

TITLE: *Thunderbird* and The Hero's Journey

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SUMMARY OF THE LESSON/UNIT:

Book One of the *Thunderbird* trilogy is a fast-paced time-traveling fantasy adventure centered on an orphaned Palestinian teenager (Noor) who is tasked with finding her courage, learning how to use her superpower, and going back in time in order to save the world. The author, Sonia Nimr, brilliantly interweaves rich Palestinian culture and history, as well as Middle Eastern mythology, into her dynamic story, opening the door for teachers to make deep cultural and historical connections.

This fun and engaging literature unit focuses on the hero's journey (or "monomyth") plot structure and reflective journal writing on the nature of courage and one's own personal strengths and superpowers. It also provides an opportunity for students to design their own superheroes and structure their own hero's journey.

Included in this unit is a Chapter-by-Chapter Teacher's Guide that can be easily adapted into a Student Reading Guide that includes literary terminology, vocabulary and allusions, comprehension/discussion questions, and additional resources for cultural/historical connections. Also included in this unit is a Slideshow on Mythical Creatures of the Middle East, and the following activities: Noor's "Hero's Journey" Activity that guides students through the monomyth structure present throughout world literature, including *Thunderbird*; Reflective Journal Entries that can also be launching points for rich whole-group or small-group discussions; and a Superhero Creation Project where students can apply what they've learned to their own superhero's journey.

SUBJECTS: English/Language Arts; Social Science

GRADE LEVEL(S): 6-8

TIMING: 3-4 weeks

STANDARDS: [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.6.1](#); [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.6.2](#); [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.6.3](#); [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.6.4](#); [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.7.1](#); [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.7.2](#); [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.7.3](#); [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.8.1](#); [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.8.2](#); [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.8.3](#); [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.8.4](#); [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.6.10](#); [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.7.10](#); [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.8.10](#); [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.6-8.4](#)

INQUIRY QUESTIONS: What makes a hero? How can storytelling be used to teach us about culture, history, and geography? In what ways and for what purpose do authors weave ancient stories and mythologies into modern contexts? How does the hero's journey/monomyth story structure transcend cultural boundaries?

LEARNING OBJECTIVES:

1. Understand the ways authors use literary tools to craft an engaging work of narrative fiction, including setting, conflict, plot structure, foreshadowing, flashback, imagery, and character development.
2. Identify the parts of a hero's journey/monomyth story structure and analyze multiple works of literature through it's lens.
3. Understand the purpose and ways in which authors weave language, history, and culture into modern fiction contexts.
4. Reflect on the meaning of courage in the context of our own lives.
5. Draw inspiration from literature and the hero's journey/monomyth structure to design our own heros.

LISTS OF MATERIALS/RESOURCES NEEDED:

[Teacher's Guide \(adaptable to a Student Study Guide\)](#)

[Slideshow: Mythical Creatures of the Middle East](#)

[Activity: Reflective Journal Entries for *Thunderbird*](#)

[Activity: Noor's Monomyth/Hero's Journey](#)

[Activity: Superhero Creation Project](#)

BACKGROUND/CONTEXT/RATIONALE:

Thunderbird is perfect for middle school ELA and/or a dynamic addition to a Social Studies Unit on mythology or the Middle Ages. It is a short, fast-paced, and exciting novel that could be read on its own for fun or developed into an extensive unit. Sonia Nimr weaves Palestinian culture, history, and mythology into her novel, which provides countless opportunities to demystify Arab culture, language, and perspectives. The chapter-by-chapter teacher's guide includes chapter summaries, vocabulary and allusions, translations of Arabic phrases, reading comprehension questions, and additional resources to help teachers and students understand and contextualize cultural references. The teacher's guide can be easily converted into a student reading guide. If converting it to a student guide, teachers may want to delete the "summaries" and instead, have students write their own summaries of important events. Teachers may find it helpful to have some background knowledge on the history of the Palestinian people and the current issues in the Israel-Palestine conflict in order to answer students' questions as they come up, and the resources sections of the chapter-by-chapter guide seeks to fill any knowledge gaps. However, having limited knowledge of the history of

the region in no way will impede the comprehension of the plot or appreciation of the characters and journey. *Thunderbird* would serve as a perfect gateway to the region for students and teachers alike.

The English-Language Arts activities in this unit focus on story structure, specifically, the hero's journey (or monomyth), which opens the door to so many cross-cultural and pop-culture connections, as this structure is both timeless and can be applied to many stories from around the world as well as popular films, including *Harry Potter*, *Star Wars*, and *Lord of the Rings*. Furthermore, it is easy for students to make personal connections with the protagonist of *Thunderbird*, Noor. Like many pre-teens and teenagers, Noor struggles with confidence in completing what seems like an impossible task, and this opens the door for reflective writing about courage and students' own personal strengths. The reflective journal entries include questions that help students explore the nature of courage and are perfect for small-group and whole-group discussions. The novel also includes wonderful mythological elements, and a whole unit could be developed on pre-Islamic mythical creatures with a focus on the phoenix (al-anqa) and its various manifestations throughout the Mediterranean and MENA region. This unit does provide a brief slideshow that features a video on djinn and background information about each of the mythical creatures featured in the novel.

A final note: This is the first book of a trilogy that has yet to be published. Noor's journey has really just begun. This invites a wonderful opportunity for students to make predictions, and then wait in suspense for the next novel in the series.

PROCEDURES: Use the Chapter-by-Chapter Teacher's Guide for pacing. The Slideshow of Mythical Creatures can either be frontloaded or presented as the creatures come up in the story. Students can be introduced to the hero's journey/monomyth with the activities provided and then trace Noor's journey as it happens in the novel, or it can be taught at the end of the book. The reflection questions can also be interspersed through the reading of the novel, and the Superhero Creation Project is intended to be an assessment at the end of the reading.

ASSESSMENTS: The Superhero Creation Activity asks students to design their own superheroes and then apply what they've learned about the hero's journey structure to their hero. Teachers can assess by determining if the students have successfully interpreted the stage of the monomyth and applied it to their own hero.

EXTENSIONS: Teachers can use the Superhero Creation Activity as a template for students to write a superhero narrative fiction piece that follows the Hero's Journey/Monomyth story structure.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

All resources listed below, as well as some additional resources, can also be found in the teacher's guide.

TED talk: [What makes a hero?](#)

Article: ["Coffee and qahwa: How a drink for Arab mystics went global"](#) (BBC)

Recipe: [Maqlooba](#) (*New York Times*)

Encyclopedia article: ["Muslim prayer beads"](#) (*Britannica*)

Map: [Ramallah and the Palestinian territories](#)

Article: ["In Palestine, Protecting One of the World's Oldest Olive Trees Is a 24/7 Job"](#) (*Atlas Obscura*)

Encyclopedia article: ["Phoenix: Mythology"](#) (*New World Encyclopedia*)

Article: ["For Jericho, the World's Oldest City, it Was all About Location"](#) (Newsela)

Video: ["Archeologists - Career Spotlight"](#) (USAGov)

Video: ["Jinn: The Ancient Arabian Shape-Shifters"](#) (PBS/Storied)

Video: ["Al Aqsa, 360° tour of Jerusalem's holiest mosque"](#) (*Al Jazeera English*)

Article: ["How Does the Islamic Calendar Work?"](#) (TeachMidEast)

Photo Essay: [Checkpoints: "We live a life of injustice"](#) (*Al Jazeera*)

Video: [Lunar Eclipse 101](#) (*National Geographic*)

Video: ["The Crusades - Pilgrimage or Holy War"](#) (Crash Course)

Article: ["Demons, Djinns, and Devils of the Medieval Islamic World"](#) (Adam Ali, University of Toronto)

Article: ["Anzu and Ziz: Great Mythical Birds in Ancient Near Eastern, Biblical, and Rabbinic Traditions"](#) (Nili Wazana; Hebrew University of Jerusalem)

Article: ["A Flight Through Islamic Culture"](#) (Janice Mann, Bucknell University)