

Literature Circle Guide to *The Breadwinner* by Deborah Ellis

Book Summary

Parvana's life changed suddenly when the Taliban came to power in Afghanistan. Both of her parents lost their jobs; her mother is unable to work because the Taliban has forbidden it, and her father's high school was bombed during a raid. Parvana is no longer able to attend school, and she must accompany her crippled father every day to the market to earn money by reading and writing letters for the largely illiterate population of Kabul. When Parvana's father is captured and arrested by Taliban soldiers, it is up to Parvana to support her family on her own. At the urging of her mother, sister, and her mother's friend Mrs. Weera, Parvana disguises herself as a boy so that she can freely roam the city without suspicion. She earns money in any way she can: by writing letters, digging up bones from corpses, and selling cigarettes with her friend Shauzia. One day she discovers a young woman refugee hiding, and Parvana brings her home to keep her safe. Finally Parvana's father returns home, to Parvana's great joy. At the book's end, the family's future is still uncertain, since Parvana's mother, sisters, and brother, are en route to another town that has been suddenly captured by the Taliban, and Parvana and her father must travel to meet them.

Author Information

Deborah Ellis was born and raised in Ontario, Canada, and since the age of seventeen she has been a political activist, advocating nonviolence, women's rights, and economic justice. She currently works in Toronto as a mental health counselor. Before writing *The Breadwinner*, Ellis spent several months in Afghan refugee camps, interviewing women and girls to document their lives. Her experiences inspired her to write *The Breadwinner* and two other books in the trilogy: *Parvana's Journey* and *Shauzia*. All the royalties from *The Breadwinner* are being donated to the education of Afghan girls in the refugee camps in Pakistan.

Suggested Answers to Literature Circle Questions

1. What was Parvana's father's former occupation? What was her family's old home like?
Parvana's father was a high school teacher before the Taliban took control of their country. The family used to live in a big house with a courtyard, servants, modern appliances, and a car.
2. Why did Parvana need to accompany her father to the market? Why does it have to be Parvana and not Nooria or their mother?
Since he lost his leg, Parvana's father needs his daughter to help him to get to and from the market. Since the Taliban had ordered all women and girls to stay inside their homes, Parvana is not really supposed to be outside at all. However, since she is small for her age, she is more easily able to get away with being outside than her mother or grown sister Nooria would.

3. What happened to Hossain? What happens to Parvana's father?
Hossain was killed by a land mine when he was fourteen years old. Parvana's father is arrested by Taliban soldiers for mysterious reasons and taken to jail without any trial. The Taliban keeps him in jail for many months without sending any word to his family.
4. Why doesn't Mother write in the beginning of the book? Explain what happens to make her change her mind.
Parvana's mother is discouraged and depressed at being shut up inside her house without any creative outlets. She refuses to write at the beginning of the book because as a woman she is not allowed to publish. With Mrs. Weera's encouragement, she begins to write stories about life in Kabul under the Taliban. The stories are smuggled to Pakistan, where they are printed for distribution all over Afghanistan.
5. Describe how life changes for Parvana's family after Mrs. Weera comes to live with them.
After Parvana's father is taken, Parvana's mother becomes terribly depressed, spending her days lying in bed, barely talking to her children. When Mrs. Weera comes, she immediately takes responsibility for helping the family, and begins assigning tasks to each family member so that everyone has a role to play in the family's survival. Her lively, energetic personality brings hope to Parvana's family. Mrs. Weera is resourceful; it is she who first has the idea of dressing Parvana as a boy so that she could roam freely around the city. She also inspires Parvana's mother to begin writing again, and the two women begin forming plans for a secret magazine.
6. How do Nooria and Parvana get along? Does it change from the beginning of the story to the end? Find examples of how their relationship changes or stays the same.
Nooria is Parvana's older sister, and the two girls are often irritable and quarrelsome. The family lives in very close quarters with a great amount of stress, and Parvana and Nooria react to the situation by picking on each other. Also, the two girls are often jealous of each other. Parvana is jealous because Nooria is older, has beautiful hair, and doesn't have to do chores like bringing water in from the outside tap. Nooria is jealous because Parvana is able to go outside and roam the city. As the story goes on, both girls become kinder to each other. Nooria is less critical and Parvana no longer tries to start fights with her sister (p. 118). Also, Nooria supports Parvana when Parvana tries to convince her mother to let her sell cigarettes on a tray (p. 116). When Nooria leaves Kabul to get married, Parvana buys her sister a special present and can hardly hold back tears of sadness (p. 141).
7. Why do you think Parvana keeps the Window Woman a secret? Why does she plant flowers for her at the end of the book?

Parvana appreciates the small gifts that the mysterious Window Woman throws down for her to find. One day while outside her window, Parvana hears a man yelling at a woman and the sound of a person being beaten, and she knows that she must keep the Window Woman a secret for the woman's own safety. She plants flowers for the woman to let her know that she is leaving Kabul.

8. What does reading the Talib's letter reveal to Parvana? How does this change her view of the Talib in general? Did it change your ideas of the Talib as well?
Parvana reads a letter for a Talib whose wife had recently died. When she reads the letter, she notices that the Talib is crying; he is obviously touched by the letter. Formerly, Parvana had only seen the Taliban men beating women, and she never imagined that they could have real feelings of sorrow, too. Parvana's feelings of empathy surprise her, and for the first time she is able to imagine the Taliban as real people.
9. How does running into Shauzia change life for Parvana? How would the story be different if they hadn't run into each another?
Before she met Shauzia, Parvana felt very isolated going to work in the market every day. Since she was dressed as a boy, she was always trying not to attract too much attention from anyone. When she meets Shauzia, Parvana has a friend in the same circumstances as she, and this is a source of comfort to her. With the encouragement and companionship of Shauzia, Parvana has the courage to get a job collecting bones for even greater pay, and she is then able to buy a tray to sell cigarettes and thus support her family much better.
10. What does the story of Malali mean to Parvana? Do you think Parvana is like Malali?
Parvana's father often told her the story of Malali, a young, determined girl who led Afghan troops into a final rush in a battle with the British. Thanks to her courage, the Afghans won the battle, and according to Parvana's father, the example of Malali shows that "Afghanistan has always been the home of the bravest women in the world" (p. 29). Her father has nicknamed Parvana "Malali," and Parvana often remembers her father's name for her when she is feeling scared or worried. With the inspiration of the story of the real-life Malali, Parvana finds courage to brave the streets of Kabul to work for her family.
11. If you had to make the same decision as Shauzia, would you have stayed in Afghanistan? Do you think she's a "bad person" for wanting to leave? Why?
Students will have many opinions about Shauzia's decision to leave Afghanistan. Like Parvana, Shauzia is the sole source of support of her family, though her family does not treat her kindly. If she leaves, they have no other way to make money. Yet, Shauzia's days of moving freely through the streets dressed as a boy are numbered, because she is starting to look more grown-up. Shauzia feels that she can not survive being a grown woman under the Taliban rule, and she feels it is worth risking her life to try to escape.

12. What do you think was the hardest thing that Parvana experienced? Why? What helped her endure it?
Answers will vary. Some students will feel that seeing her father taken to jail was the hardest thing; others will mention disguising herself as a boy, digging for bones in the ruins of Kabul, or witnessing the torture of thieves in the city stadium. In all of these instances, Parvana recovers because she is motivated by her desire to protect and provide for her family.
13. Would you have been as brave as Parvana? What would have happened to her family if she hadn't become the breadwinner?
Parvana found herself in a position where the survival of her family depended on her alone. Her father was captured, her mother was in a deep depression, and her older sister Nooria could not legally leave the house to earn money or buy goods at the market. Without Parvana, her family may well have starved to death. Although Parvana is very fearful about her new role in the beginning, she becomes accustomed to dressing as a boy and wandering the streets alone. As the story goes on, her courage increases, as shown by her willingness to accompany and hide Homa, the young refugee woman she discovers.
14. Why do you think Deborah Ellis wrote this book? Do you think it's still important to read about the Taliban even though they are no longer in power?
Deborah Ellis spent months with Afghan refugee women and girls, and she wrote this book and its sequels to describe life under the Taliban for these real women. Although this story is fiction, Ellis based her story on many real-life accounts. Though the Taliban are no longer in power, this book depicts life under a totalitarian regime.

Note: The literature circle questions are keyed to Bloom's Taxonomy: Knowledge: 1-3; Comprehension: 4-5; Application: 6-7; Analysis 8-9; Synthesis: 10-11; Evaluation 12-14.

Activities

1. Draw pictures of the clothes worn by characters in the book, including a burqa, a chador, and a shalwar kameez. Illustrate what you think Parvana looked like dressed as a girl and as a boy.
Students will need to use outside resources such as encyclopedias or dictionaries to help them draw typical Afghan clothing. This activity will help students visualize the characters in the novel, especially Parvana's transformation from a girl to a boy.
2. Write a scene about Parvana and Shauzia meeting at the Eiffel Tower in twenty years. What has changed in the world since they last met? What has happened to the two of them?
With this activity, students will extend Parvana's story and imagine the futures of the two girls. Students may choose to write their scenes in the form of a

dialogue or a play script, and they should show their understanding of these two characters.