

DISCUSSION TOPICS:

THE MAYA PEOPLE: YESTERDAY, TODAY & TOMORROW

LANGUAGE ARTS, SOCIAL SCIENCES, DRAMA, DEBATE; GRADES: 5–8



"Once you join the consumer society, you have to keep making money to buy things you don't need."

The Jaguar Stones, Book One: Middleworld, page 201

SOME SUGGESTED TOPICS FOR INDEPENDENT RESEARCH, CLASS DISCUSSION, CREATIVE WRITING AND DRAMA PROJECTS . . .

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1. DEFINING YOUR TERMS

During the course of Middleworld, Max is forced to rethink many of his assumptions about life and society. What do the following terms mean to you—and why? Do you expect your definitions to change as you get older?

- What is 'civilization'?
- What is 'poverty'?
- What is 'wealth'?
- What is 'happiness'?

2. THE ETHICS OF ARCHAEOLOGY

Some people would say that all archaeology is theft," says Uncle Ted, in an attempt to justify his illegal smuggling of Maya artifacts. Do you agree with him? In your opinion, who owns ancient artifacts – the descendants of the indigenous people who made them/ looters or whoever finds them/ archaeologists and the institutions that sponsor their expeditions/ the nation they were found in/ the world at large?

Related Topic:

Research the dispute between Britain and Greece over ownership of the Elgin marbles (which once adorned the Parthenon in Ancient Greece and now sit in the British Museum in London). In your opinion, should the Marbles be returned to Greece? Should all the museums of the world be forced to return their treasures to their country of origin?

Useful websites:

www.bbc.co.uk/history/ancient/greeks/parthenon_debate_01.shtml

http://www.britishmuseum.org/about_us/news_and_press/statements/parthenon_sculptures.aspx

3. LANGUAGE LAB

Lola tells Max that the six million Maya alive today speak 31 different and mutually unintelligible Mayan languages. Most can speak another language (Spanish or English) as well. Many speak Maya at home and Spanish at school or work. Should these Maya languages be preserved? If so, why—and how?

Related topic:

Research the world's minority languages. What would the Maya and other linguistic minorities such as the Welsh and the Catalans lose (or gain) if their languages were allowed to die out? Would the world be a better or a worse place if everyone spoke the same language? And if you had to choose that one language, what would you choose and why?

Useful websites:

www.omniglot.com

www.native-languages.org

4. WELCOME TO THE JUNGLE

In Middleworld when Max runs into the jungle after the howler monkeys, he has given no thought to the dangers that lie ahead. What three things would you add to his backpack to increase his chances of survival? If you were only allowed one choice, which would it be?

Related topic:

Have you ever been plunged into a totally alien environment, unprepared? (Running a birthday party for your little sister and her friends, perhaps? Visiting a distant relative for Thanksgiving? Your first day at summer camp, or at a new school?) How did you adapt? What changes did you make to fit in and what did you decide not to change? What, in your opinion, are the most important characteristics needed to survive and flourish in a new environment?

Useful website:

<http://www.survivaliq.com>

5. BURNING ISSUES

The one non-fictional character in Middleworld is Friar Diego de Landa, the true-life Spanish priest who made one huge bonfire of the Maya folding bark books. In those books was contained the sum of Maya learning—culture, myths, math, astronomy, architecture, ritual. To what extent would you agree that by destroying the Maya's history, De Landa also destroyed their future?

Related topics:

1. Research the scene at Mani in 1549. Imagine you are a Maya noble, scribe or peasant watching the conflagration. Feel the heat from the fire and the smoke in your eyes as two thousand years of wisdom, your cultural inheritance, goes up in flames. How do you feel?
2. It's a common fallacy that the Maya died out a thousand years ago. Certainly, a large part of their history died when Friar de Landa burned it, but there are still 6 million Maya people living in Central America. Can you plan a museum exhibit linking the Maya past and present? Your theme could be politics, architecture, crafts, eco-tourism, fashion, food, whatever you like, but your message should look to the future, rather than dwelling on past achievements.
3. How would it affect US society and how would the US start again if every single book, every computer and every source of knowledge in North America were destroyed?
4. "Where they have burned books, they will end in burning human beings," wrote the German playwright Heinrich Heine in 1821, about the burning of the Koran by the Spanish Inquisition. One hundred years later, Heine's own works were torched by the Nazis in Berlin. Research the history of book-burning and draw some conclusions about the power of intellectual freedom.

Useful websites:

http://www.travelyucatan.com/maya/meet_the_modern_maya.php

<http://www.latinamericanstudies.org/landa.htm>

6. SACRIFICE

Max calls the customs of bloodletting and human sacrifice barbaric. “Why is always blood with you guys?” he asks. Research the importance of blood to the Ancient Maya world view. In your opinion, were the Ancient Maya more or less barbaric than their peers – such as the Ancient Romans who threw men to the lions for sport or the grisly torture chambers of medieval Europe?

Why have the Maya historically been more strongly associated with blood sacrifice than with their incredible achievements in astronomy or their architectural prowess?

Related topic:

The Maya believed that regular sacrifices were necessary to keep the cosmos working in harmony. “It’s interesting, the idea of making a sacrifice for the common good. Like, if people stopped buying things made out of mahogany, the loggers might stop chopping down the rainforest,” says Lola. (p.162). What personal sacrifices might we think about making today to help keep the earth in good shape?

Useful website: <http://www.greenpeace.org/usa>

7. THE MYSTERY OF THE MAYA

We know that Maya civilization originated on the Yucatan peninsula around 2600 BCE and developed into highly structured kingdoms during the Classic period, CE 200-900. Then, around 900 CE, the southern Maya abandoned their cities. When Max voices the popular misconception that they just vanished into thin air, Lola explains some more likely explanations. Looking at the population densities, farming methods and social structures of the time, what do you think was the most likely reason for the decline of the great Maya city states?

Related topic:

What lessons can we learn today for our society and our environment from the fall of the Maya?

Useful websites:

https://science.nasa.gov/science-news/science-at-nasa/2004/15nov_maya

<https://uanews.arizona.edu/story/archaeologists-uncover-new-clues-maya-collapse>

<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/science-nature/why-did-the-mayan-civilization-collapse-a-new-study-points-to-deforestation-and-climate-change-30863026/>

<https://www.nationalgeographic.com/news/2012/11/121109-maya-civilization-climate-change-belize-science/>

COMMON CORE CONNECTIONS:

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.6-8.1 Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grade 6 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.2 Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary of the source distinct from prior knowledge or opinions.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.8 Distinguish among fact, opinion, and reasoned judgment in a text.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.WHST.6-8.7 Conduct short research projects to answer a question (including a self-generated question), drawing on several sources and generating additional related, focused questions that allow for multiple avenues of exploration.