



**Classroom Guide for**  
**Bird**  
**Written by Zetta Elliott**  
**illustrated by Shadra Strickland**

### Reading Level

\*Reading Level: Grade 3  
 Interest Level: Grades 3–8  
 Guided Reading Level: Q  
 Accelerated Reader® Level/Points: 2.8/.5  
 Lexile™ Measure: AD720

\*Reading level based on the Spache Readability Formula

### Themes

Family, Coping with Death, Art (drawing), Mentors, Siblings, Urban Life, African American Interest

### Synopsis

This story, best suited for older elementary or middle grade students, focuses on young Mehkai, also known as Bird. Bird loves to draw. With drawings, he can erase the things that don't turn out right. In real life, problems aren't so easily fixed.

Bird idolizes his older brother, Marcus, who also has artistic talent, and struggles to understand Marcus's drug addiction. He wishes he could "fix" Marcus so his parents would let his brother come back home. After Marcus and Bird's beloved grandfather both pass away, Bird is befriended by Uncle Son, a longtime friend of Bird's granddad. Uncle Son tells Bird stories of his missions as a pilot in the war, helps Bird with his homework, and takes him to the park to look at the birds. Through all this, Bird escapes into his art, drawing pictures of people, animals, places, and events that are important to him so he won't forget them. Drawing becomes an outlet for his emotions and imagination, and provides a path to making sense of all the confusing things in his world.

Told with spare grace, *Bird* is a touching look at a young boy coping with real-life troubles. Readers will be heartened by Bird's quiet resilience, and moved by the healing power of putting pencil to paper.

### Background

Drug use and abuse are ongoing problems among young people. "Adolescent substance use is America's number one public health problem," says Susan Foster, who conducted a study of one thousand American teens for the National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse.

If you wish to provide some drug education for your students, be sure to tailor your discussions to students' age and maturity levels. There are many resources online with information on how to talk about drugs in the classroom, such as this one from the [Hanley Rehabilitation Center](#).

In the story, Bird uses drawing to cope with difficult situations in his life. "I want children to know there are constructive and destructive ways to deal with our emotions," says author Zetta Elliot. "So many kids, especially in [cities], don't have art class; they aren't being *taught* how to express themselves creatively. But we all need to express our emotions, and sometimes art can be a way of memorializing those we've lost. If you can imagine a different way of being, you can become a different person. We need to feed the imagination of our youth so they can imagine different possibilities for their lives and their communities."

## **BEFORE READING**

### **Prereading Focus Questions**

Before introducing this book to students, you may wish to develop background and promote anticipation by posing questions such as the following:

1. Think about the people you live with and those who take care of you. How is each person important to you?
2. How would you feel if any of those people were in trouble? How could you deal with your feelings?
3. Everyone has a bad day sometimes. Is there something you do or someplace you go that makes you feel better when you are having a bad day?
4. Many people like to draw. How do you think drawing can help someone who has a problem or who is confused about something?

### **Exploring the Book**

Read the title of the book. Ask students why they think the boy on the front cover might be called Bird?

Open the book so students can see the entire front and back cover illustration. Ask students what they think the connection is between the boy on the front cover and all the other images.

Take students on a book walk and draw attention to the following parts of the book: illustrated endpapers, dedications, title page, illustrations, and text format.

Ask students to predict what the story is going to be about. Which parts of the book did they use as clues to making their predictions?

### **Setting a Purpose for Reading**

Have students read to find out:

- why the main character is called Bird.
- how birds are important to the story.
- how Bird deals with his problems.

## VOCABULARY

The story contains several words that may be unfamiliar to students. Review the vocabulary below, and then ask students to write their own meanings and sentences for each word. If students also know synonyms for any of the words, have them list the synonyms as well.

|          |        |           |              |
|----------|--------|-----------|--------------|
| perched  | gust   | stale     | missions     |
| saucepan | cheep  | graffiti  | takeoff      |
| soar     | chill  | swirls    | 'hood        |
| museum   | fierce | a fix     | addicts      |
| junkies  | stereo | locksmith | mallard duck |
| fiery    | spark  | helmet    | crest        |
| fragile  | splint | spirit    |              |

## AFTER READING

### Discussion Questions

After students have read the book, use these or similar questions to generate discussion, enhance comprehension, and develop appreciation for the content. Encourage students to refer to passages and illustrations in the book to support their responses.

### Literal Comprehension

1. Why does the main character have the nickname Bird?
2. How does Bird feel about drawing? Why does he draw? How do you know?
3. Who is Uncle Son? What is his relationship to Bird? How is their relationship special?
4. The roof is a special place for both Bird and Marcus. Why is it special to Bird? Why is it special for Marcus? How do you know?
5. How are Bird and Marcus alike? What talent do they share?
6. What advice does Marcus give Bird? What special gift does he give Bird?
7. How does Bird feel about Marcus? About Marcus's problem?

### Extension/Higher Level Thinking

1. How are birds important in the story?
2. Why is Uncle Son an important character? What do you think would have happened to Bird if Uncle Son didn't look out for him?
3. What is some of the advice Uncle Son gives Bird? Do you agree with this advice? Why or why not?
4. How does Marcus behave? What does this tell you about Marcus?
5. What season is it for most of the story? What clues do the author and illustrator give that helps you know what season it is? How does the season contribute to the mood of the story?
6. What is the main problem in the story? Does the problem get resolved by the end of the story? How do you feel about the way the story ends? Why?
7. How would the story have been different if it was told in another genre, such as a memoir, an informational text, or a fantasy? What would the author need to change to rewrite the story in that genre? What could the author keep? Why?

### Literature Circles

If you use literature circles during reading time, students might find the following suggestions helpful in focusing on the different roles of the group members.

- The **Questioner** might use questions similar to the ones in the Discussion Question section of this guide.
- The **Passage Locator** might look for lines in the story that suggest how each character is feeling.
- The **Illustrator** might create scenes on a timeline that follow the plot of the story.
- The **Connector** might find other stories about young people dealing with the death of a family member, with a focus on how the young people cope with their losses.
- The **Summarizer** might provide a brief summary of the group's reading and discussion points for each meeting.
- The **Investigator** might look for information about the effects of drug addiction on the families of addicts.

\*There are many resource books available with more information about organizing and implementing literature circles. Three such books you may wish to refer to are: *GETTING STARTED WITH LITERATURE CIRCLES* by Katherine L. Schlick Noe and Nancy J. Johnson (Christopher-Gordon, 1999), *LITERATURE CIRCLES: VOICE AND CHOICE IN BOOK CLUBS AND READING GROUPS* by Harvey Daniels (Stenhouse, 2002), and *LITERATURE CIRCLES RESOURCE GUIDE* by Bonnie Campbell Hill, Katherine L. Schlick Noe, and Nancy J. Johnson (Christopher-Gordon, 2000).

### Reader's Response

Use the following questions and writing activities to help students practice active reading and personalize their responses to the book. Suggest that students respond in reader's journals, essays, or oral discussion. You may also want to set aside time for students to share and discuss their written work, if they wish to.

1. What kind of person is Bird? What is he like? How would you describe him? What about Uncle Son? What is he like? How would you describe him? What about Marcus? What is he like? How would you describe him?
2. Which parts of the story did you connect with the most? Why? Which parts of the story did you have a hard time connecting with? Why?
3. Bird has some special memories of times he spent with Uncle Son. Do you have a family member or an older person with whom you share special memories? Who is this person? What special memories do you share?
4. Bird turns to drawing when his life gets rough. What do you do when you feel stressed, or if you have a bad day? How does this help you calm down?
5. Have students write a book recommendation for this story explaining why they would or would not recommend this book to other students.

### ELL Teaching Activities

These strategies might be helpful to use with students who are English language learners.

1. Assign ELL students to read the story aloud with strong English readers/speakers.
2. Have each student write three questions about the story. Then let students pair up and discuss the answers to the questions.
3. Depending on students' level of English proficiency, after the first reading:
  - Review the illustrations in order and have students summarize what is happening on each page, first orally, then in writing.

- Have students work in pairs to retell either the plot of the story or key details. Then ask students to write a short summary, synopsis, or opinion about what they have read.
4. Have students give a short talk about what they admire about a character or central figure in the story.

### **INTERDISCIPLINARY ACTIVITIES**

Use some of the following activities to help students integrate their reading experiences with other curriculum areas.

#### **Social Studies**

Uncle Son acts as a mentor for Bird. Have students work in small groups to research what a mentor is and the various kinds of ways adults can mentor younger people. Let groups present their findings to the class. If any students have mentors who work with them and the students would like to talk about their personal experiences, encourage them to add their experiences to the presentations.

#### **Social Studies/Science**

Have students learn about the effects of drug use on a person's health using age appropriate resources. Sample research focus questions include: Why are drugs harmful and unhealthy? Why are drugs illegal? A good introduction for younger students can be found at "[What You Need to Know About Drugs?](#)" Information for older students can be found at [Helpguide.org](http://Helpguide.org).

#### **Science**

Have students find out which kinds of birds are common in their area. Students should then research their habitats, behaviors, what they eat, and so on. Ask students to sketch or collect pictures of each of bird for later identification.

#### **Math**

If possible, arrange for a local naturalist or birdwatcher to take students on a bird watch at a local park or around the school neighborhood. (Even in cities, several kinds of birds can be seen.) Have the guide help students keep count of the number of each type of bird they see, and have students keep a record. Back in the classroom, students can graph their results and then review the graph to determine which birds are most common in your area.

#### **Art**

1. Students may enjoy trying the following drawing exercises:
  - Choose an object or scene to draw and try drawing it without looking at the paper.
  - Try drawing the object or scene without taking the pencil or marker off the paper.
  - Have students create tiny drawings of the object or scene on paper no bigger than 6" by 6".
2. Encourage interested students to carry around sketchbooks and to draw scenes of their neighborhood, their friends, their family, things they like, special events, and so on. Volunteers may provide drawings to display around the classroom.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

**Zetta Elliott** is an accomplished poet, playwright, author, and African American studies scholar. As a young girl she loved to escape into a good book and began writing as a way to create “a world that was better than my own.” Elliott lives in Brooklyn, New York. You can find an interview with her about this book on the [Lee & Low website](#), and her website is [zettaelliott.com](http://zettaelliott.com).

**ABOUT THE ILLUSTRATOR**

**Shadra Strickland** has illustrated several books for young readers. She earned her MFA at New York’s School of Visual Arts in the Illustration as Visual Essay program. When not illustrating books, Strickland travels the country conducting workshops and sharing her work with children, teachers, and librarians. She also teaches illustration at Maryland Institute College of Art in Baltimore, Maryland, where she currently lives. Her website is [shadrastrickland.com](http://shadrastrickland.com).

**Book Information**

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**RESOURCES ON THE WEB**

Learn more about *Bird* at: <http://www.leeandlow.com/books/176/hc/bird>

**Order Information****On the Web:**

<http://www.leeandlow.com/order> (general order information)

**By Phone:**

212-779-4400 ext. 25

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