Reading-group guide: *Songs of Dust and Water*

by M.J. Hydara

This guide gives away the whole story. Each meeting starts on a new page, so you can hand out one meeting at a time, once everyone has read that far. Page numbers are from the paperback, and chapter numbers are the same in both editions.

Before you start

The novel begins with Talib, a weaver's son, and moves ten years on to Kadiatou, a village Water-Keeper. It asks who will own what their villages build.

Part One is set in Madina, in the dry north of Awdagha. Part Two moves south, across a border, to Nafawol in Tekuru. It opens with a short passage set ten years later.

This guide splits the book into three meetings of about seventy pages each. Every question gives its page numbers.

Meeting 1: Part One, chapters 1 to 9

This meeting covers pages 3 to 78. Bring paper and pens for a map, and one line you liked.

Talib, a weaver's son in Madina, leaves his father's loom to work at a new solar plant. Its engineer, Adam Sterling, has designed it so that the village will never need to touch it. By the end of Part One the plant has burnt down, and everyone, from the ministers in Bakoro to the crowd in Madina's square, has a view on whose fault it was. The last pages follow Adam into the years after the fire.

To start the evening, draw a map together. The book tells you enough to sketch where things are. Put Madina in the dry north and Bakoro, the capital, to the south. Keep the sketch, and at Meeting 2 cross the border to Nafawol on its old floodplain, far to the south. To get a feel for the distance, measure six hundred kilometres from your own town, in any direction, on an ordinary map. Add the other villages and the coast to the sketch as they come up.

1. A new steel bracket on the plant snaps. Malik, the village smith, mends it in his forge, but Adam waits for a new one from the capital. What is each of them protecting? (pages 14 to 15)
2. Under the meeting tree, Samba asks whose land the plant will stand on, and Adam turns to Mustapha for a signature instead. What would it have cost Adam to answer Samba? (pages 16 to 18)
3. On the night the lights come on, Malik keeps to his forge and Ibrahim stays at home, though he moves his loom into the new light. What do you make of the characters who hold back that night? (pages 20 to 21)
4. Mustapha, the elder who signs for Madina, takes an envelope of money from a man sent by Minister Dunia. The book gives his reasons: a daughter's wedding, a son's debts, a roof that leaks. Does knowing them change how you judge him? (pages 34 to 35)
5. At dawn Talib shows Adam where the plant's money has gone, and Adam calls it noise. Why do you think he can't take it in? (pages 48 to 50)
6. Dunia, the Minister of Energy, tells Aisha about the eleven charity plaques she had counted in her district before she was twenty. Not one of the projects behind them still worked. What did those years teach Dunia, and does that change how you see what she did with the plant's money? (pages 58 to 60)
7. Six months after the fire, Talib sits at his own loom and ties the thread that broke in chapter 1, and his father begins to hum. What has changed for each of them since the morning it broke? (pages 73 to 74)
8. Adam stays away when Proxima's board meets to hear the report on the fire. He sends a single page about what he did, and asks for it to be read out in full, not summarised. Why might that matter to him? (pages 75 to 76)

Meeting 2: “Ten years after the fire” and chapters 10 to 19

This meeting covers pages 81 to 150. Bring the map from Meeting 1, and a guess about what Nafawol will do next.

Kadiatou is the Water-Keeper of Nafawol, a village on a dry floodplain in another country. For six years she has watched its well fail. The water she draws is making the children ill, her granddaughter Mariam among them. Ten years after the fire, Adam comes to Nafawol with Dr Arramata, an engineer who was born there, and the village tests a machine that draws water from the air. Over the next four years Kadiatou, Fatou and their neighbours learn to feed their soil, build their own road and set up a fund they all share. Its accounts go up on a wall for anyone to read.

To start the evening, ask one person to read aloud Isatou’s list of the women’s work on page 111, starting at “So many measures of millet”, and to read it slowly, one item at a time. Then make your own list of the work behind tonight’s meeting: who cooked, who washed up, who minded the children so someone else could come.

1. On the walk home, Fatou teases Kadiatou that asking to see the machine work is “yes with its sandals still on”. What sort of friends are these two? (pages 89 to 90)
2. When the test machine overheats, Bakary, the master weaver, has it covered in wet jute, the way the women cool their dye pots. Water from the old well saves it. How is that different from the day in Madina when Aisha brought a box of sisal, charcoal and woven grass to filter the plant’s air? (pages 93 to 95)
3. Ousman, an elder who has farmed all his life, asks Dr Arramata to teach him in front of everyone. He waits until they are alone to tell her, “The water is yours. The soil is ours.” Why does he say that only when they are alone? (page 105)
4. Isatou, head of the women’s kafo, wants the ledger to record the women’s cooking for the road crews, in millet, oil, water and hours. What is she afraid will be lost if it isn’t written down? (page 111)
5. Demba, a young road-builder, joins the night watch with his father’s machete at his side, angry at whoever has been wrecking the road. When two new guards chase a figure into the dark, he is at the next post and could have called them back. What does he learn about himself? (pages 121 to 122)
6. Mamadou wants a new rule to bind everyone, himself most of all: no large sum can leave the village fund without three signatures. That way the rule can say no for him. Is there a rule you would want your friends to hold you to? (pages 126 to 127)
7. A supplier Fatou has traded with for twenty years has overcharged the mill. She makes him pay back the difference, and he never speaks to her again. That evening she goes to sit with Kadiatou, though the two have not sat together since they took opposite sides in committee. What passes between them? (pages 141 to 142)
8. Ousman sees his son’s family off on the bus. When his son puts the sleeping baby in his arms, Ousman takes care that his fingers never touch her. There is still earth in the cracks of his hands. Why do you think he holds her like that? (page 147)

Extra get-together: after chapter 24 (if you want one)

This get-together covers pages 151 to 192. You will need two small objects for each person, one white and one black.

Hold this when everyone has read to the end of chapter 24, and ask the group not to read on until it is over. If anyone has already read further, ask them to vote as they would have at chapter 24, and to keep what happens next to themselves. It takes about half an hour. Talk about the two questions below first, then vote. Don't use the Meeting 3 sheet or the chapter cards for this: they go beyond chapter 24.

If your group meets online, ask everyone to send you their choice, white or black, in a private message, and keep the count to yourself until you have talked about chapter 25 at Meeting 3.

1. Late at night in the mill office, Fatou and Kadiatou argue over the offer from Veldane, a foreign company that wants the first right to buy the Union's crops. Fatou has known real hunger and will not risk it again for the sake of a principle. Kadiatou spent six years handing children bad water because there was nothing else. "I will not have our grandchildren's cup in another man's hand," she says. Where do you stand between them? (page 188)
2. Bintu reads Veldane's draft agreement and finds a clause that would give the company the sole right, for ever, to use anything the Union invents during the partnership. Evelyn Reed of Veldane replaces it with a narrower licence, but she keeps the company's right to block large investments and its first right to buy. What would you want to know before you dropped your stone? (pages 191 to 192)

The vote

Hand out the white and black objects, two to each person. Stones are best, but buttons or beans will do. White means yes to the offer in chapters 23 and 24, and black means no.

Set a pot in the middle of the room, and a basket with a lid near the door. Take turns, without talking. Each person walks up with a stone in each closed fist, drops the stone for their choice into the pot and the other into the basket, so every vote stays secret.

When everyone has voted, take the objects out of the pot one at a time and count them where everyone can see. A tie counts as no, because the offer needs a majority to pass. Write down the result, seal it in an envelope and bring it to Meeting 3. Open it there, after you have talked about chapter 25, and compare your result with the vote in the book.

Meeting 3: chapters 20 to 28

This meeting covers pages 151 to 224. Bring one question about the ending. If you held the extra get-together, bring the result of your vote, still sealed, and open it after question 5.

Sirawol and then other villages follow Nafawol's example and form a union. A foreign company, Veldane, offers fifty thousand dollars a family, in return for the first right to buy what they grow. The villages vote on it with stones. The last chapters follow the hard years after the vote, go back to Madina and bring a party of visitors from Madina's district to Nafawol.

If your group didn't hold the extra get-together after chapter 24, take its two questions after question 4, so that the questions stay in page order.

1. Musa, the head of Sirawol, admits that men from his village broke the culvert, the stone channel under Nafawol's new road. Mamadou's first question is about the Sirawol herd boy who broke his arm years before, running from Nafawol's night guards. Why do you think Mamadou starts there? (pages 151 to 152)
2. Mamadou's grandson Lamin has taken money from the fund. At first Mamadou argues for him. Then he sits down and asks the committee to write his own name under Lamin's. What does it cost him? (page 164)
3. Every year at Tobaski, the Feast of Sacrifice, Mamadou's household sends a bowl of meat to Kadiatou's. This year the children of his compound carry their bowls past her gate. Near dusk Lamin's mother brings one herself and hands it to Mariam without a word. What is she telling Kadiatou's household? (pages 165 to 166)
4. At the mill scales, Fatou settles how to share the Union's spare money: six parts for the fields, four for the workshops. She says Yaya would walk out if the fields got only five parts, and Aminatu would walk out if they got seven. Hassan's formulas have led nowhere. What does Fatou understand about Yaya and Aminatu that Hassan's sums missed? (page 173)
5. The morning after the vote, before the market opens, Fatou crosses the square to the well and tells Kadiatou how she would have voted. Why does it matter to Fatou that Kadiatou hears it from her, and at the well? (pages 195 to 196)
6. Adam once promised the Minister, "Nobody in Madina will ever need to touch it." On his way to the coast to fly home, he holds a lamp while a stranger mends his pickup. How far has he come, and what is still the same about him? (page 208)
7. Singing at his loom, Ibrahim loses a line of a song, and Talib gives it back to him without looking up. What does the loom mean to father and son now, compared with the first chapter? (page 212)
8. Hawa is now in charge of the maternity ward in Bakoro. She sends her own student to deliver a baby, the way her teacher, the Major, once sent her. Where else in the book is something handed on like that? (pages 213 to 214)

Once everyone has finished the book, you can read the seven short pieces in the Companion's last section together. The section ends with what the book leaves open, and the story year by year.

Last questions

These go with Meeting 3, after its own questions. If that is too many for one evening, choose a few from each sheet.

1. In the last chapter, Fatou still says the Union should have taken Veldane's money. Do you think she is wrong? (page 220)
2. A visitor from Madina's district asks who is still poor in Nafawol. Hassan answers at once: "The farmers at the edges." He admits the Council has argued about it for eight years without solving it. Does his answer change how you feel about what the Union has built? (page 222)
3. Halima asks her great-grandmother whether she trusted Adam, and Kadiatou thinks before she answers. How far did you trust him, from Madina to the end? (page 222)
4. In the last scene Kadiatou can't draw the bucket from the old well alone, and her great-granddaughter Halima pulls with her. Who else from the book would you put on that rope? (page 224)

One meeting for the whole book

If your group can meet only once, allow sixty to ninety minutes for the discussion. Everyone should have finished the book first, because these questions give the ending away.

Start by going round the room once, with each person naming a character they would like to meet, or argue with, and saying why. Then take the six questions below. Give each about ten minutes. If time runs short, take the first, third and fifth.

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Before you finish, ask everyone which stone they would have dropped in the Union's vote, white or black, and whether the ending changed their mind. End with each person choosing one line from the book to take home.