

# DISCUSSION GUIDE



## SERAFINA'S PROMISE

BY ANN E. BURG

AUTHOR OF THE AWARD-WINNING  
*ALL THE BROKEN PIECES*

**S**ERAFINA HAS A SECRET DREAM. She and her best friend, Julie Marie, want to go to school and become doctors, like the amazing Antoinette Solaine who tried so hard to save baby Pierre.

But in their rural village outside Port-au-Prince, Haiti, many obstacles stand in Serafina's way—little money, never-ending chores, and Manman's worries. More powerful even than all of these are the heavy rains and the shaking earth that test Serafina's resolve in ways she never dreamed.

At once heartbreaking and hopeful, this exquisitely crafted novel-in-verse will leave a lasting impression long after the last page is turned.

★“Lilting, lyrical and full of hope.”—**KIRKUS REVIEWS**, starred review

“Rich details of everyday life add texture to this emotional, fast-moving tale.”—**HORN BOOK**

“Serafina's dreams are challenged by poverty, flood, and earthquake, but her tenacious spirit hangs on through it all. The grace of the Haitian people is revealed in Burg's poetic language, the vastness of Haiti's needs apparent in the details of Serafina's world. Serafina's journey is one readers will find unsettling but, at the same time, rich with examples of true courage and dignity.”

—**KAREN HESSE**, author of the Newbery Medal winner *Out of the Dust* and *Safekeeping*

“Ann E. Burg has masterfully crafted a lovingly cadenced book in which, behind each gemlike story, another gemlike story rises. A fascinating poetic tale, a magic window that opens gently and brings to your heart the cultural richness and wonders of a fate-taunting nation.”

—**PROFESSOR DENIZE LAUTURE**, St. Thomas Aquinas College, author of *The Black Warrior and Other Poems*

# DISCUSSION QUESTIONS



1. Serafina's days are dominated by chores for the family. How does this affect her childhood? How do Serafina's life and responsibilities compare with the day-to-day responsibilities of you and your friends?
2. Serafina's mother is pregnant when the story begins, and her father feels that "everything will be better when the baby arrives." Why does Serafina's father believe that Gregory will be a blessing? How does Gregory's birth underscore both the joys and sorrows of the Haitian people?
3. As Serafina tends to her daily chores, we walk with her through her surroundings: "The sun presses against my neck / like a burning rock. / One more hill, and I'll be home. / Beside me a row of thirsty shacks / leans against the mountain / like faded cardboard weeds." How does the setting of the story help to shape the difficulties in Serafina's life and define her as a character?
4. Serafina's grandmother, Gogo, shares the troubled and violent past of their family when she talks about how Serafina's grandfather was taken away by the Tonton Macoutes. Grandpé once said, "Education is the road to freedom." How do these words influence Serafina's hopes for her future?
5. On a walk to the city, Serafina discovers a heart-shaped rock that she clutches as she talks to her father about her dream of going to school. At home, Serafina presents the special rock to her mother who has reservations about Serafina attending school. Why is Serafina's heart-shaped rock significant? And when it survives the earthquake, how does it symbolize Serafina's promise to herself and to her family?
6. The author, Ann E. Burg, wrote *Serafina's Promise* in verse. How does this style of writing influence the story? How does poetry effect how you see the struggle of daily life, the flood, and the earthquake?
7. The flood is a pivotal event in Serafina's life. She feels that her courage and her dreams are washed away with her home. What does the aftermath of the flood reveal about Serafina and her family?
8. At the beginning of the novel, Serafina is eager to attend school to become a doctor. How do her views toward school change over the course of the novel? Have you ever dreamt of doing something and had it turn out to be different from what you expected? If so, how did you handle it?
9. After the earthquake, Serafina encounters Dr. Antoinette Solaine, the woman she models herself after. How does this chance meeting influence Serafina's promise for her own future?
10. *Serafina's Promise* is sprinkled with sayings and proverbs that help to explain many of life's experiences. Are there words of wisdom that important adults in your life have shared with you? Choose one of these sayings or one from *Serafina* to explore. What meaning could it have in Serafina's world? What meaning does it have in yours?

**Common Core State Standards addressed by the discussion questions in this guide include  
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.5.2, 6.1, 6.2, 6.3, 6.5, 7.2, and 7.3.**

For more information about the Common Core, visit [www.corestandards.org](http://www.corestandards.org).

Discussion questions were created by Leigh Courtney, PhD., who teaches in the Global Education program at a public school in San Diego, CA. She holds both master's and doctoral degrees in education, with an emphasis on curriculum and instruction.



## A Conversation with ANN E. BURG

Executive Editor Tracy Mack spoke with Ann  
about her novel, *Serafina's Promise*



***Serafina's Promise* is the story of eleven-year-old Serafina, who grows up in extreme poverty in a rural village outside Port-au-Prince. Why did you choose to write about Haiti?**

Until the devastating earthquake of 2010, I knew very little about Haiti. After the earthquake, like most people, I was shocked and overwhelmed by the catastrophic devastation that Haiti suffered. The images of so many people broken and lost, dazed and frightened, haunted me. Their faces—especially the children's faces—followed me everywhere and demanded that I learn more about them. After reading and researching, I discovered that Haiti is so much more than the sum of her tragedies and troubles. The more I learned, the more I hoped to find a way to tell an authentic and illuminating story.

**While the earthquake is the climax of the novel, *Serafina's* story is about so much more than the natural disaster. Can you talk about how *Serafina* and her story took shape?**

What struck me most about the Haitian people is their resiliency. The earthquake was a cataclysmic disaster, but it is not the only one the Haitian people have suffered. In addition to floods, mudslides, and other forces of nature, there is a daily struggle with poverty, hunger, and a lack of clean water. Constant political upheaval has also taken its toll. And yet, if you look at the faces of Haiti's children, you will see bright, beautiful smiles. If you listen to their voices, you will hear laughter and song. They are part of a vibrant heritage, filled with music, dancing, rich customs, and traditions. I wanted Serafina to be an embodiment of that buoyant Haitian spirit. More and more, I've come to understand that writing is less about creating than it is about *listening*. When I listened to the voices of Haiti's children, I heard the joyful hope that is the birthright of children everywhere. Eventually, a single voice—Serafina's voice—began to play in my mind. I listened and followed.

**Natural disasters are increasing worldwide. Often, people have hardly begun to recover from one before there is another somewhere else, demanding our attention. How can fiction help?**

I can honestly say that every disaster deepens my sense of a shared humanity and fills me with a desire to offer comfort and assistance. I know that financial assistance is often the most needed, but sometimes we make our donations and then forget that people continue to suffer long after the last penny has been spent. Natural disasters do seem to be increasing and today's tragic headline often bumps yesterday's tragic headline to the back page. Even the most in-depth article leaves us on the outside looking in. Fiction is different. Fiction takes us by the hand and allows us to look behind the headlines. When we truly engage with the characters in a book, we actually experience what they experience and feel what they feel. We develop empathy. In the best stories, characters linger in our minds and in our hearts. They remind us of a deeper reality and our shared humanity.

**As a former middle-school English teacher, how might you have explored the topics in *Serafina's Promise* with your students?**

I always encouraged my students to appreciate the customs and traditions of all people—and to look beyond surface differences to see what unites us. If I were teaching *Serafina's Promise*, I would ask my students to compare and contrast their life experiences with Serafina's. Naturally, there are many differences to consider, but hopefully they would discover that people are more alike than different.



## **I love learning about other cultures through stories, and I found the Haitian Creole culture fascinating. What interested you most about it?**

I was intrigued by Haiti's history. Haiti was the first independent black republic, and that should be lauded. As Serafina's teacher, Monsieur Leblanc, tells her and her classmates, Columbus saw a land with lush green fields and fruitful mountains. Compare that to the images of Haiti today! Throughout their history, Haitian people have been mistreated and misguided by both internal and external forces and yet, what is most beautiful remains—the hopeful and persevering spirit of the Haitian people. As Maman tells Serafina, even when life is hard, *“You beat the drum and you dance again.”*

## **The subject matter in your books is serious and often difficult. Yet you manage to suffuse your stories with light and hope and, as *Kirkus* put it, “elegiac simplicity.” How do you keep your stories authentic and emotional without becoming too dark? And how do you decide how much to tell?**

As adults, we know how serious, difficult, and full of ugliness life can be. But I don't think I could write for children if I didn't believe that there is a measure of hope in the darkest of circumstances. Natural disasters shock and overwhelm us. We can't erase evil or hide ugliness, but we can—and I believe we must—offer an alternate perspective.

Most of the hard things that happen in Serafina's story are natural disasters that can be easily understood by young readers. But there are problems in Haiti that are far more difficult for American readers of any age to understand. One of these problems concerns restaveks—children from poor families who are sent away to live with wealthier families. In exchange for food, shelter, and education, restaveks are forced into domestic slavery, gathering water, cooking, and cleaning. They are poorly fed, barely sheltered, and in actuality, seldom sent to school. In many cases, they are abused by members of the host family.

It is hard for us to comprehend a parent giving away a child. And it is difficult to extol a culture that would allow this practice to continue. But Haiti's poverty is so deep and unrelenting that parents are forced to make unnatural and devastating choices. I didn't think it was fair to pose this issue to children when, even as adults, we might struggle to be nonjudgmental. Instead, Julie Marie's story is an opened door. Guided by a parent, teacher, or librarian, a mature reader may peek through the opening, but is not forced to do so. I took the same approach to the Tonton Macoutes and Doc Duvalier's reign of terror.

## **Your books require a lot of research even though they are works of fiction. Can you talk about the research for *Serafina's Promise*?**

Because I was unable to leave my family and home commitments, I traveled to Haiti via books, videos, and vlogs. Early on, I discovered that the culture and wisdom of Haiti is captured in a multitude of proverbs. I loved these proverbs and wove them in through Gogo, Serafina's grandmother. But a curious aspect to many Haitian proverbs is that they deride the French language and French speakers. I began digging for the root of this antagonism and discovered that the majority of people in Haiti speak Haitian Creole, but that the “educated” people speak French. Serafina, who is torn between pride in her Creole heritage and a desire to be educated, exemplifies this unfortunate dichotomy.

## **Can you discuss your work with the Haitian People's Support Project and with Professor Denize Lauture?**

The Haitian People's Support Project is a humanitarian organization that promotes self-sufficiency and independence for people in Haiti through the support of orphanages, schools, and a number of sustainable farming projects. When I completed my first draft of *Serafina's Promise*, I contacted Pierre LeRoy, the founder of the Project. I was writing about a culture very different from my own, and I hoped that Pierre or someone he knew would be willing to read and verify the authenticity of my manuscript. Since my story contained so many Haitian Creole phrases, Pierre introduced me to Denize Lauture, a language professor at St. Thomas Aquinas College in Sparkhill, New York, and a native of Haiti. Professor Lauture is also an author who writes in English, French, and Haitian Creole. He painstakingly reviewed my manuscript, corrected my Haitian Creole, gave me further insight into the Haitian culture, and, with an open heart, shared his own childhood memories.





**You are donating a portion of the proceeds from *Serafina's Promise* to support the people of Haiti. Can you tell us a little about the charities you have targeted?**

I am donating part of my royalties to the **Haitian People's Support Project** and **Pure Water for the World**, a non-profit organization that provides safe drinking water and hygiene education to developing countries. They allow you to indicate what area you'd like to help, and my money is going to the region in Haiti where Professor Lauture was born. Hopefully, in time, people there will no longer be forced to drink and bathe in rainwater.

**Can you talk about your writing and revision process? What are the most critical stages?**

Usually the process starts with a nagging feeling, a reaction to an incident or circumstance that I've read about or experienced. Sometimes I carry the feeling with me for a long time before it evolves into something more. After a while, I might try forcing the feeling into what I think will be a believable character or situation. But that only leads to lots of false starts. Characters won't fully materialize and situations remain static. I'm compelled to read and research more, to think, and to ask myself more questions while I wait and listen. The waiting and listening is the most critical stage. Once I discover something I'd like to write about, I am always anxious to begin the journey. I prefer the later stages when my character is firmly alive in my mind and can be moved about like a chess piece. There is so much wonderful freedom then! I can make mistakes, introduce new characters, and even change the flight path without losing my way. Once I have completed a draft that I believe is ready to show you, I get ready for the real revisions. This is one of my favorite parts of the process! Working with you is like hiking with a friend. You'll ask me to follow a new trail or to look under an ordinary rock. Often we discover a beautiful path worth following or a whole universe squirming and squiggling underneath an ordinary slab of slate! By this time, my own feelings—the ones that initially motivated me—are completely absorbed in the life of the characters I've discovered. The story almost writes itself. This is when I love writing!

**The voice in your novels is so distinctive. How do you create voice?**

I think that an authentic voice is the result of a writer's ability to let go of his or her conscious control of a character's thoughts and words. Of course I know I am writing the story and of course I have some measure of control over my creation. But at the same time, I must forfeit my own expectations and allow each character to develop a unique and unfettered intuition. I spend a lot of time with my characters even when I'm away from my desk. Eventually there is a seamless connection between us. I do the typing, but my character does the talking!

**All the Broken Pieces is also written in verse. What about the verse form appeals to you?**

Verse allows me to jump into the heart of a character and a story. A million details accost our senses at every moment, but in the privacy of our minds, we contemplate only what is most essential. A clock ticks. Water from the faucet drips. These details will only be important to the reader if they are important to the character. I find writing in verse liberating because I am able to concentrate on the essential.

**I love how Dr. Solaine mentors Serafina. Who in your life inspired and encouraged you to write?**

My mother always wrote poetry and though I am not an only child, I am the only child for whom she wrote a poem: *On the tenth of December, cold and clear, an angel bent down and whispered, your child is here, your child is here...* These are the opening lines of the poem she wrote shortly after I was born. I always thought that my mother's poem marked me as a writer, because my earliest memories are her beautiful voice and loving words. According to my mother, my first book, bound in brown construction paper and entitled *Pomes* was a masterpiece. How then could I *not* continue writing? Both of my parents were so proud of me that I knew from a very young age that I wanted to be a writer. In college, I had a number of professors who believed in me and inspired me to follow my heart and search for my voice. If you are a parent, teacher, or librarian, never underestimate your power to encourage and support a child!

**What's next for you?**

I'm not entirely sure, but I'm listening for voices and stories all the time!

