

Study Guide for *The Breadwinner*

Note: Be sure to check all websites listed in this Study Guide to ensure suitability for your class.

Getting Started

- Have students each research two facts about Afghanistan (e.g., languages, religion, population, area, capital, life expectancy, literacy rate, monetary unit, flag, geographical features, climate, historical information, art, architecture, music, media). Have volunteers compile the information for a “Quick Facts” sheet or a bulletin board display.
- Read the Author’s Note (pages 167–69) for background information and context.
- Provide information about the author, Deborah Ellis, from online interviews, videos and the About the Author section on the final page of *The Breadwinner*.
- Talk about the meaning of the term *breadwinner*.
- Display a series of maps of Afghanistan and have students consider its geographical features such as its landlocked situation, bodies of water, regions, major cities and bordering countries. Have them discuss the effects of these features on the people who live there. Have them also figure out where it is relative to your latitudinal location, and its size compared with your province or state.
- Have students view photo essays or other collections of photographs of Afghanistan and have them discuss their responses with a partner or small group.

Questions for Discussion/Writing

Chapter One

1. What characters do you meet in this chapter? Begin character profiles for each one: write their names or sketch the character and write some notes about what you have learned about each of them.
2. How has life changed for Parvana’s family in ten years?
3. Imagine that suddenly you were not allowed to go to school. How would you feel after the first day? After the first month? After a year?

Sample websites for facts on Afghanistan:

[The Central Intelligence Agency / The World Factbook](#)

[Compton’s Britannica](#)

[The Beacon of Hope for Afghan Children Society](#)

[Afghanistan: The Harrison Forman Collection](#)

[Women for Women: Afghanistan](#)

For information about the author, Deborah Ellis, see:

[The Power of One Voice: An Interview with Deborah Ellis](#)

[Deborah Ellis Profile](#)

[Video Clip: Deborah Ellis Reads at Who Will Speak for the Child](#)

[Video Clip: Deborah Ellis interviewed by Shannon Skinner on Extraordinary Women TV](#)

See the maps on pages 4–5 of the book, and encourage students to refer to them as they encounter place names during their reading.

For a collection of photos, see:

[Afghanistan Image Gallery](#)

Some characters reappear in the other books in the series: *Parvana’s Journey*, *Mud City* and *My Name Is Parvana*. Students can continue adding to their character profiles throughout the entire series.

4. How long has it been since the mother and children, except for Parvana, have been outside the house? Imagine you were not allowed to leave your home. How do you think you would cope?
5. What do you learn about the Taliban in this chapter?

Chapter Two

1. What did the soldiers do to the family? Where do you think they have taken the father?
2. Why do you think the books are so important to the family? What do they represent?
3. Draw a sketch of the room where the family lives and its contents.
4. What happened to Hossain, the oldest brother?
5. When you are reading, what techniques do you use to figure out a word you don't know (e.g., read ahead and back to see if it is defined; use the glossary; use context)? How does the author give clues to a word's meaning (e.g., how does "stretched out on a toshak" help a reader understand what a "toshak" is)?

Chapter Three

1. Why did the Taliban order all windows to be painted over with black paint?
2. What emotions did you feel as you were reading this chapter? What caused them?
3. What character strengths has Parvana shown in the novel so far?

Chapter Four

1. What has happened to the mother?
2. How do Parvana and Nooria differ on how they should handle their mother?
3. "Everybody leans on everybody in this family" (page 18). What does Parvana mean by this? Would you say this is true in your own family? How could you be a better support for family and/or friends?

For more about the importance of literacy, see "Faranoz, 14" (page 14) and "Sigrullah, 14" (page 129) in *Kids of Kabul: Living Bravely Through a Never-ending War* by Deborah Ellis. See also this list of resources on librarianship in Afghanistan [Resources on Librarianship in Afghanistan](#) and the International Board on Books for Young People (IBBY) [International Board on Books for Young People](#)

For an account of one girl's experience of the Taliban, see "Angela, 17" (page 89) in *Kids of Kabul*.

The issue of mental illness and depression is revisited throughout the series. See, for example, *Parvana's Journey* (pages 27–29), *Mud City* (pages 89–90) and *My Name Is Parvana* (page 25). See also "Fareeba, 12" (page 64) in *Kids of Kabul*.

Chapter Five

1. What are your first impressions of Mrs. Weera? Find two things she says or does that give you a strong sense of her character.
2. Parvana is responsible for bringing in water for the family. Why is it such an important and tiring job? Why must the water be boiled before they can drink it?
3. A reference to an Afghan Women's Union appears on page 57. What kind of services and support do you think this organization would offer?

Chapter Six

1. What is the plan that Mrs. Weera thought of? How well did it work on the first day?
2. How does Parvana feel when she is out in the market as a boy?
3. The author mentions Parvana's special red shalwar kameez on page 69, already described on page 24. Why is it important to Parvana? As you read, watch for further mentions of it and think about what it might symbolize.

Chapter Seven

1. What is Parvana's job? How does she feel about it?
2. Why do you think the author included the scene with Parvana reading the letter for the Talib?
3. Parvana must sell her special shalwar kameez. How would you feel if you were forced to sell something that was important to you?

Chapter Eight

1. How does the family's life change when Mrs. Weera moves in?
2. Nooria says that she had forgotten how good the sun feels on her face. Maryam has to be helped to walk down the stairs. If you were forced to stay indoors, what would you miss most about being outside? Why is it unhealthy to be indoors for so long?
3. Why do you think the woman in the window is throwing small items down to Parvana?

For photographs of water pumps, use the search words "water pumps in Afghanistan." For a connection to what happens when drinking water is not boiled, see pages 93–97 of *Parvana's Journey*. See also [UN World Water Day](#), a United Nations website about World Water Day.

For more on organizations that support the health and welfare of women in Afghanistan, see:

[Women for Afghan Women](#) Note that all royalties from the sale of *The Breadwinner* go to this organization.

[Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan](#) Note that some photographs on the site are graphic and disturbing

The red shalwar kameez is a recurring image in the series. See *Parvana's Journey*, page 67, for example, and *My Name Is Parvana*, page 23, for further descriptions of what the red shalwar kameez symbolizes for Parvana.

See [The New York Times: Working to Help a Haven for Afghan Women Blossom](#) for an article and slideshow of the Kabul Women's Garden. Read about the Women's Garden in "Zuhul, 13" (page 71) in *Kids of Kabul*.

4. What do you predict will happen when the “tea boy” recognizes Parvana?

Chapter Nine

1. How are Parvana’s and Shauzia’s lives similar? How are they different?
2. What two plans do Mrs. Weera and the mother have? Why are the plans dangerous?

Chapter Ten

1. What is the job the girls do? Do you think you would be able to do it? What do you think makes them able to do it?
2. “Kabul has more land mines than flowers,” the father used to say (page 109). Share what you know about land mines.
3. The girls say that they must remember the experience of bone-digging when they are rich old ladies drinking tea together. Do you think that vision of their future will come true? Why do you think that?

Chapter Eleven

1. Why did Parvana end up telling her family about the bone-digging even though she had said she wouldn’t?
2. How did digging bones lead to the girls’ new job?
3. How is the relationship between Parvana and Nooria changing?
4. What happens at the soccer stadium? Why do you think the author chooses to include scenes like this one and the scene about the bone-digging?

Chapter Twelve

1. What is Shauzia’s dream? What is your opinion of her wanting to leave?
2. Why did Parvana’s parents disagree about leaving Afghanistan?
3. What does Parvana want her life to be like? Are you surprised by what she wants?

The establishment of schools for girls and the importance of education are main themes in all books in the series. The women’s magazine and women’s secret network are also a recurring subject. See the Aina website about an organization that provides writing, photojournalism, and reading training for Afghan children: [AINA](#)

For information about land mines in Afghanistan, see [Afghanistan: Landmine Fact Sheet](#). For a story on Afghan land mine survivors, see: [UN News Centre](#)

See also [Foreign Affairs and International Trade Canada](#) and [Canadian International Demining Corps](#) for Canadian government information on land mines and a Canadian demining organization.

For an account of the soccer stadium, now home to the Afghan Women’s National Football Team, see “Palwasha, 16” (page 81) in *Kids of Kabul*. See also a video about the team at [Video Clip: The Afghan Ladies National Football Team](#)

- Pages 131–32 describe areas in Afghanistan outside of Kabul. Locate the areas on the map. How do the descriptions differ from those of Kabul? Why is it valuable for Parvana to talk to the people from these outside areas?
- What do we learn about the reasons for the Window Woman's little gifts to Parvana?

Chapter Thirteen

- How is Nooria's life going to change? How does she feel about it?
- Parvana feels both relieved and sulky about not going to Mazar-e-Sharif. Describe a time you have felt that kind of mixed emotion.

Chapter Fourteen

- What do we learn about Parvana's character from her actions toward Homa, the woman she finds?
- Why was getting back to Parvana's house so dangerous?
- What news does Homa report to Parvana and Mrs. Weera? How do their responses to the news differ? How do you think you would have responded?
- What do you predict has happened to Parvana's family?
- Had you predicted that the father would return? Why or why not?

Chapter Fifteen

- What do Parvana and Shauzia say they are working toward? Why are their plans different?
- What do you know about refugee camps and camps for internally displaced persons (IDPs)? What do you think the camps are like?
- How does Parvana say goodbye to the Window Woman? What has their interaction meant to both Parvana and the woman?
- How does the author give a sense of hope in this chapter?
- What do Parvana and Shauzia plan to do in twenty years? Do you think this plan will come true? Explain your reasoning.

Select some Internet photos of the areas (search "Images" using the place names and the search words "Afghanistan fertile valleys") to display for students.

Parvana is tough, but she shows great compassion. This aspect of her character arises again when she takes a baby, a boy and a girl under her wing in *Parvana's Journey* and when she rescues some girls in *My Name Is Parvana*.

For an article on the Taliban capture of Mazar-e-Sharif in 1998, see: [InDepth Afghanistan: The Heartbreak of Mazar-e-Sharif](#)

For general information about refugee and IDP camps, see these articles:

[Anatomy of a Refugee Camp Humanitarian News and Analysis](#)

For a UN report on Afghanistan refugee camps, including photographs, see: [2012 UNHCR Country Operations Profile – Afghanistan](#)

Note that *Mud City*, the third book in the *Breadwinner* series, describes Shauzia and Mrs. Weera's life in an IDP camp in Pakistan.

Activity Ideas

Choose from the following ideas to best suit your purposes and class needs.

- Have students create a large Venn diagram or a T-chart to compare Parvana and her family’s life before and after the Taliban took over Kabul. Alternatively, ask students to create a Venn diagram or T-chart to compare their own lives with Parvana’s. **English Language Arts; Social Studies**
- Have students skim the novel to make a list of the restrictions the Taliban placed on women. Point out that sometimes the restriction is obviously stated, as in “The Taliban had ordered all the girls and women in Afghanistan to stay inside their homes” (page 7) and sometimes it can be inferred, as in “Their mother had been kicked out of her job as a writer for a Kabul radio station” (page 7). Have students compare and discuss their lists in small groups. **English Language Arts; Social Studies**
- Have students make a video of a series of interviews with people who have read *The Breadwinner*. Encourage them to prepare interview questions that ask about the novel’s themes, the author’s style, thoughts on characters, favorite scenes and so on. **English Language Arts; ICT**
- Draw students’ attention to the symbolism of flowers in the book. Have them create a piece of artwork (e.g., painting, sculpture, collage, photograph or video) that reflects this symbol and what it represents in *The Breadwinner*. **English Language Arts; Visual Arts**
- Have students work in pairs to study the relationship between Parvana and Nooria and trace how it changes during the novel. They can present their findings in the form of diary entries for both sisters; an exchange of letters; monologues or a role-play of the girls as older women looking back on their relationship. **Drama; English Language Arts; Health and Life Skills**
- In the classroom or another area in the school, work with students to create an area that is the same size as Parvana’s (“ten regular steps one way and twelve regular steps the other way”). You might set up sheets or large pieces of cardboard for walls and include other setting features using details from the novel (pages 22–23, 36). Have groups of students enter the area to play the roles of the family members, and possibly Mrs. Weera, in a scene from the novel or an improvisation. If feasible, you might also have students take turns fetching pails of water (or similarly weighted pails) to get an idea of how arduous Parvana’s chore was. At some point in the activity, ask the groups to sit quietly in the area to reflect on how it might feel to be in that space for a year and a half without being allowed to leave. After the activity, have students write about their thoughts. **Drama; English Language Arts; Health and Life Skills; Social Studies**
- Talk with students about how the book is told from Parvana’s point of view (even though it is written in the third person). Have students choose a scene from the book and think about it from another character’s point of view. Have them write and perform (live or on video) a monologue based on the scene in role as that character. **Drama; English Language Arts**
- Talk with students about how the author infuses the novel with some humor, despite the grimness of the themes. Ask students to recall or look for examples of humor in the novel, and discuss how the author has created it (e.g., through dialogue, Parvana’s thoughts, the character of Mrs. Weera). **English Language Arts**

- Draw students' attention to the mother and Mrs. Weera's magazine and why it was so brave of them to have created it. Read from page 164 "... copies are being sent out to women all over the world. She has helped to let the world know what is happening in Afghanistan." Ask groups of students to think about what type of stories and information might have been in the first issue of that magazine, and what they would have wanted other women, or the outside world, to know about what was happening. Then, have them create a contents page with brief annotations about each article (5–6 articles). **English Language Arts; Social Studies**
- Read Mrs. Weera's words (page 116): "These are unusual times. They call for ordinary people to do unusual things just to get by." Ask students to draw or paint a scene or image from the novel that they think best illustrates this idea. Have them include a title for their artwork. **English Language Arts; Health and Life Skills; Social Studies; Visual Arts**
- Ask students to imagine they are creating a display of artifacts for a museum in Afghanistan to represent the time *The Breadwinner* describes. Have them choose 6–10 artifacts and write a brief description of each one and why it was chosen. They could design a web page about the artifacts, or sketch the display as it would look in the museum. **English Language Arts; ICT; Social Studies; Visual Arts**
- Have students create a "Malali" award to give to Parvana for her courage. The award (e.g., medal, plaque, plate, trophy or statue) should represent the Malali story in some way. Students will also write and present a brief speech describing something Parvana did that they found particularly courageous. **Drama; English Language Arts; Visual Arts**
- Ask students to research aid organizations that provide support to Afghan citizens, including organizations created by Afghans themselves. Students could work in pairs to research one organization and report their findings to the class. The following are organizations listed in *Kids of Kabul*. Be sure to check the websites first to ensure suitability for your class. **English Language Arts; Social Studies**

[Afghanistan Youth Center](#)

[Afghan Youth Initiative](#)

[Aina](#)

[Aschiana Foundation](#)

[Canadian Women for Women in Afghanistan](#)

[International Board on Books for Young People](#)

[Little Women for Little Women in Afghanistan](#)

[PARSA](#)

[Shuhada](#)

[SOLA](#)