**The Heaven Shop**
by Deborah Ellis

**BOOK SUMMARY:**

At her father’s funeral, Binti’s grandmother utters the words that no one in Malawi wants to hear. Binti’s father (and her mother before him) dies of AIDS. Binti, her sister, and brother are separated and sent to the home of relatives who can barely tolerate their presence. Binti, was once a child star of a popular radio program. Now she is scraping to survive.

Binti Phiri is not about to give up. Even as she clings to hope that her former life will be restored, she must face a greater challenge. If she and her brother and sister are to be reunited, Binti will have to look outside herself and find a new way to be special.

The Heaven Shop is a contemporary novel that puts a very real face on the African AIDS pandemic, which to-date has orphaned more than 11 million African children. Inspired by a young radio performer the author met during her research visit to Malawi, Binti Phiri is a compelling character that readers will never forget.

**FOR MORE INFORMATION:**

http://www.umanitoba.ca/outreach/cm/vol11/no1/theheavenshop.html

**AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY:**

Deborah Ellis was born in Northern Ontario but grew up farther south in Paris, Ontario. Like many writers through history, she was a creative loner as a child, at odds with formal education in her youth, and an avid reader at all times. As an adult, Deborah has been occupied with many issues of interest to women such as peace, education, and equality in society – at home and abroad. She also travels whenever she can, listening to people’s stories, especially those of children telling about their lives. Deborah’s books have earned her literary awards – including the Governor General’s Award in 2000 for *Looking for X*, the 2003 Ruth Schwartz Award and the 2004 Golden Oak Award for *Parvana’s Journey* – and praise from readers everywhere.

Deborah lives in Simcoe, Ontario. She is donating the royalties from *The Heaven Shop* to UNICEF.
SUGGESTIONS FOR TUTORS/INSTRUCTORS

Consult “Tips & Tools For Successful Book Discussion” for more ideas – linked to the Golden Oak home page and included in the hard copy GO kit.

● There is an extensive Teacher’s Guide available on the Allen and Unwin website.

Allen & Unwin Teaching Resources:
The Heaven Shop

If you cannot open this URL go to:
http://www.allenandunwin.com/Teaching/resources.asp Scroll down to Heaven Shop and click.

● Deborah Ellis published a book of interviews with African AIDS orphans. Each interview has a photo of the child. You may want to look at the pictures as you read the The Heaven Shop and then read the interviews afterwards. It is very powerful hearing the children speak for themselves.


PRE-READING QUESTIONS

● Use an atlas to find Malawi, Africa.
● Look up Malawi in an encyclopedia
● Find picture books of Malawi in the children’s and travel sections at your local library.
● Read the following background information.

Background on Malawi, Africa
Malawi is a country in southern Africa, near Zambia, Tanzania and Mozambique. There are 12 million people living in the Malawi, in an area of 118,000 square kilometres. That is approximately the size of Newfoundland.

In Malawi, only 40% of the people know how to read and write. More than 14% of the adult population is infected with HIV or AIDS. In Malawi, there are an estimated 500,000 (half a million) children who are orphans because of AIDS. The average life expectancy is only 40 years old.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Malawi vs. Canada</th>
<th>Malawi</th>
<th>Canada</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Population</td>
<td>12,158,924</td>
<td>32,805,041</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Population growth rate</td>
<td>2.06%</td>
<td>0.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total area</td>
<td>118,480 sq km</td>
<td>9,984,670 sq km</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Climate</td>
<td>Sub-tropical</td>
<td>Temperate in the south; sub-arctic and arctic in the north</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Irrigated land</td>
<td>280 sq km</td>
<td>7,200 sq km</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average age</td>
<td>16.3 years</td>
<td>38.5 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life expectancy</td>
<td>36.9 years</td>
<td>80.1 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fertility rate</td>
<td>5.9 children per woman</td>
<td>1.6 children per woman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of people with HIV or AIDS</td>
<td>900,000</td>
<td>56,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of HIV or AIDS related deaths (in 2003)</td>
<td>84,000</td>
<td>1,500</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

● Why is the average age in Malawi so much lower than in Canada?
● What impact would that have on the country? (e.g. lack of skilled workers, a lot of resources go into health care instead of other programs)

VOCABULARY WORDS

Bambo - father
chintje - a type of cloth, sometimes used for a skirt
Gogo - grandmother
nsima - an African porridge made out of corn meal
The slim - AIDS

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Chapter 1
● What is the Heaven Shop?
● What is the name of Binti’s radio play?
● What does the name “Gogo” mean?
● Who are the people in Binti’s real family? What are they like?
Chapter 2
• In what city does the story take place?
• How would you describe Binti’s father? What does he look like? What do you learn about his personality?
• What are two things you learn in this chapter about Binti’s sister, Junie?

Chapter 3
• Why is Junie upset with her father?
• What is your impression of the school that the Binti and Junie attend? What kind of school is it?
• Binti and her brother and sister go to private schools. Do you think the family is rich?
• What is the name of the club that puts on a play at school? What is the play about?
• At this point in the story how would you describe Binti’s personality?

Chapter 4
• Can you guess what is wrong with Binti’s father?
• Do you think Binti knows why her father is sick?
• What does Kwasi always put on the bottom of every coffin? Why?

Chapter 5
• Why does Binti’s father have to leave the party?

Chapter 6
• What happens when Binti and her father arrive at the hospital?
• “He died on the floor, but he was surrounded by music and by people who loved him....Many are the kings whose death was not as good” (p. 62). What do you think this statement means? Did Binti’s father die a good death?

Chapter 7
• Who builds a coffin for Binti’s father?
• Who does Binti see at her father’s funeral?
• “In the old days, when there were still lions around, if a lion came into our village and carried away our young, we did not keep silent! If we were silent, it would keep eating our children. We had to hang pots and yell, ‘There is a lion in the village!’ Then we could get rid of the lion and save our children. There is a lion in our village now. It is called AIDS” (p. 70). What do you think Gogo is trying to say? Why do you think people keep quiet about AIDS?

Chapter 8
• How do the children plan to look after themselves? What do you think of their plan? Why don’t their relatives agree?
• Why do some of the aunts and uncles refuse to take Binti and her brother and sister?
• Junie receives a note from her boyfriend Noel. What does it say?

Chapter 9
• Who do Junie and Binti live with after their father dies?
• Uncle Wysom says that Binti and Junie can prepare food for customers, but not for the family. Why?
• “You keep away from them,” Uncle Wysom told his children. “Their parents died of AIDS. For all we know these two have it, too. So keep your distance” (p. 85). Do you think Binti’s uncle has a point? What would you do if you had to look after a child that might have AIDS? Would you do anything differently?

Chapter 10
• What does Uncle Wysom do when “Gogo’s Family” comes on the radio?
• How does Binti’s aunt scold her when she gets in trouble with her cousin Mary?
• Binti and Junie are both treated badly by their relatives, but they react very differently. Compare how they cope with their situation? What is the same? What is different?

Chapter 11
• Where does Junie get the money she’s saving up?
• What does Junie’s note to Binti say?
• How does Binti get to Mulanje?

Chapter 12
• How do the other children react to Binti when she arrives at Gogo’s?
• How well do Melody and Binti get along?
• What discovery does Binti make about the “cousins”?
• Why do you think Gogo gets upset with Binti for asking if Memory is a real cousin?

Chapter 13
• How does Binti’s new school compare to her old school? What are the differences?
• Binti and Memory meet other children who are part of “The Orphan Club.” How many children are in the group?
• What is the punishment for not going to school?
Chapter 14
- What secret had Memory been keeping from Binti?
- What is the name of Memory's daughter?
- How old is Memory?
- How did Memory get her name?

Chapter 15
- What does Jeremiah agree to do in order to help Binti?
- Where is Kwasi when Jeremiah finds him?

“Babies who are HIV-positive don’t usually live long in Malawi, although they do in countries that have the right drugs. But miracles happen. People, even in Malawi, can live for a long time with HIV if they have a good diet and people who love them.”

“What should I do?”
“You won’t catch it from living with them.”
“No, I mean, what should I do...for them?”
Jeremiah smiled. “Be their family, and let them be yours.” (p. 140).

- Why does Jeremiah tell Binti to “be their family.”?
- What is the best way Binti can help Memory and Beauty?

Chapter 16
- Why is Kwasi in jail?
- What does Binti promise her brother before she leaves? Do you think she will be able to keep her promise?

Chapter 17
- Do you think Binti is feeling differently about living at Gogo’s? Why or why not?
- Who is Jeremiah in love with? How does Binti react?
- At the end of the chapter a toddler dies. Why does he die? What do Binti and the children do?

Chapter 18
- How do the children decide what to buy with the money they earn from building a coffin?
- What is the name of the coffin business started by Binti and the others?
- What is the motto of the business?
- When Gogo dies what does Binti fear? How has her grandmother protected her and the others?

Chapter 19
- What roles do Binti, Kwasi and Memory have in the coffin business? How do the smaller children help?
- Where is Junie living when Jeremiah finds her?
- Why is Junie ashamed to see her brother and sister?
- Binti says, “Junie got lost” (p.169). What does she mean?

Chapter 20
- In what ways has Binti changed since the beginning of the story?
- Do you think this story has a happy ending? Why or why not?

ADDITIONAL ACTIVITIES
- Why do you think AIDS has become such a big problem in Africa?
- Are you aware of AIDS problems in Canada?
- What do you know about AIDS?
- Do you worry about AIDS? If so, what can you do about these worries?

Find out more information about AIDS in Africa by visiting the library or using the Internet. Check out the following sites:

Deborah Ellis Biography
http://www.umanitoba.ca/outreach/cm/profiles/ellis.html

Allen & Unwin Teaching Resources: The Heaven Shop
if you cannot open this URL go to:
http://www.allenandunwin.com/Teaching/resources.asp
Scroll down to Heaven Shop

Deborah Ellis Weblog
http://writerscafe.ca/weblogs/writers/Deborah_Ellis.php

The Stephen Lewis Foundation
http://www.stephenlewisfoundation.org

The World Fact Book
http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/

Aids and Africa
http://www.aidsandafrica.com/

Avert: HIV and AIDS in Africa
http://www.avert.org/avert.org/aidinafrica.htm

Project Profile: Children's Town
http://www.globalfundforchildren.org/project_profiles/childrens_town.htm