



The Genocide Education Project

Using historical fiction to teach the Armenian Genocide:

Who She Left Behind

By Victoria Atamian Waterman

Rationale:

Reading memoirs and historical fiction with students supports learning while exploring different eras and geographic locations. To prepare students for reading *Who She Left Behind*—a historically based account of a young woman's experience during the Armenian Genocide and immigration to the United States, teachers are advised to introduce the historical and cultural conditions of Ottoman Armenians during the late 1890s and early 1900s. To support teachers as they plan, The Genocide Education Project has developed a [variety of lessons](#) and activities to fit sequential learning based on 50-minute class periods.

Depending on curricular pacing, teachers are encouraged to choose and adapt a lesson to suit their students' needs.



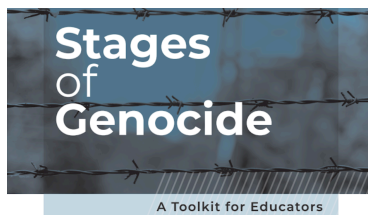
Creating Context:

Providing students with a foundational understanding of genocide and the historical context of the Armenian Genocide is an essential component of teaching texts such as [Goodbye, Antoura](#), [Forgotten Fire](#), [Like Water on Stone](#), [Who She Left Behind](#), or any literature centered on this history. Learning about Armenia's cultural heritage, the historical events leading up to the genocide, and the lasting impact of genocide denial on descendants and current geopolitical conflict in the region greatly enhances students' ability to grasp the depth of the narratives they read.

[The Genocide Education Project](#) is committed to supporting educators in this critical work. A variety of background resources and lessons curated by teachers and subject-matter experts are available free of charge. These tools are designed to deepen student understanding and provide educators with reliable, accessible materials as they guide students through Armenian Genocide memoirs and historical fiction.

What is Genocide?

Before reading a genocide survivor's memoir, students must have a foundational



understanding of genocide. The [Stages of Genocide Toolkit](#) introduces students to the United Nations Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide. Using the **Stages of Genocide** framework, students analyze six different historical cases of genocide. Through the unit's concise readings and engaging visual materials, students

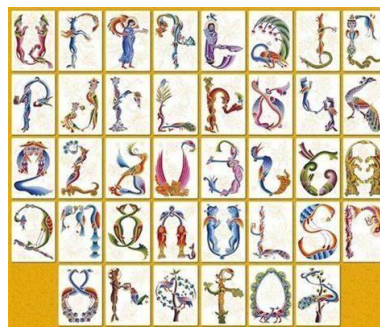
develop critical thinking skills to identify patterns of genocide, preparing them for more thoughtful engagement with survivor narratives.

Cultural Learning:

Learning about Armenian culture and traditions helps students better understand the society and individuals they read about. To support student understanding of Armenian heritage and values, teachers may choose from the following lessons in whole or in part:

[The Stories "Digniks" Tell: Preserving Armenian Culture Through Artifacts](#): This lesson complements *Who She Left Behind*, which includes a story thread about Armenian national dolls (digniks) and their cultural legacy. The "Digniks" lesson introduces students to these traditional cloth dolls that serve as cultural artifacts passed down through generations. Students explore the historical and cultural significance of these dolls, learn how they reflect aspects of daily life, gender roles, and national identity, and have the opportunity to create their own dignik-inspired artifact. Through storytelling and artifact analysis, students gain a deeper appreciation of how culture is preserved through tangible items and oral traditions.

[Armenian Bird Letters](#): Understanding other cultures means exploring their languages, beliefs, art, and traditions. Central to the Armenian identity is its unique language and alphabet, a deeply held religious faith, and the unique expression of these two components in "illuminated manuscripts" (handwritten books decorated with elaborate designs or miniature pictures). These ancient texts are still revered by Armenians as expressions of their religious devotion and their shared history, whether they live in Armenia or in the diaspora.



Building Foundational Knowledge of the Armenian Genocide:

GenEd offers a range of lessons designed to support students as they explore the history of Armenia and the Armenian Genocide. Teachers are encouraged to select and adapt these lessons and activities that best meet the needs of their students and classroom objectives.

Available options include:

[The Armenian Genocide: A Brief Background Reading](#)

This 1-2 -day lesson introduces students to key facts about the Armenian people, their geographic and cultural origins, and the historical events of the Armenian Genocide. Using a combination of video, targeted vocabulary, and a comprehensive background reading with accompanying questions, students gain a clear understanding of how the genocide was carried out and the long-term impact of ongoing genocide denial.



[Under the Cover of World War I: The Armenian Genocide](#)

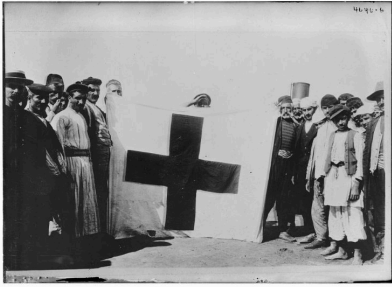
This one-day lesson introduces students to the UN Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of Genocide and the Armenian Genocide, which occurred during WWI. Using a video from *Facing History and Ourselves*, students will gain a basic understanding of one of the first genocides of the 20th century.

[A Doll's Dress](#)



Humanizing history through objects is a powerful instructional approach for high school History and English Language Arts teachers. In this 50-minute lesson, students will engage in artifact analysis and practice critical examination of a historical object.

[Resistance, Agency, and Empowerment](#) *(Multi-day teaching unit)*



Through the lens of resistance, agency, and empowerment, this multi-day unit engages students in learning about the Armenian people and the Armenian Genocide. Using a variety of hands-on activities that incorporate both primary and secondary sources, students analyze how Armenians maintained cultural identity, resilience, and dignity in the face of persecution and violence.

Post-reading Activities:

[Resistance, Agency, and Empowerment](#), Lessons 8 & 9

Students gather and synthesize information about the Armenian experience before, during, and after the genocide. They also examine what it means to be Armenian today, exploring themes of cultural identity, resilience, and continuity in the face of historical trauma.

[Resistance, Agency, and Empowerment](#) Day 10

In this concluding lesson, students explore the enduring consequences of hate by examining antisemitism, anti-Armenianism, and genocide denial. Through guided discussion and analysis, they reflect on how prejudice and denial impact communities and why education and remembrance are vital to prevention.