

Opportunities to Affect: In Reading Groups

By: Jo Ann Sharkey

Blue Hole Back Home

by Joy Jordan Lake

Before you read:

Joy Jordan Lake's novel, *Blue Hole Back Home*, recounts the dramatic events that unfold during the summer of 1979 when the Moulavis, a Muslim family from Sri Lanka, move to the small town of Pisgah Ridge, North Carolina. The clash of culture and religion has tragic effects on the small group of teenagers who are at the core of the events. Yet none in the town escapes unscathed when the dark-skinned Farsanna begins socializing with Turtle, her brother Emerson, and their friend Jimbo, who eventually begins a romantic relationship with the outsider.

Though the novel is not overtly religious, the religious differences between characters are distinguished. There is a strong division, both religious and cultural, between the insiders and the outsiders in *Blue Hole Back Home*. Not only are Farsanna and her family outsiders as Muslims in a predominantly Christian culture, but Hyme Steinburger, who owns the local barbeque restaurant and is Jewish, is also an outsider in the town. Even Turtle who appears to be an insider is actually an outsider—she claims to be an agnostic and unapologetically socializes with the Sri Lankan family. Her decision to pick up Farsanna and take her to the swimming hole one hot summer day is ultimately what sets the entire events of the novel into motion.

Reflecting on Culture:

- Despite the large amount of Muslims currently living in the United States, when the Moulavis moved to Pisgah Ridge in 1979 they were the only Muslim family in the town. Were more people disturbed by their difference in religious practice or their difference in appearance?

- In *Blue Hole Back Home*, specific incidences of racism result because of the relationship between Farsanna and a group of white teenagers. These incidents include events such as the destruction of the Moulavi's house, the burning cross that was placed in the truck, and the harassment from the Ku Klux Klan. The narrator, Turtle, eventually realizes that more racism occurs to other outsiders in her community, such as the vandalism of the predominantly African-American neighborhood. What were the effects of these events on the victims and the community? Did justice occur for the victims? Why or why not?
- Steinburger, the only Jew mentioned by name in the novel, warns Farsanna and her friends not to go home by way of a certain route. Despite his warnings, they encounter the KKK and face disastrous events. Why does Steinburger warn the teenagers? Why do they not listen to him?

For Group Reflection and Discussion:

- Mr. Moulavi brought his family to the United States in pursuit of the "American dream." What do you think he was looking for? What did he find?
- The Moulavi family and their desire to be a part of American culture, especially Farsanna's desire to fit in, appeared to make many people in Pisgah Ridge uncomfortable. Why do you think this happened?
- Several representations of Christianity are present in the town. One example is the sign that reads, "Fresh Bait! Cold Beer! Jesus Saves!" What do these representations of Christianity mean to the town? To the reader?

- Jimbo's father, Reverend Riggs, is the pastor of the Baptist church. How does he react to the Moulavi family? Do you think he failed or succeeded in representing Christ to the outsiders?
- How did the church respond to the Moulavi family when they move to their town? Farsanna, Turtle, and the rest of the teenagers attend the Baptist church one Sunday morning. What events unfold during their visit? Although something like this may never happen in your church in a literal sense, how can figurative acts that shun and turn away people occur? Do you think that your church is a place where people of any color, culture, and socio-economic group would feel welcome?
- L.J. has the idea to take two burnt rafters from the Moulavi's charred house and turn them into a cross which now hangs in the Baptist church. Does this seem an appropriate act to you?
- Turtle never visits the Baptist church again nor does she seem interested in the religious life. Her brother Emerson, however, becomes an Episcopalian. How do you think the events of their youth shaped the religious formation of these two?
- The blue swimming hole is the central location for much of the action of the novel. Jimbo Riggs even calls it a sacred place. Near the end of the novel, Turtle is longing to return to the simplicity of their summer days before the destructive, racist events unfolded around her and her friends:

Turtle says to Jimbo,

I closed my eyes and tried to picture the Blue Hole, the boulders and hemlocks and layers of pink in late May... 'I wish,' I raised my face up to his, 'we were back at the Blue Hole. You were the one who called it sacred one time. You remember?' He brushed the hair back from my face. 'Sacred's not the same thing as safe, though.' (269)

- What is the significance of a sacred place to Turtle? To Farsanna? To all those in town who have been excluded?

Relating to our Mission:

- How can the church identify members of religious groups who may typically isolate themselves and be the presence of Christ to these groups?
- How can the church use education, knowledge, and open-dialogue to further our goal of sharing the gospel to people groups living in the United States who do not know Christ?

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next month:

Alice Walker's acclaimed novel, *The Color Purple*, tells the story of Celie, an African-American woman living in 1930s Georgia. Despite being oppressed by violence, racism, and sexism, Celie embarks on a search for God, family, love, and hope.