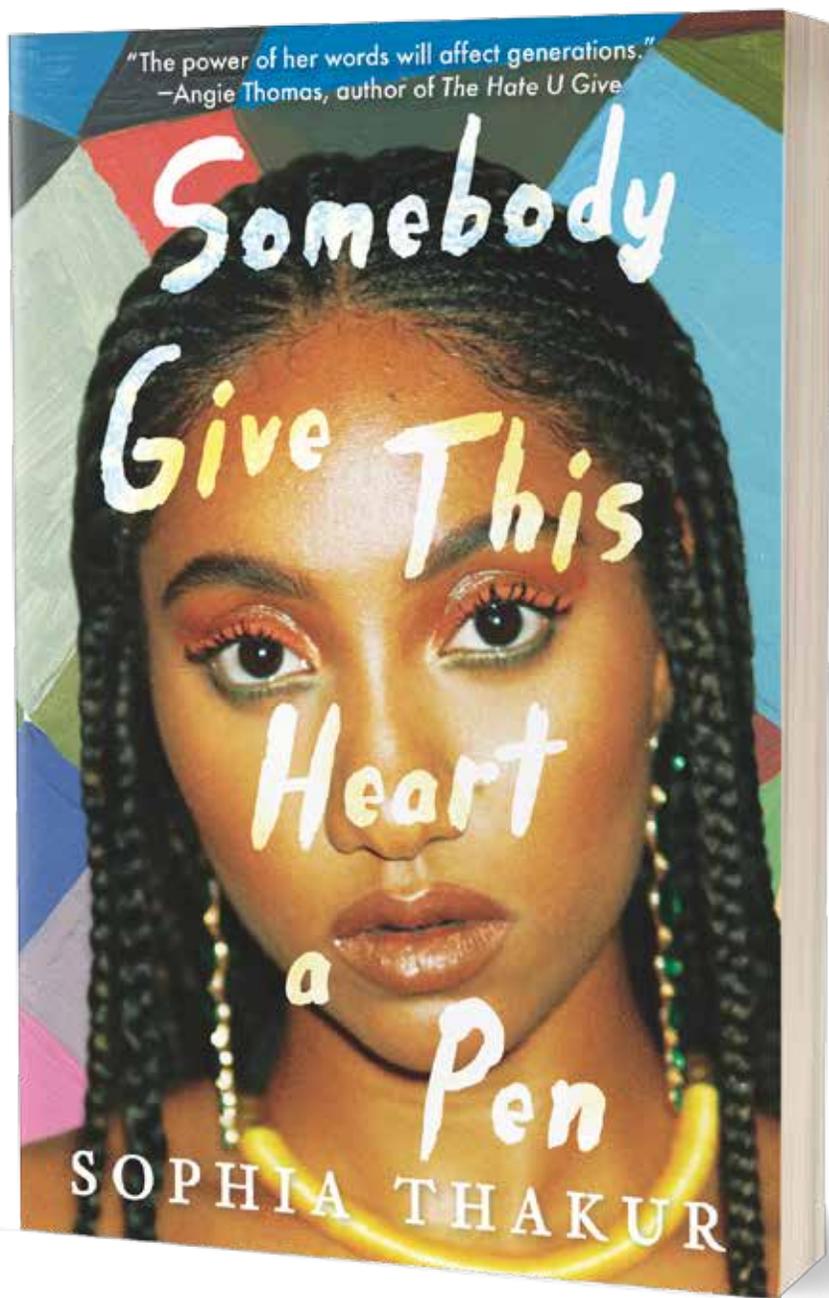


Somebody Give This Heart a Pen

SOPHIA THAKUR



About the Author

Sophia Thakur, based in Middlesex, England, has been performing since the age of sixteen. She has presented two TED Talks and has worked closely with young people, sharing her poems and the creative process. Her poetry features powerful messages on mental health, womanhood, diversity, politics, self-expression, and more. She has performed at the Glastonbury stage and participated in BET's Black History Month series. This is her first published collection.

About the Book

This is a stirring collection of coming-of-age poems exploring issues of identity, difference, perseverance, relationships, fear, loss, and joy. Addressing subjects from youth to school to family life to falling in love and falling back out again, the poems draw on the author's experience as a young mixed-race woman trying to make sense of a lonely and complicated world. With a strong narrative voice and emotional empathy, this is poetry that will resonate with all young people, whatever their background and whatever their dreams.

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Preparing Yourself as an Educator

In preparing yourself to teach this book to students, it is critical to understand the role this book is playing in your curriculum. It is a good tool for exploring poetry, literary devices, and voice. It's also a good opportunity to provide students with an international perspective on Blackness. A UK resident, Thakur is part of the Black diaspora, and her voice can offer a new vantage point for US teachers. Teachers should explore and interrogate their own biases before teaching this book. Too often, educators use books written by people of color to teach about their pain in the hope of inspiring empathy and understanding, only to have students take away a stereotypical understanding of this group. Thakur's book won't let you do that. She shares about hope, love, beauty, identity, strength, and more. It's an opportunity to explore Blackness in its vastness and nuance. Teachers should think about what gaps they have in their understanding of Black identity to avoid perpetuating them through their teaching of this book.

Preparing Your Students

Similarly, many students have gaps in their understanding about race. This book may inspire some important questions in your students. Invite them into prereading conversations that explore race as a social construct, Black diasporic history, intersectionality, and more so they can appreciate all aspects of Thakur's voice. You can use nonfiction readings, especially ones by Black people in England, to build background knowledge. Ultimately, the goal is to offer students some foundational language to engage in conversations about race and gender, as well as context to grasp as much as possible of what Thakur is writing about.

Motifs

Have students consider the motifs Thakur embeds throughout her poetry. The motifs can be used to invite students into writing as well as reflecting on themes.

FREEDOM: The book explores freedom in both a physical and a spiritual way. Thakur talks about being emotionally free, and many of the poems offer rich examples of this motif.

RACE: Thakur's Blackness is paramount to her voice and certainly present in all of the poetry. Some of the poems explore race and oppression directly, and sometimes race is simply an element of identity.

IDENTITY: Throughout the poems, Thakur explores what shapes identity, what changes it, and what hurts it, among other angles. Many lines offer ideas that students can explore in their writing and use to process other identity-focused readings as well.

WOMANHOOD: Throughout the book, there are poems that inspire ideas about womanhood. Thakur writes about the older women in her life, what makes a woman, and more.

Discussion Questions

1. In “Picking a Name” (page 10), Thakur writes, “Ignore those scared by your potential.” Why would someone be scared by someone else’s potential? What role might race and gender play in this dynamic?
2. In “Excerpt from a Letter to My Little Black Girl” (page 12), Thakur writes, “Run your fingers through your Afro, / a tree that this whole culture breathes from.” What do you think she means? What culture breathes from this tree? How? Do you think this is also true in the United States?
3. In the same poem, she writes, “You are art, and we all see that.” How is this an example of joy and celebration of Black identity? What do you think her overall message in this poem is?
4. In “Daddy’s Accents” (page 22), Thakur invites us to think about the role of language in conformity. What happens to her dad in this poem, and what does this say about identity and society? Which line in the poem accentuates his struggle?
5. In the poem “Fearmongering” (page 25), Thakur takes on police violence. How might this poem relate to social justice movements and current events? How does this experience reflect the struggle of the diaspora regardless of where its members live?
6. There are various poems about loss and death. How does Thakur share about grieving? What does grieving typically look like and how is it talked about in the United States? In your community?
7. On page 85, Thakur’s poem “Sprouting” talks about growth. What does growth look like for you? What imagery is she using here? Does it connect to other poems in the book?
8. Throughout the book, Thakur talks about herself, other women, and the relationship between all of them. What does the poem “Making Mum” (page 89) offer to that ongoing exploration in the book?
9. In the poem “Journey of Mirrors” (page 95), Thakur writes, “Our bodies are God’s canvas / decorating time. / Really, it is a privilege / to wear what He writes.” How does this last stanza exemplify her messages about womanhood in this poem and the book overall?
10. “When to Write” (page 98) is an exploration of writing. When do you write? Why do you write? How do you write? What do you write about? What makes a writer?

Academic Activities

A POETRY COLLECTION

This is a great opportunity to use some of the prompts listed in the discussion questions and invite students to respond via writing to create their own poetry collection. They can try their hand at some of Thakur's literary techniques. Have students write between three and seven poems. After an editing process, you can have a sharing day where students engage in a written, silent feedback process by reading and responding to their peers' poetry.

A COMPARE-AND-CONTRAST ACTIVITY

Thakur is a spoken word artist. Create a playlist of videos of her sharing her poetry and have a viewing day where you analyze the tone, cadence, and other elements of her spoken word in relationship to her written poems. Ask students:

- What differences do you notice between her spoken presence and her written presence?
- What is new for you in listening to her spoken words that didn't surface when you were reading?

A SPOKEN WORD NIGHT

Students might be inspired to write their own poetry or recite one of Thakur's poems because it resonates with them. Invite students to practice speaking the poetry out loud, and after dimming the lights and playing some music, open up the metaphorical (or physical!) microphone and let them share.

STRATEGIC TEXT PAIRING

Pairing this book with other poetry texts provides a powerful learning experience for students. Some ways to pair books might be to consider shared topics, themes, or voices. Look for other authors who push the reader to wrestle with word choice and structure. Find poets who explore the experience of intersectionality between gender, race, politics, and identity. Consider finding poetry that offers a counterangle from a Black male point of view or set in the United States.

A smart pairing can lead students into a critical reading of society and exploration of poetic craft. Invite students to make connections across themes, motifs, and symbols. Consider having students do a compare, contrast, and connect analysis exercise.

Lorena Germán is a Dominican American educator working with middle and high school students in ELA classrooms. She is the author of *The Anti Racist Teacher: Reading Instruction Workbook* and a two-time nationally awarded teacher. She is cofounder of the Multicultural Classroom as well as cofounder of #DisruptTexts and chair of NCTE's Committee Against Racism and Bias in the Teaching of English. Follow her on Twitter @nenagerman.