

GIRL ON THE FLY

by Nansubuga Nagadya Isdahl

About the author

Nansubuga Nagadya Isdahl was born in Cambridge, MA, USA to Ugandan parents. A global health and development writer, she has consulted for a range of UN agencies, multilateral development banks, and international NGOs—including the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank, the Global Fund, UNFPA, UNESCO and UNICEF. She is the author of *NELSON* and *BEYONCÉ*, both part of the First Names Series, and has also written two award-winning picture books. Across all of her writing, she endeavours to bring attention to the shared bonds that connect us to one another and the beautiful planet we call home. She currently lives in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania with her husband and two children.



Girl on the Fly: Setting the Scene

This book is set in 1992 Philadelphia and follows Kamaria Kessy, who is 13, independent, confident and loving life. But then she falls out with her best friend, Odie, and has no idea how to talk to him about it, and her Tanzanian aunty becomes her new roommate.

Kam's passion is running, and with her relay teammates – who are her best friends, too – her ambition is for them to win the state championship relay.

This book has been described as celebrating “true female friendship, rich family roots and a sprinkling of first love, all with the fresh and uplifting beat of the '90s in the background.”

For readers aged 9+



GIRL ON THE FLY

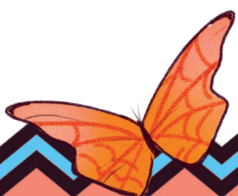
INTRODUCTORY ACTIVITIES

Wordsearch: Who's who and What's what?!

Hidden in this grid are the names of the main characters in Girl on the Fly plus some important themes in the story.

See if you can find them – the words run forwards, backwards, up or down – and just one runs diagonally.

When you have found them, talk or make notes about each character or theme, and how they fit into the story.



GIRL ON THE FLY

Girl on the Fly: Board Game

Have a go at this board game – race ‘on the fly’ through Kam’s story and see how many counters you can collect on the way!

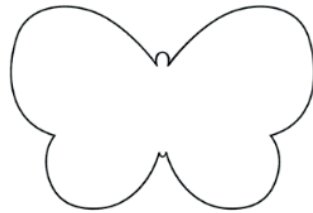
Cut out this game and stick it onto cardboard.

You’ll need a dice, and counters – enough for 20 counters per player – and a central pot for collecting/redistributing counters.

Each person has their own special butterfly, to move round the board as they take it in turns to throw the dice and move round the squares.

You’ll find a different challenge on each square you land on, as you try to make your way to the FINISH!

The winner is the person with most counters at the end of the game.



Here’s a template you can use – give each person a different coloured butterfly



GIRL ON THE FLY



START

1. Kam has to share a bedroom with Aunt Rose

GET 3 COUNTERS

2. Kam finds it hard to write a chant

GET 3 COUNTERS

3. Odie is ignoring Kam

LOSE 4 COUNTERS

4. Kam finishes her chant
SING KAM'S CHANT AND
GET 3 COUNTERS

5. Kam enjoys her ritual flapjack meal before a race

GET 2 COUNTERS

6. Baba talks a lot about Tanzania

GET 2 COUNTERS

7. Kam likes listening to hip-hop music.

TELL EVERYONE YOUR FAVOURITE MUSIC

8. Kam drops the baton

MISS 2 TURNS

9. Neeka calls Kam 'Loser'

LOSE 3 COUNTERS

10. Kam can't stop thinking about how she lost the race

MISS A GO

11. Kam and Neeka's friendship is at risk

GO BACK TO START

12. Enjoy chai tea with Aunt Rose
DESCRIBE HOW ROSE MAKES CHAI TEA.
GET 2 COUNTERS

13. Kam is learning about listening

FOR 3 COUNTERS LIST 3 SOUNDS YOU CAN HEAR AT THIS MOMENT

14. Rose tells Kam about her kanga scarves

TO WIN 2 COUNTERS DESCRIBE ONE MESSAGE FROM ROSE'S KANGAS

15. Kam learns to be more patient

GET 3 COUNTERS

16. Rose is telling Kam all about Mount Ngorongoro

GET 4 COUNTERS

17. Coach Rosse gives Kam's team a pep talk

HAVE ANOTHER TURN

18. Kam dares to open up with Odie

GO FORWARD TO SQUARE 26

19. Coach puts Laina in the team

GET 1 COUNTER

20. Laina is sick

LOSE 1 COUNTER

21. Enjoy Aunt Rose's cooking
DESCRIBE YOUR OWN FAVOURITE MEAL AND GET 2 COUNTERS

22. Odie and Kam work together on her project

DRAW A FLAMINGO AND GET 1 COUNTER

23. Alexis hurts her ankle

LOSE 2 COUNTERS

24. Explain what 'kipepeo' means.

GET 3 COUNTERS

25. Kam finds her heartsong

GET 4 COUNTERS AND ANOTHER TURN

26. Kam's team wins the relay

HAVE 2 EXTRA TURNS

27. The Night of Learning is a big success

GET 3 COUNTERS

28. Neeka chooses not to know the future
GET ANOTHER TURN

29. Next year Kam will be in the 8th grade

SAY KAM'S AGE AND GET 2 COUNTERS

30. Say why you think Kam is a 'Girl on the Fly'

GET 4 COUNTERS

Kam, her family and Odie go to Tanzania

FINISH

FIRST PLAYER HERE GETS THE POT OF GOLD

GIRL ON THE FLY

THINKING AND TALKING ABOUT THE BOOK

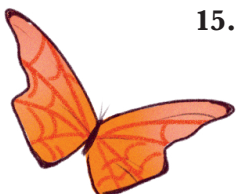
“I’m excited about this story because it not only shines a light on the inevitable tangles of girlhood, but it also celebrates the exuberance and the merry-making of that pivotal time (the 1990s).”

NANSUBUGA ISDAHL

Now that you’ve read the book, what do you think?

Here are some questions to get you thinking, and discussing the story.

1. **What did you think of the book?**
2. **Did any parts of it really mean something to you?**
3. **Were there any parts you weren’t sure about?**
4. **How did you feel when reading this book? And when you’d finished it?**
5. **Which parts of the story do you remember most?**
6. **Did you skip any parts? Which ones?**
7. **Was there anything that took you by surprise?**
8. **Were there any parts you didn’t make sense of?**
9. **What was the thing you most liked finding out from the book?**
10. **What kind of a book did you think it was going to be? Was it what you expected?**
11. **Did you feel swept up by this story, all the time wanting to know what happened next?**
12. **Did you stop and start, or did you want to read it all through in one go?**
13. **Are there parts you want to read over again?**
14. **If you gave up on this book, can you say why?**
15. **Has reading the book changed or affected you? At the end of the story has it given you things to think about?**



GIRL ON THE FLY

Themes to think about

Ubuntu; 'I am because we are'

In her introduction to *Girl on the Fly* the author talks about a philosophy found across the African continent called Ubuntu. Translated from Zulu it means 'I am because we are' and refers to the idea of a universal bond that connects us to one another.

In this book Aunt Rose says to Kam:

'You like to travel deep into the heart. You like close connections.' (p116)

What are all the ways in which this feeling of ubuntu come across in this story? Think about Kam's family, her friendships, and being part of a team – and her relationship with Odie. How important are they for her?

Neeka and I were teeter-tottering right on the edge of losing our friendship. Just like I'd lost Odie. (p169)

How does Kam learn from Rose to resolve these problems and rebuild and keep these friendships, these connections?

The sound of us . . . (p22-3)

Look at this lovely description of Kam and Odie's friendship, listing all the things they enjoyed together when they were close.

. . . Friday night marathon phone calls . . . Talking and laughing and cone crunching. Tapping and shouting and dashing and whacking.

The sound of us . . .

Think of a close friendship you have and list all the things which you love doing together – 'the sound of you'!

On the Fly

'Kam, you can't plot everything. You gotta learn how to do things on the fly.' (p120)

What does 'on the fly' mean to you?

Why do you think this book is called Girl on the Fly?

I had blueprints in my mind for a world of things. (p10)

At the start of the story Kam likes to know exactly how things will work out. What does she want and do things work out for her or not?

Has she changed at the end of the story? In what ways?

I guess I had to be open to hearing something new. Something different. (p317)

Another phrase we use with a similar meaning is 'go with the flow': be flexible, respond, be ready to deal with things if they don't turn out as you expect!

'Maybe we can try to win and go with the flow' (p249)



GIRL ON THE FLY

Rhythms of life

At the start of the book the author talks about the many rhythms of life:

- Winning and losing
- Flying and falling
- Holding tight and letting go
- Think of examples of all these things happening in the story.



Aunt Rose talks about listening to our own, and each other's, rhythms – our heartsongs – and feeling the connections to people and places: '*. . . listening so deeply we could start to see and hear and feel the connections around us . . .*' (p200)

Sometimes, she says, we lose the rhythm, as Kam and Neeka did, and have to listen closely '*. . . until you can hear the rhythm and then the entire beautiful song, again.*' (p201)

More things to talk about

Aunt Rose

Aunt Rose was DEFINITELY going to turn my whole world upside down (p21)

Before Aunt Rose arrives, what does Kam think it will be like having someone else staying with the family?

In fact she was bringing '*a whole new world.*' (p341)

Think of all the differences she brought to Kam and her family.

How people move

'I've studied how the family moves.' (p255)

Aunt Rose says that each person has a different way of moving, which means she can always tell who's coming! For example Momma has a light touch, Kam is like a monsoon.

Check out your family and friends – how do each of them move? Quickly? Slowly? Darting, or plodding? Like a cat, a bird? What kind of mover are you?!

Rituals

Every race night, I had my own ritual. And it ran like clockwork. (p126)

What does Kam always do, in what order, on the night before a race?

Why does she do this?

Do you have any special rituals or superstitions that you follow, because you think it will help things to turn out well?

There are lots of common superstitions which people believe – for example if you see a single magpie you should wave and greet it, to ward off bad luck!

And wearing 'something borrowed, something blue' on your wedding day will bring you good luck.

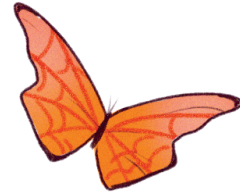
GIRL ON THE FLY

Nicknames

Each of Kam's friends has a nickname – Kam's is Wild Thing.
On page 108 you can find out all their nicknames, and how they got them.

Usually because of something we did or said.

Do you have a nickname? How did you get it?



Getting your heart's desire . . .

We did it . . . This is what we had been working for . . . For two whole years! (p312)

Kam's team wins the state championship – but now they have realised their dream – what next?
How do you feel when you've actually achieved something you have worked and longed for?
After the first thrill is there an anti-climax – or plans to move on to the next thing?

Seeing the future

If you had a crystal ball and could see into the future, what one thing would you want to know? (p275)

This is what Neeka asks Kam and her friends. How does each of them reply?
Neeka herself says 'I'll just wait and see'. She's choosing to 'Go with the flow!'

What would your answer be – is there one thing you really want to know about the future? But if you did get to know it, would it help or hinder the choices you make in your life?

Special days

The Night of Learning was my favourite school event, besides track meets. (p265)

What's a special day in your school year?



GIRL ON THE FLY

THINGS TO DO

Write about:

Your passion

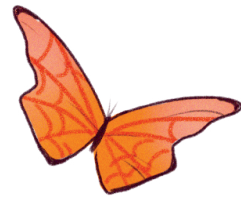
Kam's passion is running – what do you most love doing? A favourite sport or skill? A special interest or creative activity? What do you enjoy about it? What does it mean to you?



Your best friend

Write a description of them:

- What they look like
- Why you like them, what got you together as friends
- What they like doing
- What you like doing together



Having an argument with a friend

Have you ever fallen out with one of your friends? What happened? How did you feel, and how did you make up?

Sharing a room

Do you share a room at home? What do you like and what don't you like about sharing?

My bookshelf carefully lined with track ribbons and school awards. Momma's old globe sitting on my desk . . . (p24)

Describe your room: the furniture, pictures, special things.

Sweets – and reading!

Her hands were heavy with the whole sugar rainbow. Skittles, Starbursts, Now & Laters and her favourite, Bazooka bubble gum.

What are your favourite sweets? What do they taste like? How do they make you feel?

Have a go at describing your reading in terms of your favourite sweets.

Here are a few suggestions to get you started:

- My reading is like a Fry's Turkish delight . . . I like to savour every last bit . . . slowly . . . slowly.
- My reading is like chewing gum . . . anytime, anywhere . . .
- My reading is a gob stopper . . . it shuts me up!

GIRL ON THE FLY

Write a chant:

The chant was that extra magic touch which pulled their team together and kept them focused. (p11)

Have a look at the chant (p121) which Kam wrote for their relay team.

What do 'head deep', 'heart deep', and 'soul deep' mean for the team?

Do you and your friends have a special song or catchphrase? How does it connect you all up?

Listen to these two chants. The first one was written for the English women's football team, the Lionesses, and the second one is the Lionesses themselves with a chant inspired by Kolo Toure, an Ivorian footballer, which is popular at matches around the world.

<https://bit.ly/3Uh29u4> Lionesses Forever

<https://bit.ly/47OhANf> Kola Yaya Toure chant

Have a go at writing a chant for your friendship group, or any other group or team which is special in your life.

Think about:

- What you all care about
- The things that connect you to each other
- The rhythms with which you do things together
- Special sounds and words which say something about your group



Make your chant simple and catchy, with lots of energy and enthusiasm.

Here are two more examples – you may know them already!

Two, four, six, eight – who do we appreciate?!

Hey, hey, are you ready to play? Get on your feet, let's repeat, go, team, go!



Tips for writing your chant

- Brainstorm ideas about your team, which say how it is special – e.g. *'Lionesses – side by side forever'*
Use simple words and phrases that are easy to understand and pronounce.
- Then organise your words and phrases into a rhythm which is clear and punchy – getting the message across about your team.
- Practise the chant aloud till it flows easily and sounds just right!

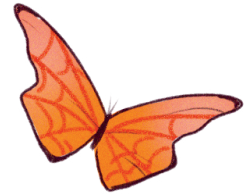


GIRL ON THE FLY

Find out:

There are lots of sport and music references from the 1990s in this story.

Here are some of them, plus some words and phrases which may be new to you. Look them up to find out more about them.



FIND OUT MORE ABOUT:	YOUR FINDINGS:
Flo Jo	
Jackie Joyner-Kersey	
2024 Olympic Games	
En Vogue	
Pete Rock	
Red Hot Chilli Peppers	
Arrested Development (group)	
AND WHAT THE MEANS OF THESE WORDS AND PHRASES?	
Jazzed (p22)	
Busting out the bogle (p38)	
My flow was tapped out (p47)	
Scooch (p49)	
Scarfed (p51)	
Gassing me up (p57)	
Bleachers (p10)	

GIRL ON THE FLY

Kangas

... a piece of fabric folded in her hands. She sat next to me and unfurled it. It was white with small blue dots and a purple flower motif twisting around all four sides ...' '... they also have our sayings on them ...' (p97)

A kanga is a piece of brightly printed cotton fabric, often worn as a scarf, usually by women, especially in countries on the east coast of Africa. The name 'kanga' comes from the word for a guinea fowl, a bird with brightly spotted plumage.

Often a kanga will have a saying or proverb printed or embroidered on it. You can find out more here:

<https://www.dw.com/en/the-kanga-east-africas-cultural-jewel/g-50451306>

<https://artsandculture.google.com/story/kanga-a-cloth-that-unites/fwLSRgiEQNcJLA>



In this story Aunt Rose brings three special kangas which she shares with Kam. Here are the sayings on each of them:

Sema yote – 'Say everything' (p218)

Kila kipepeo huruka na mbawa zake – 'Every butterfly flies with its own wings' (p287)

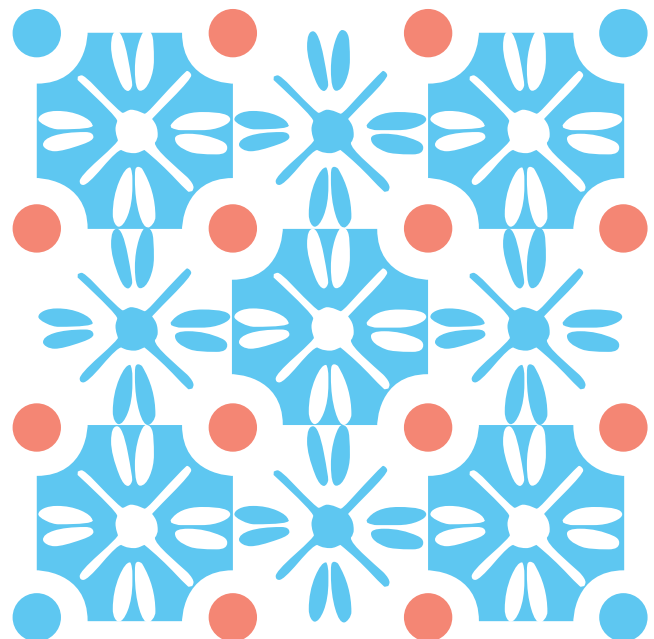
Hapa umefika – 'You are here' or 'This is the place you are looking for' or 'You have arrived' (p341)

How does each kanga fit into the story and how does Kam learn from them and follow each piece of advice?

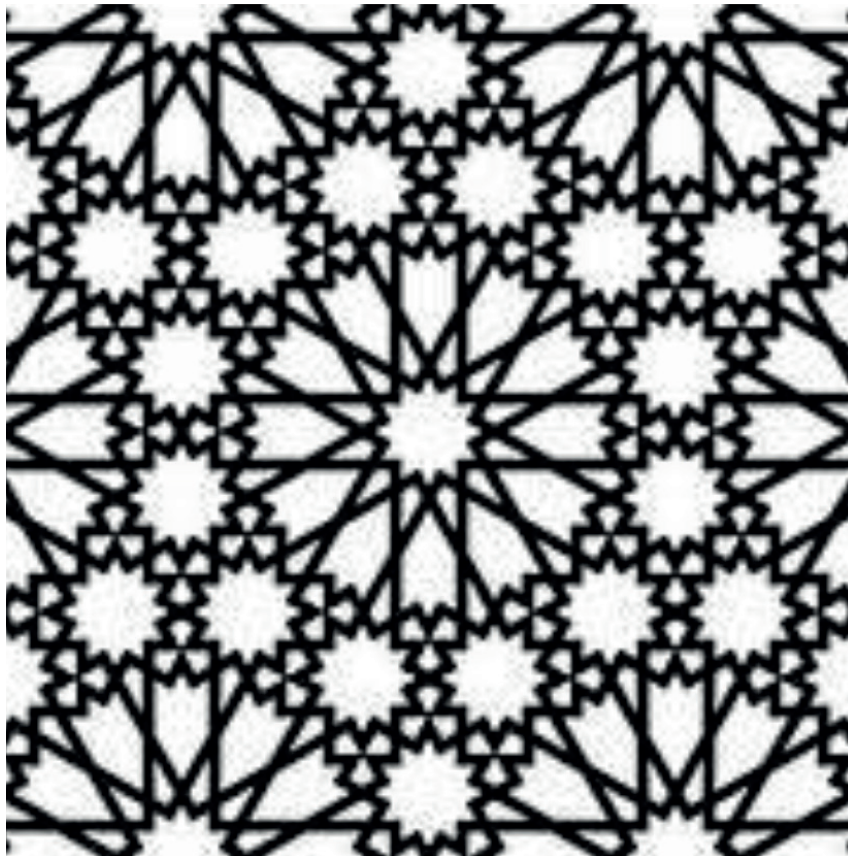
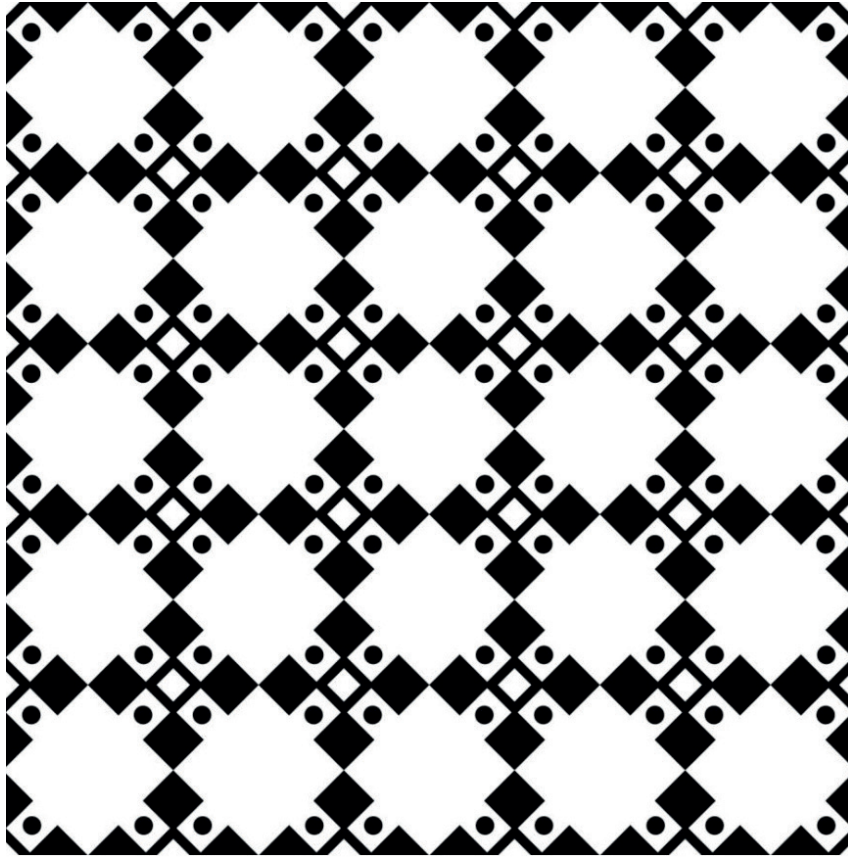
Design your own kanga!

Make up a pattern, or colour in one of these below, and add in a saying or proverb. You could choose from one of these, or write something which has a special meaning for you:

- * Count your blessings
- * Every little bit helps
- * Don't judge a book by its cover
- * A friend in need is a friend indeed



GIRL ON THE FLY



GIRL ON THE FLY

Make your own Night of Learning project

At Kam's school each year they had a special Night of Learning when all the students showed off projects they had done to share with their families something they'd learned. With her friend Odie's help, Kam makes a diorama of the Ngorongoro Crater in Tanzania, which her Aunt Rose has described to her: '*... one of the wondrous places of my heart*' (p175).

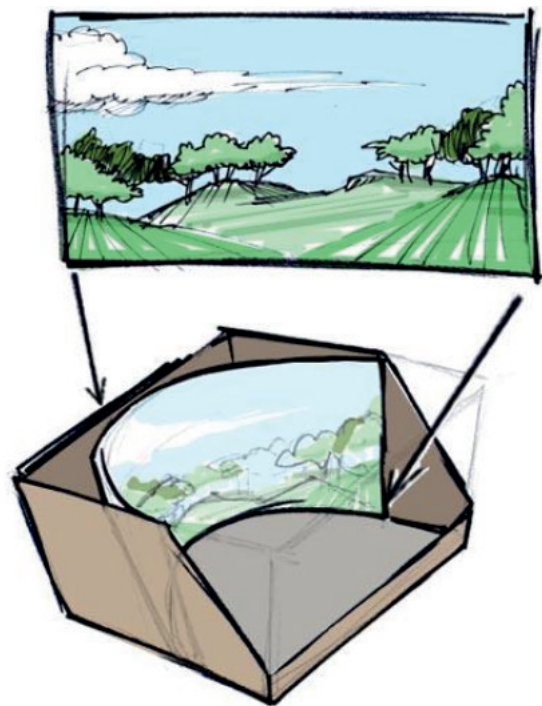
Think of a place which is special to you, or which you would like to visit.

Write a description of it – and then have a go at making a diorama of it!

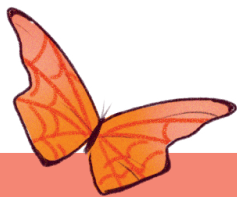
Kam thinks at first of the Grand Canyon – or you might choose to model Mount Etna or the Giant's Causeway!

Here's how Kam makes her diorama – *Inside one shoebox, which was turned on its side facing front, I'd shredded pieces of twine to make dried grass . . .* (see p260 onwards; p269 will also give you some good ideas) – and here are some guidelines to get you going:

- Get a shoebox with a matching, fitted lid
- On a piece of paper, sketch out ideas for your scene
- Collect objects and materials you could use – e.g. cotton reels, matchboxes, fabrics, plasticene, fabric, wallpaper, things from nature – and make sure their size works for the planned scene. You may want to make items – e.g. flamingos!
- Paint, colour, or stick coloured paper to the outside and inside of the box
- When it's dry, arrange everything in the box to get the desired layout
- Stick the items in the box, starting from the back of the box and working towards the open front. Use glue, masking tape, or bluetak
- Use the lid to protect the diorama's contents when transporting it



GIRL ON THE FLY



MORE TO READ

BOOKS BY NANSUBUGA ISDAHL		
	<i>First Names – Beyoncé</i>	David Fickling Books
	<i>First Names – Nelson</i>	David Fickling Books
with Sandra van Doorn	<i>Sing to the Moon</i>	Lantana
	<i>Sleep Well, Siba and Soba</i>	Lantana
TEENAGE FRIENDSHIP		
Megan Abbott	<i>Sandra</i>	Picador (out of print)
Angie Thomas	<i>The Hate U Give</i>	Walker Books
Lira Quintero Weaver	<i>My Year in the Middle</i> (about a 6th grader and a runner!)	Candlewick
Kristy Wientage	<i>Honey Bees and Frenemies</i>	Simon & Schuster
FAMILY		
Sharon Creech	<i>Moo</i>	Guppy Books
Hena Kahn	<i>Amina's Voice</i>	S&S Books
Laura Shovan, Saadia Faruqi	<i>A Place at the Table</i>	Clarion Books
NON-FICTION: TANZANIA & PHILADELPHIA		
Julia Bkt	<i>Tanzania Photography Book</i>	Independent
Golriz Golkar	<i>Tanzania Country Profiles</i>	Blastoff/Discovery



GIRL ON THE FLY



WORDSEARCH ANSWER



K	W	L	I	S	T	E	N	I	N	G	X	Q	F	Z	O
A	P	A	X	V	N	Z	B	C	X	A	A	K	E	E	N
M	V	I	L	O	X	J	Q	W	F	J	C	X	L	P	T
A	M	N	B	F	H	K	P	B	M	B	P	Q	O	X	H
R	F	A	J	V	R	F	T	V	G	X	H	W	R	G	E
I	X	V	Z	B	O	Z	A	J	P	W	L	F	H	Z	F
A	L	E	X	I	S	G	N	X	Z	B	Z	M	C	B	L
P	F	C	U	W	E	B	Z	F	Z	K	C	J	A	X	Y
J	X	B	K	C	J	P	A	R	B	A	N	F	O	H	X
M	O	M	M	A	Z	X	N	C	J	F	X	P	C	G	W
B	D	X	V	P	Q	F	I	Q	F	T	M	W	L	K	F
A	I	H	P	L	E	D	A	L	I	H	P	Q	G	R	M
V	E	B	V	J	X	W	Z	U	S	M	Z	G	E	X	S
J	E	B	A	B	A	L	J	C	F	S	K	L	J	V	F
W	Q	Z	X	J	P	Q	Z	E	T	T	A	P	V	Z	M
S	M	H	T	Y	H	R	B	S	C	Y	V	F	M	C	W