poster that defines each term along with the example you found in the text.

 9. After Mary's mother writes a letter to Eleanor Roosevelt, her family receives a surprise response (see pages 370, 411-14). Traditionally, the First Lady of the United States has used her position to advocate for issues that she finds meaningful important. For example, Nancy Reagan worked on efforts to stop drug abuse, and Michelle Obama was committed to helping children have healthy and active lifestyles. Research Eleanor Roosevelt's work as First Lady of the United States and then choose another First Lady and give a speech introducing her biography and advocacy work to your classmates (Note to Teachers: You may choose to randomly assign a First Lady to each student to ensure a variety of presentations).

 10. An ekphrastic poem is a poem written about a work of art. Pages 483-9 contain an ekphrastic poem written about Diego Rivera's Detroit Industry Murals. You can watch a video about these murals here: <https://tinyurl.com/w6hbbhey> and you can view them here: <https://www.dia.org/riveracourt> Choose a work of art that you admire and compose an ekphrastic poem about the work you selected. As a class, create an in-person or virtual gallery that combines pictures of the art with the poems written about them.