



I'M
AFRAID
Vivek Shraya
OF
MEN.

TEACHER'S GUIDE

About the Book

Vivek Shraya has reason to be afraid. Throughout her life she's endured acts of cruelty and aggression for being too feminine as a boy and not feminine enough as a girl. In this essay, with raw honesty, Shraya delivers an important record of the cumulative damage caused by misogyny, homophobia, and transphobia, releasing trauma from a body that has always refused to assimilate. *I'm Afraid of Men* is a journey from camouflage to a riot of colour and a blueprint for how we might cherish all that makes us different and conquer all that makes us afraid.

About the Author

Vivek Shraya is an artist whose body of work crosses the boundaries of music, poetry, fiction, visual art, and film. A Publishing Triangle Award winner, her books include *even this page is white*, *The Boy & the Bindi*, and *She of the Mountains*. Shraya is one half of the music duo Too Attached and founder of the publishing imprint VS. Books. She teaches creative writing at the University of Calgary.

Before-Reading Discussion Prompts

- Examine the front and back covers of the book. What predictions about the text can you make based on the duality of "I'm Afraid of Men" and "Men are Afraid of Me."
- Have you ever felt afraid? How would you describe the feeling? What other emotions accompany fear? Can you recall a time when you felt fearful? How did you respond to the experience?
- What is freedom? What is oppression? In what ways do you experience freedom and oppression in your daily life?
- This book is about re-imagining ideas of masculinity and femininity. In advance of reading, how would you define these terms?
- The author states that she is in a "unique position to address what actually makes a good man, and how we can reimagine forms of masculinity that don't arouse fear" (p.11). Predict and describe qualities of masculinity that could avoid arousing fear.
- How do you think fear might impact the choices we make in our daily lives? Can you think of examples from your own experiences? What decisions have you made in your life in order to feel safe?

Learning Intentions & Outcomes

Students will have the opportunity to:

- Reimagine ideas of femininity and masculinity
- Build understanding of non-conventional gender expression (gender creativity)
- Celebrate gender identities which exist outside a traditional binary view
- Understand that fear is not a monolithic emotion
- Develop empathy and expand world views

Glossary of Terms

Teachers may find it helpful to build student capacity and understanding with terminology present in the text before reading. For a comprehensive glossary of terms, which can support building shared understandings around equity, diversity, inclusion and awareness, please reference:

The 519 Glossary of Terms:
<http://www.the519.org/education-training/glossary>

AFTER-READING

DISCUSSION

Safety vs. Self-Expression

- In the opening pages of the text the author describes the many ways her day is governed by fear and the countless preparations and “minute-to-minute compromises” (p. 10) she makes in order to protect herself and try to stay safe. So often women and girls may not even realize the ways that they plan for safety each day. Map out your day, as the author does in the introduction and note how often your decisions are tied to safety. How are the author’s daily experiences similar to or different from your own?
- The author describes working to make herself invisible in hopes of experiencing safety. In what ways does fear prevent true expression of identity? Should safety prevail over self-expression?
- The author outlines the many ways that fear silences women. What specific examples does she provide? Are you able to make connections between the examples she describes and your own lived experiences, or the experiences of those around you?
- Throughout the text the author explores the notion of “taking up space” or “not taking up space.” What does it mean to “take up space”? Think about the ways you

take up space. Are there times when you would like to take up more space? Are there instances when you feel that you should take up less space?

- The author describes the challenges she experienced as a brown student in a predominantly white junior high school (p.17). Why would assimilation in junior high be a helpful survival strategy? What other survival strategies are required in junior high? Do our “survival strategies” change as we get older?
- The author describes how she felt about fashion and her love of wearing her mother’s jacket (p.18). In what ways does fashion allow true self-expression? Does fashion allow one to assert their individuality? Are there ways that taking risks with fashion might expose one to harm?

Gender & Body

- Are bodies born male/female or assigned male/female? How might a person feel when their body does not conform to traditional ideas of femininity or masculinity? How might this impact identity? Consider referencing the glossary of terms for a definition of cisgender to support conversation and responses to this question.

- Throughout the text the author writes about her efforts to reclaim femininity (p.1). What does she do to achieve this? Why is she cautious about this endeavour? What risks does she take in doing so?

Setting Boundaries

- The author describes experiences in which her boundaries are violated as well as those when her boundaries are respected. What is she referring to when she speaks about boundaries?
- Why are boundaries important? Do you have a set of boundaries when engaging in relationships? What are they? How do you feel when your boundaries are dismissed, versus being respected?

Falling in Love

- The author provides details about her relationship with Nick. How does her relationship with Nick alter her perception of masculinity?
- The author describes that falling in love with another human is terrifying (p. 53). What experiences have led her to feel this way?

AFTER-READING

DISCUSSION

(CONTINUED)

Falling in Love (continued)

- The author posits that the idea of a “good man” is problematic for several reasons. Do you agree with her? Why or why not? Do you agree with the author that in order to reimagine masculinity, the quest for a “good man” must be abandoned?

Thinking Beyond Labels

- The author describes the ways in which our perceived weaknesses are also strengths (p. 71). What examples does she offer? Think about yourself and the aspects of your personality that have been perceived as weak. In what ways might those aspects actually be your strength?
- The author challenges us to think beyond the typical definition of misogyny (disdain for women) and pushes us to see that misogyny takes many forms (p. 76 – 77). What examples does the author provide from her own life? Think about examples from your own life. In what ways have you experienced or enacted misogyny?
- The author offers suggestions for a healthier masculinity (p. 78). What does she argue must occur in order for this to happen? What

are the societal and individual benefits that could result from this shift?

- The author asks us to unpack the idea of fear. Does fear extend beyond something that we hate or something negative? Is it possible to see fear as a positive? Is it possible to love the things that we fear?
- The author states that she is in a “unique position to address what actually makes a good man, and how we can reimagine forms of masculinity that don’t arouse fear” (p. 11). Predict and describe qualities of masculinity that could avoid arousing fear.
- How do you think fear might impact the choices we make in our daily lives? Can you think of examples from your own experiences? What decisions have you made in your life in order to feel safe?

Narrative Structure

- The book is divided into three sections: Introduction, You, and Me. Why might the author have chosen to divide the text in this format?
- In the You section, the author uses the present tense to discuss events that have occurred in the past. Why might she have made the decision to do so?

- Throughout the text the author uses dialogue to share specific conversations rather than recounting the event. Why do you think she chose to use dialogue in these sections and not others?
- In the closing pages of the book, the author includes a quote from Indigenous playwright Tomson Highway (p. 78). Why might the author have chosen to include this voice? What purpose does this quote serve?

“I’m afraid of men because it was men who taught me to fear the extraordinary parts of myself.”

VIVEK SHRAYA

FOLLOW-UP

ACTIVITIES

Goodbye “Good”

The text challenges us to think about the problem with the label of “good.” The author states, “the pressure to be ‘good’ is not exclusive to one gender, nor is it applied equally to all genders. To be clear, the stress on girls to be ‘good girls’ far surpasses any stress men might feel to be ‘good.’”

Think about the social construct of a “good woman” or a “good man.” List what the word “good” actually asks of women and men.

Next, look to yourself and generate a list of other possible adjectives that more accurately represent who you are.

Create a visual representation of this tension between what we are supposed to be and who we are. Ask students to trace a silhouette of themselves and then collage with words and images from magazines. On the outside of the silhouette, images and words that show what is perceived or expected by society to be “good.” On the inside of the silhouette, images and words that showcase what we actually are or imagine we could be without societal constraints.

As an alternative to a silhouette, students could also visually represent an iceberg. The peak of the iceberg collaged with images and words that show what is perceived or expected by society to be “good.” Under the surface, images and words that showcase what we actually are or imagine we could be without societal constraints.

Ask Her

The author shares great detail about her experiences throughout the text. Ask your students to imagine that they had the opportunity to interview the author. What questions might they like to ask her? What would they like to know more about?

Consider using the QAR (Question-Answer Relationship) strategy in order to push students to move beyond simplistic questions and towards questions that would require information that exists outside the text.

This activity may be extended to include giving students the opportunity to answer the questions using the text and their own background knowledge to infer what the author’s responses might be.

I Wish I Had

There are often moments in life when we reflect and wish we had more patience, been more empathetic, showed more kindness, reserved judgement, stood up for someone.

Think about a time like this and write a letter to the person in your memory. The letter might be to your younger self or to someone else. Recount the details of the incident and explain what you wish you would have said or done.

Consider these letters as monologues that could be recorded as a video diary or presented orally.

If I Were Safe to Speak

Revisit sections of the text where the author does not speak or take up space. Explore these sections, imagining what the author would have said if she did not have to worry about safety.

This exploration could be a writing task or a drama activity. If you choose to explore this activity through drama, consider having one student read the text excerpt and the other student respond. Explore various scenarios switching the role back and forth.

Possible Scenarios:

- “We finally reach our homeroom after the tedious welcome speeches, you wait for me to take a seat, before you choose yours — on the other side of the classroom.” (p. 16)
- “My body tightens, but instinctively I keep reading instead of turning around. A few minutes later something else lands on my back. Another giggle. After this pattern repeats a few times, it occurs to me that you might be spitting on me.” (p. 19)

FOLLOW-UP

ACTIVITIES

If I Were Safe to Speak (continued)

Possible Scenarios (continued):

- “I turn around, but the almost-midnight dance floor is too packed for me to determine who has grabbed me. I re-enter the music and resume dancing. Then you do it again. And again.” (p. 32)
- “As I wait for the bus at the corner of a busy intersection, a car slows down at the red light. Then the passenger window rolls down. You fling a used paper cup at me. As the light changes to green, you yell ‘tranny’ and speed off.” (p. 36)

Research. Representation. Celebration.

We know that gender-creative, gender-nonconforming, and trans people are underrepresented in mainstream media. Their experiences and accomplishments are frequently undervalued, even silenced.

Through this task, students will have the opportunity to do research and subsequently bring the experiences of a gender-nonconforming person into the spotlight to be celebrated.

After completing the research phase of this lesson, students are then tasked with creating a magazine cover and feature article featuring the person that they have researched.

Success criteria should be co-constructed with the students through the analysis of magazine covers and feature articles.

Possible Research Topics:

Tilda Swinton	Asia Kate Dillon
David Bowie	Jen Richards
Prince	Tyler Ford
Grace Jones	Mykki Blanco
RuPaul	Rae Spoon
Janet Mock	Alok
Rhea Butcher	Grayson Perry

Other Resources

For lessons including, but not limited to:

- Aspects of Identity and Contextual Power
- Gender Stereotypes
- Power and Privilege
- Analyzing Heterosexist/Homophobic Temperature of Your School
- Media Literacy – Identifying Heterosexism in Media Images
- Taking Action Against Homophobia and Transphobia
- Exploring Transphobia and Genderism

Equitable and Inclusive Schools: Challenging Homophobia and Heterosexism in the K-12 Curriculum (Toronto District School Board)

<https://canadianvalues.ca/ICV/TDSB-Equity%20-%20InclusiveCurriculum-See%20page%2010%20.pdf>

Rebecca Haskell and Brian Burtch, *Get That Freak: Homophobia and Transphobia in Schools* (2010), We also highlighted ways in which students and their allies worked to establish what we in our concluding remarks termed “A Better Place.”

<https://www.glsen.org/>

https://www.glsen.org/sites/default/files/The%20Breakdown_0.pdf

<http://www.unesco.org/new/fileadmin/MULTIMEDIA/HQ/ED/pdf/IDAHO%20Lesson%20plan.pdf>