

## **Something About America: Study Guide**

It has been ten years since her family fled the fires of ethnic hatred in Kosova, Yugoslavia- long enough for the narrator to have learned how to hide the scars of war and transform herself into a typical American school girl. Her parents, however, continue to feel like foreigners, and she grows impatient with what she perceives as their refusal to assimilate. Then an ugly incident in a nearby town changes everything, stirring the passions of an entire community and forcing each member of this refugee family to consider what being an American truly means. Inspired by actual events in her home state of Maine the author has crafted a nuanced, provocative, and very modern American drama.

A New York Public Library Book for the Teen Age

"Testa's distilled poetry never seems forced, and her stirring words enhance a sense of the characters' experiences and emotions, particularly those of a young person caught between cultures." – Booklist

"Testa writes stories told in poems of surpassing beauty, fragility, and depth. . . . Riveting -- and tender." – Kirkus Reviews

### **Pre-reading:**

Why do people continue to immigrate to America? What do they hope to find within its borders that they cannot find in their own countries? How did your family become American?

### **Discussion Guide:**

What is the narrator's earliest memory? What does it tell you about her relationship with her father? What is your earliest memory?

What did the war change for this family? Has war ever touched your own family? If so, how? Who do wars hurt the most? The narrator's family is from Kosova (which is the Albanian spelling of Kosovo, a region of the Balkans). From this one letter difference in spelling we know the family are probably ethnic Albanians and were expelled by the Serbs. What clues about your own heritage are revealed in pronunciations, spellings or even in your diet?

What opportunities and possessions do you have if you are considered "lucky" in America? Contrast that to what it meant to be lucky if you were in Kosova? How can these disparate views of lucky exist in the same world? How can we change the meaning of lucky for all people?

Describe Ms. Lee's class. Compare it to your own classroom. Why does the narrator say, "we could be a slice of pizza." (p. 14) What do we gain by knowing people of diverse backgrounds?

Why are scarves so important to the narrator? What do you think it would be like to carry scars (both literal and figurative) from your old life to America? How has this affected her relationship with her father? In the end how does she herself differently?

What does the narrator love about America? Why does she believe she might be more American than anything else? What does it mean to be American? What do you love about America?

Do you agree with the narrator's mother that work is important to a man? What does she say is important to a woman? Is there a difference? Why? Do you agree?

Why is the narrator's mother ready to explode? Who is she trying to please? "I know this because/she's my mother,/ I'm her daughter,/and when I stare at her/ I notice something, /recognize something." Can you read one of your parents or caregivers better than another? Why?

The poem "A Dream Divided" is a literary allusion of the poem "A Dream Deferred" by Langston Hughes. Compare the two poems. How are they similar, how different? Whose dream do you most identify with? Why? Which poem would your parents most identify? What makes you think so?

What happened in Lewiston that suddenly made this town visible? How does this activate the narrator's father? What does he do with his anger? How had her father become disillusioned with America over time? How does this event restore his purpose and his humor?

Reread the poem "Close Enough" on p. 68. What does the narrator believe should be true about America and Americans? How do we disappoint her? Why is it ironic that some people believe that immigration should stop? In your opinion, what should America mean?

Which poem was your favorite? How does Maria Testa often surprise her readers at the end of poems? How can you apply this to your own writing?

### **Projects:**

Create a PowerPoint, website, poster or pamphlet about one of the following topics from the novel:

Ethnic Albanians

Kosova/Kosovo

Lewiston, Maine (letter to immigrants)

Immigration

### **Language Arts:**

Try to tell the story of one of your own grandparents in a novel-in-verse format. Find scenes that represent their story well and sculpt them into portraits of your family.

**Art:**

Create a collage based on one of the novels of Maria Testa. Use images, words and materials from newspapers, magazines, the internet, or create your own. Consider not just the elements of color, shape, and texture but also the shape and object you might use for your creation (like a box). Explain your choices in a brief journal.

**Social Studies/ History**

Find maps that relate directly to each of the stories in Maria Testa's novels. Identify where the setting takes place and also any connections to any additional geography that the parents or grandparents may have. Be able to locate these places on a world map and globe. Print out the maps and answer the following questions:

Who are the political neighbors of this location?

How does the location affect the outcome of the novel?

What wars and conflicts has this region been affected by in the last 75 years?

This guide was created by Tracie Vaughn Zimmer, a reading specialist and author of *Reaching for Sun*.