



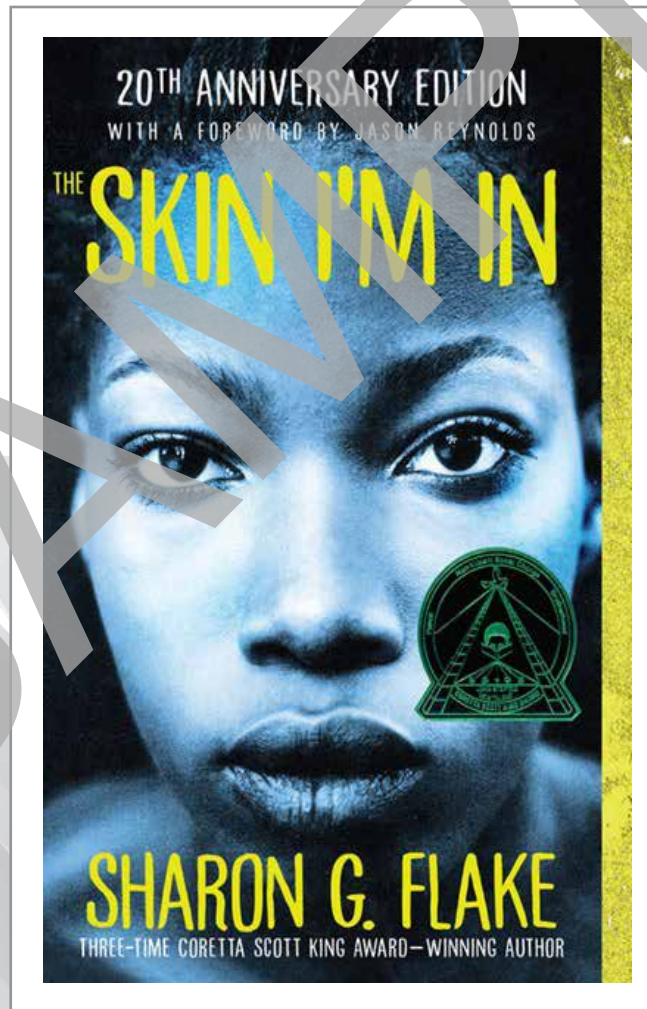
**TEACHER GUIDE**

**GRADES 9-12**

COMPREHENSIVE CURRICULUM BASED LESSON PLANS

# The Skin I'm In

Sharon G. Flake



**READ, WRITE, THINK, DISCUSS AND CONNECT**

# The Skin I'm In

Sharon G. Flake

## TEACHER GUIDE

**NOTE:**

The trade book edition of the novel used to prepare this guide is found in the Novel Units catalog and on the Novel Units website. Using other editions may have varied page references.

Please note: We have assigned Interest Levels based on our knowledge of the themes and ideas of the books included in the Novel Units sets, however, please assess the appropriateness of this novel or trade book for the age level and maturity of your students prior to reading with them. You know your students best!

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3901 Union Blvd., Suite 155

St. Louis, MO 63115

[sales@novelunits.com](mailto:sales@novelunits.com)

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## Skills and Strategies

### Thinking

Research, comparison, problem solving, decision making, recalling, interpreting evidence, forming opinions, point of view, drawing conclusions, pros/cons

### Comprehension

Analyzing, cause/effect, details, generalizing, inferring, predicting, summarizing, main idea, evaluating, examining

### Listening/Speaking

Class discussion, oral report, panel discussion, presentation

### Vocabulary

Context clues, synonyms, definitions

### Writing

Report, diary entry, essay, encyclopedia entry, paragraph, letter, creative writing, note-taking and listing, newspaper journalism, brochure, television script, poetry

### Literary Elements

Characterization, identifying main events, simile, metaphor, plot, theme

### Across the Curriculum

Art—posters, collage, illustration, scenery/décor; Economics—finance, stock market; Education—special programs; Health—exercises, home remedies; Literature—literary review; Music— theater, musical styles; Social Studies—culture, government, history, community issues

**Genre:** fiction

**Setting:** in and around contemporary inner-city McClenton Middle School

**Point-of-View:** first person

**Themes:** discrimination, peer pressure/bullying at school, self-esteem/identity, true meaning of friendship, meaning of enslavement, coming to terms with loss

**Conflict:** person vs. person, person vs. self

**Style:** narrative

**Tone:** serious, gritty

**Date of First Publication:** 1998

## Summary

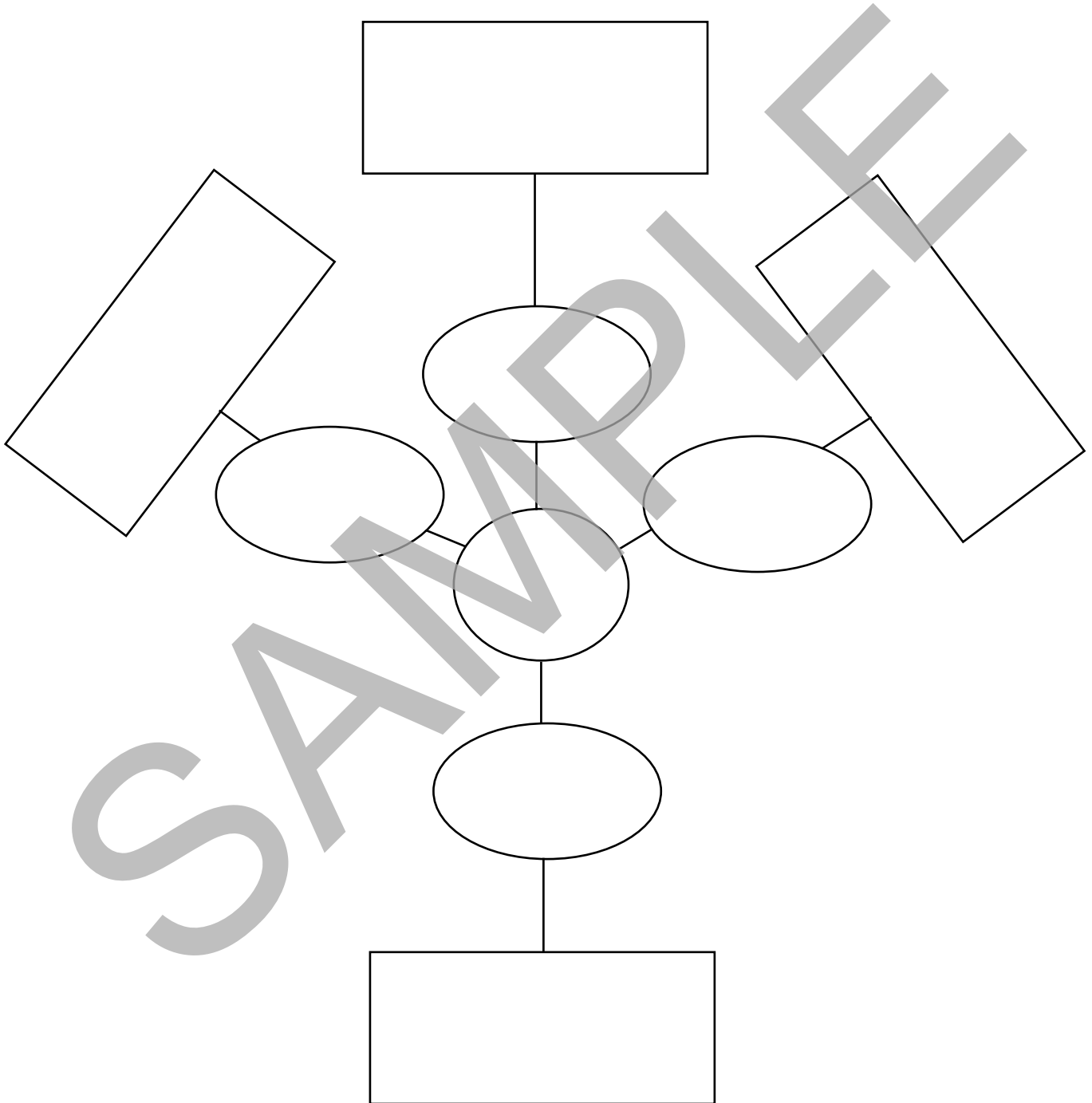
*The Skin I'm In* recounts the struggles of seventh-grader Maleeka Madison to conquer low self-esteem and to fit in at school. Peers tease Maleeka because she has dark skin, wears homemade clothes, and gets high grades. Maleeka is "protected" by mean, tough Charlese. She does homework for Charlese, who virtually enslaves her. Maleeka feels that the new English teacher, Miss Saunders, exacerbates the situation. Miss Saunders's face is blotched with a white spot due to a skin condition, yet she exudes self-confidence. She sees potential in Maleeka and urges her to develop her writing talent. Maleeka slowly responds, but in a climactic moment, she lets Charlese bully her into helping destroy Miss Saunders's classroom. Frightened by Charlese's threats, Maleeka initially takes sole blame for the damage. Later, with Miss Saunders present, she finds the strength to confront and "squeal on" Charlese. When Maleeka stands up for herself, the bullying stops. She learns to respect the skin she's in.

## About the Author

Sharon G. Flake grew up in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, as one of six children. Flake never aspired to a writing career as a child. She began to create short stories in college. She doubted her writing ability, but it brought her high marks. Flake graduated from the University of Pittsburgh in 1978 with a B.A. in English. She worked as a youth counselor at the Center for the Assessment and Treatment of Youth in Philadelphia. She became public relations director, and later director of publications, at the University of Pittsburgh's Katz School of Business. Flake wrote for years before Hyperion accepted her manuscript for *The Skin I'm In*. She was one of the first writers to publish under Hyperion's Jump at the Sun imprint, which celebrates the African-American experience. *The Skin I'm In* received a number of honors, including the 1999 Coretta Scott King John Steptoe Award for New Talent. The honors multiplied as Flake continued to write for and reach middle- and high-school readers. Her other novels include *Money Hungry* (2002), its sequel *Begging for Change* (2003), *Who Am I Without Him? Short Stories About Girls and the Boys in Their Lives* (2004), and *Bang!* (2005). Her novels reflect themes such as self-esteem and identity, teenage love and angst, homelessness, poverty, discrimination, and the effects of loss.

## Characterization

**Directions:** Place a main character's name in the center circle. Write words that describe him/her in the ovals around the name. List details from the story that demonstrate each quality in the rectangles.



## Chapters 24–27, pp. 130–151

Charlese plots against Miss Saunders. Caleb warns Maleeka to stay clear of Charlese. Maleeka helps Charlese and the twins destroy Miss Saunders’s classroom. Unwittingly, Maleeka sets the classroom ablaze. Maleeka is caught while the others get away. Momma says Maleeka must pay for the damages. Maleeka tells Charlese to help her raise money, or she’ll squeal.

### Vocabulary

convertible (130)  
majesty (133)  
cologne (134)  
dashiki (134)  
sizzling (142)  
lotion (148)  
expelled (149)

### Discussion Questions

1. While she hangs out behind the school, John-John teases Maleeka again about her “midnight” skin color. Why does she respond with a smile? What is she learning about herself and her image? (*She remembers a poem about midnight beauty and majesty. Students may conclude that she is learning to accept herself and pay less attention to what others think or say. Answers will vary. pp. 132–134*)
2. When Caleb warns her to stay away from Charlese, Maleeka says, “Char and me are friends” and “You can’t just stop being Char’s friend” (p. 136). Charlese calls Maleeka “girlfriend” in a phone conversation (p. 150). Is Charlese really Maleeka’s friend? How would you describe a true friendship? (*Charlese is not Maleeka’s friend. Answers will vary. pp. 134–136*)
3. Maleeka says, “I know Char’s plan ain’t gonna mean nothing but trouble for me. But I got to go along, anyhow” (p. 136). Why doesn’t Maleeka think of a way out? What choices might she have besides “going along”? What would you do in this situation? (*Students may suggest telling Momma, Miss Saunders, or Mr. Pajolli, or feigning sickness. Answers will vary. pp. 136–137*)
4. Maleeka recalls that Miss Saunders said “this was our school, and we needed to take responsibility for it” (p. 138). Compare and contrast this point of view with those of Caleb and Charlese. Who loses if school or public property gets destroyed? (*In a similar way to Miss Saunders’s, Caleb wants to get a group together to discuss improving McClenton. Caleb cleaned the boys’ bathroom before, and he believes it’s right to help in the community. Charlese has no sense of responsibility and lacks community spirit. Students may suggest that tax-paying citizens and students are the losers. pp. 105–106, 130–132, 134–135, 138–143*)
5. Why does Maleeka join in when the girls start destroying Miss Saunders’s classroom? How does Maleeka really feel about her participation and about Miss Saunders? (*Maleeka does nothing until Charlese insists. Then Maleeka changes the grade book and protests the order to burn the foreign money. Charlese says she’ll bring no more clothes, then threatens bodily harm. Several times Maleeka objects; she says it’s not right, that Miss Saunders is still a teacher and runs the show. Maleeka finally yields to pressure and pain imposed by Charlese. Maleeka cries afterward, wishing she could undo the school year and go back to being herself. pp. 140–142*)
6. Maleeka wants Momma to “make this thing right again,” but Momma says Maleeka must pay for the damage. “You gotta think that you worth saving, baby. Gotta realize that who you are is all you got” (p. 148). Do you think Momma is unfair? Should Momma solve the problem? Explain. (*Answers will vary, but some students may conclude that Momma is trying to teach responsibility. Some may point out that Maleeka caused Momma to suffer; Momma cries, can’t go to work, and breaks out in bumps. pp. 148–149*)

7. Why does Maleeka keep quiet for so long about the guilt of Charlese and the twins? Would you do that? *(Students may note that Maleeka knows JuJu will give Charlese \$400 for finishing seventh grade; Charlese promises better clothes to wear, and Maleeka cares about clothes; and Maleeka expects cash to help with payment. Answers will vary. p. 150)*
8. Examine Maleeka’s diary letter that starts, “Remember the acorn” (p. 151). Maleeka rips out the page because she feels she’s no stronger than she was weeks earlier. Do you think she’s stronger? *(Maleeka writes, “Even when you don’t see it growing, it’s pushing past the dirt.” Some students may say that Maleeka is growing stronger even if she doesn’t know it. Answers will vary.)*

### Supplementary Activities

1. African Culture/Art: Caleb appears in a lime-green dashiki. Use the Internet or printed sources to find pictures of African dashikis. Create a collage.
2. Art/Literary Setting: Miss Saunders decorates the classroom for each new book that is being read. Using a shoebox or small box, decorate the inside to reflect a book you read. Display your creation in the classroom.
3. Education/Community Service: Caleb organizes a meeting to improve McClenton. Form small groups to act as committees for the improvement of your school. Hold committee discussions and assign one member to take notes. Then exchange ideas with other class committees.
4. Writing: Write a paragraph about a time you were pressured into doing something you did not want to do.

### Chapters 28–32, pp. 152–171

Maleeka rescues John-John when boys attack him. A letter informs Maleeka that she won the library writing contest. Charlese reveals that she put Miss Saunders’s watch in Maleeka’s locker. Maleeka confronts Charlese in front of Miss Saunders and tells the truth about the classroom break-in. Caleb gives Maleeka a poem he wrote about her. Miss Saunders and John-John welcome Maleeka back to class.

### Discussion Questions

1. Discuss the attack on John-John. Why do people watch at first instead of getting help for John-John? Why does Maleeka help? *(Boys beat up John-John because his talk got one arrested for shoplifting. People are on the street but don’t help. Maleeka gets a switch and hits the boys, who come after her. Caleb and other adults rescue her. Students may say people don’t like to get involved, but Maleeka remembers when boys attacked her. Answers will vary. pp. 153–156)*
2. Miss Saunders tells Maleeka, “Trust me with the truth and I promise everything will be OK” (p. 164). Why doesn’t Maleeka respond to Miss Saunders at this time? What can you tell about Miss Saunders from her visit to Maleeka’s home? *(Some students may say Maleeka is still afraid of Charlese. Some may perceive Miss Saunders as a caring, concerned teacher who values Maleeka’s intelligence and good qualities. Answers will vary. pp. 162–164)*

### Vocabulary

shoplifting (154)
switch (155)
lobby (157)
hunch (168)
spearmint (169)