



Homeless Bird

By Gloria Whelan
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Introduction:

Homeless Bird, Gloria Whelan's moving look at Indian culture and one girl's struggle to find her place in it, provides a distinctly different perspective on growing up than the one we experience in the United States. Like many girls her age in India, thirteen-year-old Koly is getting married. But her excitement and hope turn to dread when she meets her husband, a sickly boy who is much younger than Koly and her family were led to believe. When her new husband dies, Koly must take on the only identity allowed her by society—that of a widow. Faced with a lifetime of subservience, poverty, and isolation, Koly realizes how alone she is. Yet this rare young woman, bewildered and brave, sets out to forge her own exceptional future. And a new life, like a beautiful tapestry, comes together for Koly—one stitch at a time.

Questions For Discussion:

1. Koly ends up in a series of unfortunate situations. Who can be blamed for her misfortune? Her parents? The Mehtas? Society? Koly herself? Or, do all these factors work together to influence her life? Is it possible to root out one cause for Koly's misfortune? Conversely, who can be credited for the good turn Koly's life eventually takes?
2. In Koly's society in India, life is highly defined from beginning to end. How does this compare to life in the United States? Can you say the same for all the different groups in the United States (i.e. religious, ethnic, regional)?
3. In India, young girls are expected to marry. How does this affect their families treatment of them? What do the families gain from a good marriage? How is Koly affected by this expectation to marry? How would your life be different if you were expected to marry in a few years?
4. When Koly becomes a widow, she takes on a specific, rigidly defined role in society. What does being a widow mean for Koly? In what ways does this role restrict her? In what ways does it set her free?
5. The ability to read takes on a great importance for Koly. Why is she originally kept from learning to read? Why does Sassur agree to teach her? What effect does it have on the rest of her life?
6. Discuss the different bird images that are used throughout the book. What traits do birds have that make them particularly appropriate for Koly's story? Why does she relate to the homeless bird?
7. Like all the women in her family, Koly learns to embroider quilts and saris. As she explains, "All [the women's] thoughts and dreams went into their work because it took so long, each sari became a part of our lives." Discuss the ways in which Koly's life and her embroidery become interwoven. Is there a way you express your thoughts and dreams about life, for example, through singing, participating in sports or writing?
8. Does Koly believe that Sass will find happiness? Why or why not? Why do you think that Koly was able to find happiness at the end of the book? What makes Koly different from Sass in this respect? What does it mean to be truly wealthy?
9. Animals become very important to Koly after she becomes a widow. What animals does she befriend while she is living with Mehtas? Why does she tame these various animals? Find examples of Koly making comparisons between animals and the people she meets. How do these examples fit with Koly's past experiences and with her perceptions of herself?
10. Does Koly believe that Sass will find happiness? Why or why not? Why do you think that Koly was able to find happiness at the end of the book? What makes Koly different from Sass in this respect? What does it mean to be truly wealthy?
11. Koly grew up in a very rural area, but environments differ? Which does Koly prefer? What might have happened to Koly if her Sass had not left her at Vrindavan?
12. Who are Koly's true friends? Were there people she should have been able to depend on but couldn't?

About The Author:

Gloria Whelan is a poet and awarding who has written many books for young readers. One of these, *Once On This Island*, won the 1996 Great Lakes Book Award. She lives with her husband, Joseph, in the woods of northern Michigan.