

Orleans Reading Guide



Questions and Ideas for Consideration

The Future: Many popular contemporary YA texts paint a vision of a problematic future, offering a dystopia that critiques contemporary society. How does *Orleans* fit in with this idea, and what elements of society does it critique?

Culture: How does the concept of tribes complicate questions of culture?

Dialect: Consider the language Smith uses when writing from Fen's point of view, as well as the commentary the book mentions on "talking tribal"; what messages do these elements send, and how does it speak to both craft and ideology?

A Tourist: What do you make of Fen calling Daniel a "tourist"? How does this book speak to what it means to be an outsider, and what role class plays in this concept?

Responsibility: What messages or ideologies are presented through Baby Girl?

Church: Think about the role that the nuns and churches play in *Orleans*, as well as the disturbing overturning of this "safe" space when Mama Gentile arrives. How does this book comment on questions of religion, faith, and spirituality?

Relationships: How is Daniel and Fen's relationship different than other dystopia you are familiar with? How does the lack of romance shift the work the book does?

Hope: Does this story have a hopeful or hopeless ending? Why present it this way?

Extension Activities

- Research other examples of dystopian adolescent fiction. How does *Orleans* seem similar and in what ways is it distinctive?
- Visit Sherri Smith's blog (<http://sherrilsmith.com/>) and learn more about her other works. How do they compare, and what perspectives does he explore as an author?
- Think about why authors create dystopia, and plot out how you would approach this genre. What social institutions or problematics might you critique and how would you do so?
- Compare this with other portrayals of New Orleans in popular culture (consider, for example, Disney's *Princess and the Frog*). What challenges exist in representing this unique cultural space?
- Research more about the city of New Orleans and the tragedy of Hurricane Katrina. How does this add insight into the text?
- Create a character sketch of Fen, Daniel or another central character. What qualities do these individuals possess? How do you know?
- When might dystopia be useful in a classroom?

Suggested Critical Reading

"Monica Hughes, Lois Lowry, and Young Adult Dystopias" by Carrie Hintz

"Carnivalizing the Future: A New Approach to Theorizing Childhood and Adulthood in Science Fiction for Young Readers" by Kay Sambell

"Predicting a Better Situation? Three Young Adult Speculative Fiction Texts and the Possibilities for Social Change" by Abbie Ventura

"Engaging 'Apolitical' Adolescents: Analyzing the Popularity and Educational Potential of Dystopian Literature Post-9/11" by Melissa Ames

Background and Context

Set in 2056, Sherri Smith's 2013 dystopian novel follows Fen, a teenager who must find her way in the treacherous Delta, a land walled off from the rest of the USA when the pandemic of Blood Fever overtakes it. In *Orleans*, war rages over blood type, and when Fen's tribe is slaughtered, she must protect her best friend and tribal leader's Baby Girl, coming to rely on an unlikely ally—a scientist from across the wall with secrets and heartbreak of his own.