Day 5 – Teacher Read Aloud

Directions: Select and Read Aloud several excerpts from Mark Mathabane’s novel Kaffir Boy. Discuss the mental images created, any feelings or emotions inspired by Mathabane’s words, and the message or theme behind the excerpts.

THEME: IDENTITY

My father’s response was more or less typical of that of other men in the yard. So when my mother and other women in the yard sought ways of escaping from the police – at times hiding in ditches, at times in outhouses, at times in trees, at times on rooftops, at times in secret underground hollows and at times waking in the middle of the night and leaving home to drift along some faraway street until the police were gone – he and other men would frown, and, with affectations of bravery, continue with business as usual. For a long time I did not understand why my father and other men acted this way, until one day I heard talk among the womenfolk that the real reason why their husbands refused to run away was that they considered it cowardly and unmanly to run away from other men (4.11).

THEME: The black men of Alexandra need to save face. Though they don’t want to get arrested, they don’t want to appear cowardly in front of the women. Even if prison and hard labor is brutal and ugly, they choose to endure it, rather than lose face.

Participating in my father’s rituals sometimes led to the most appalling scenes, which invariably made me the laughing stock of my friends, who thought that my father, in his ritual garb, was the most hilarious thing they had ever seen since natives in Tarzan movies. Whenever they laughed at me I would feel embarrassed and would cry. I began seeking ways of distancing myself from my father’s rituals. I found one: I decided I would no longer, in the presence of my friends, speak Venda, my father’s tribal language. I began speaking Zulu, Sotho and Tsonga, the languages of my friends. It worked. I was no longer an object of mockery. My masquerade continued until my father got wind of it.

"My boy," he began. "Who is ruler of this house?"
"You are, Papa," I said with a trembling voice.
"Whose son are you?"
"Yours and Mama's."
"Whose?"
"Yours."
"That's better. Now tell me, which language do I speak?"
"Venda."
"Which does your mama speak?"
"Venda."
"Which should you speak?"
"Venda."
"Then why do I hear you're speaking other tongues; are you a prophet?" (5.3e-46)
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<th>THEME:</th>
<th>Papa tries to instill in Mark an identity similar to his, as a Venda man. The language he speaks is a critical part of his identity. Mark discovers at an early age just how political language can be. He realizes he wants acceptance, not just from his father, but from his peers. As a result, Mark starts speaking the language of his peers to distance himself from his father's culture and be accepted in theirs.</th>
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<td>I was a fool all right, but I was a fool of my own free will. I was not prepared to prostitute myself for food or money. I would rather have died than do that….</td>
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<td>Throughout all the years that I lived in South Africa, people were to call me a fool for refusing to live life the way they did and by doing the things they did. Little did they realize that in our world, the black world, one could only survive if one played the fool, and bided his time. (10.125-126)</td>
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<td>THEME:</td>
<td>Mark charts his own path. He refuses to sell his body, mind, or soul. He’d rather be himself and find freedom than have a full stomach.</td>
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<td>&quot;Pickaninny has one brother and three sisters,&quot; Granny said of me, &quot;and the fifth one is on the way.&quot;</td>
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| "My God! What a large family!" Mrs. Smith exclaimed. "What's the pickaninny's name?"
Using pidgin English, I proceeded not only to give my name and surname, but also my grade in school, home address, tribal affiliation, name of school, principal and teacher – all in a feverish attempt to justify Granny's label of me as a "smart one." (30.68-70). |
| THEME: | Mark is as eager as Granny to demonstrate his intelligence. Mark's entire family feels it reflects well on them to have a relative as smart as Mark. It boosts their collective identity, just as it does his. |
| THEME: RACE | "What's a pass, Mama?" I knew vaguely what a pass was, but not its reality.

"It's an important book that we black people must have in order always, and carry with us at all times."...There was something about it which made me fearful, helpless. But I could not figure out what about it made me feel that way. It seemed a mere book. Yet it was, I was to later find out, the black man's passport to existence. (6.17-18) |
| THEME: | Without the pass, a black man or woman couldn't find a job, legally live anywhere in the black designated urban areas, or move from one place to another without fear of arrest. |