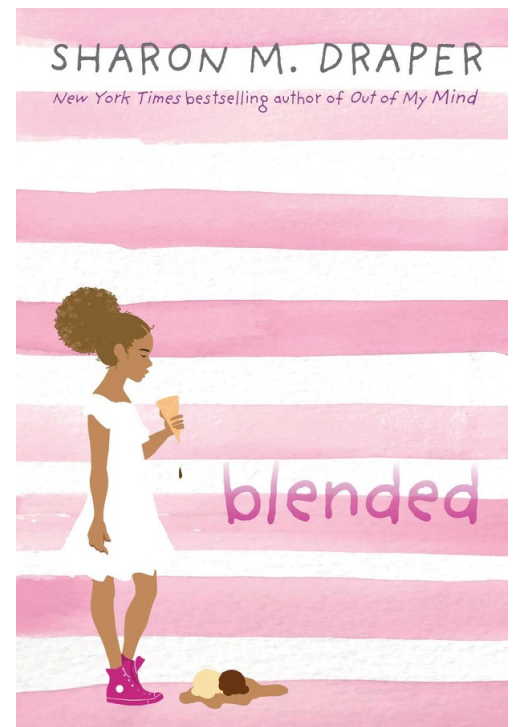


Blended

by Sharon M Draper

About the Book:

She's Isabella to her dad and Izzy to her mom. She plays a fancy piano at her dad's large house, and a portable keyboard at her mom's small one. Spending every other week with each parent and their significant other, she's a "kid sliced in half." And since her dad's black and her mom's white, her identity and her relationships seem even more complicated. Isabella knows she's loved, but the hostility between her parents and the complexities of juggling two lives make things challenging. Luckily, when things get hard, she has her deep love for the piano, two great friends, and a soon-to-be stepbrother who has her back.



Discussion Questions

1. After finishing the novel, go back and reread the dedication. Why does Isabella feel it's important to try to "meld and merge, synthesize and harmonize, to create family fusion." What does the author mean by "family fusion"? Do you think Isabella and her family create fusion by the end of the book? Explain your answer. Can you relate to any of Isabella's family dynamics? Why do you think it's important to have supportive people in your life?
2. Find examples throughout the book where Isabella uses music and musical terms, especially harmony, to talk about her blended family. Why is music a good metaphor for her situation? How do piano keys specifically reflect her life?
3. The first chapter opens with seven words that evoke the senses. Talk about the words, including the made-up word, boombles. What do you hear or see when reading each of the words? Why do you think the author started the book this way?
4. Isabella lets the reader know early on that she feels like "a kid sliced in half." She also makes the related comment, "There's pretty much two of me." What is it about Isabella's situation that causes her to feel this way? Do external and internal factors play a role? How would you react if you were in her place? Discuss whether this feeling changes over the course of the book, and if so, how.
5. How would you describe the relationship between Isabella's mother and father? Give examples that illustrate your description, and analyze why her parents act like they do. Why does her father call the police in chapter 54, and how do Isabella and her mother react? Why is this an important moment?
6. Of her mother, Isabella says, "Mom is sensitive, so I have to be careful." What are some examples of her mother's sensitive nature? What does Isabella keep to herself so that she doesn't make her mother feel bad? What are the consequences of trying to protect her mother instead of expressing her own needs and preferences? Have you ever been in a situation like this? What advice would you have for Isabella?
7. Describe Isabella's father, including his personality, work ethic, strengths, and weaknesses. What is his relationship like with Isabella? Identify times she enjoys being with him, and discuss why. What makes Anastasia a good match for him?
8. When Isabella teases her father about ironing his jeans, he explains, "I think it's important we look our very best at all times." By "us," he means "people of color . . . Black folks." What incidents in the story show you why he might think that way? How does that make you feel? How does his approach to looking his best contrast with Isabella's mother's way of dressing? Why do you think that is?
9. Describe Anastasia's personality. Give specific examples of what she does to welcome Isabella into the house she shares with Isabella's father, and what Isabella likes about her. Do you think Anastasia treats Isabella like her daughter? How is she different from Isabella's mother? How does Isabella feel about having a stepmother? Do you think adding a new family member can sometimes be a difficult adjustment? Explain your answer.
10. Describe Darren's appearance, personality, interests, and hopes. How does Isabella feel about him? How does he treat her? What brings them closer together? What kind of qualities make for a strong friendship or sibling relationship?

11. Talk about John Mark's personality and circumstances and his role in Isabella's life. How does he reach out to Isabella to show he cares about her? How does he approach his proposal to Isabella's mother? Discuss the format of chapter 43 and how it reveals Isabella's uncertainties about John Mark's proposal. Do you think Isabella is right to be concerned? Do you ever find it challenging to voice your opinions, especially to adults? Explain your answer.
12. A salesgirl says to Isabella, "You are so pretty—really exotic-looking!" Then she asks, "Are you mixed?" Clint later says, "Mixed kids are always pretty." Discuss both of these encounters, explaining what they show and why they are upsetting to Isabella. How could the salesgirl or Clint have better handled these situations?
13. Recount the incident with the noose in Imani's locker. Think about what happened in the classroom earlier that was related to the noose. How does Imani react on both occasions, and why? What does the school do about the incident? What does the incident show about at least one of Imani's fellow students? How does Isabella feel about what happened? What might you do to make Imani feel safer and respected at school and in the community?
14. Isabella's father explains to her that in stores, "Black folks are followed more often than others" by security people. How does Isabella feel about this? Relate it to the incident when Isabella and Imani go into an upscale store at the mall and the security guard asks them to leave. How do they react? Why don't they tell Imani's mother about it? Are you surprised to see kids your age treated this way? Why do you think people stereotype others?
15. It comes as a shock to Darren and Isabella when they are pulled over by the police and accused of robbing a bank. Describe the episode in detail, and think about why it escalated so quickly. Why do the police throw Darren on the ground? Why does the police officer shoot her gun? Analyze the scene in terms of how it affects the two young people and what it shows about racism. What actions don't you agree with? What actions do you agree with? How could the police have acted differently?

Extension Activities

The Real You

Mr. Kazilly assigns an essay called "The Real Me," saying, "I want each of you to consider your personal identity. . . . Each of you is uniquely wonderful. I want you to think about that as you write." Ask students to write a four-paragraph essay using this same theme.

Musical Notes into Words

Mr. K. also introduces the class to Langston Hughes's poetry. After reading some of his poems, Isabella says, "Poetry is kinda like my music—it paints a picture in my head, only with words." Have students research poetry, finding different styles, formats, and poets. Ask them to identify a poet they like, and select one poem by that poet. Using this poem as a model, have students write their own. Then have a class discussion about their experiences writing their poems, and whether they felt the same way as Isabella. Consider having volunteers read their personal poems or their favorite poet's poems aloud, and discuss the differences between reading and hearing a poem spoken.

The Music Is Me

In chapter 47, Isabella uses vivid imagery to describe the way music makes her feel. Review the two-page chapter with your students. Then choose a selection of music to play for the class and have them react to the music by jotting down sentences and phrases like Isabella does, making the language as vivid as possible. Have a class discussion to share their responses.

Black Lives Matter

The scene where Darren and Isabella are pulled over and a police officer shoots her gun is unfortunately similar to incidents across the US in recent years. Have students work in pairs to identify and research cases of police shootings of unarmed black children or teenagers. Each pair should prepare a presentation for the class about the facts of their case, the effects on family and community, and the consequences, if any, for the police involved. Finish with a class discussion about groups speaking out against these injustices, and any steps that are being done on local or state levels to address and try to prevent future incidents.

Two Families Blend

How are Isabella's two families and households alike? How are they different? Have students each create a large Venn diagram. Where the circles intersect, they should put Isabella/Izzy's name and the similarities between her two homes. They should label the other parts of the circles as "Mom's House" and "Dad's House" and fill in the space with descriptions of the differences between these two places.

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