

DISCUSSION GUIDE



THE SCORPIONS OF ZAHIR

BY CHRISTINE BRODIEN-JONES

ELEVEN-YEAR-OLD Zagora Pym has always dreamed of becoming a desert explorer—and now she's on her way to Morocco! Her father, renowned archeologist Dr. Charles Pym, has received a mysterious letter from his partner, Pitblade Yegen, who was lost and presumed dead on their last expedition almost a dozen years ago.

Once Zagora, her father, and her astronomy-obsessed brother, Duncan, reach the Sahara, they find themselves embroiled in a heart-stopping quest filled with enchanted oryxes and ravenous hyenas, prophetic glyphs, and a rogue planet moving closer to Earth. But scariest of all are the giant scorpions that threaten to destroy the secret city of Zahir—along with Zagora and her friends who are struggling to save it.

Christine Brodien-Jones thrills the explorer in every reader in this wild and harrowing adventure-fantasy novel set in the mysterious Moroccan desert.

“Brodien-Jones mixes fantasy and adventure in a way that would make Indiana Jones feel right at home.” —*Booklist*

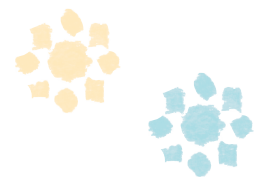
“A wild ride. . . Fast-paced, suspenseful plot.” —*Kirkus Reviews*

BEFORE READING

Read the prologue to *The Scorpions of Zahir*. Complete the Setting the Stage chart (guide page 4) to record information about the characters, setting, and story elements, and make predictions about how events will unfold over the course of the novel. Share your completed Setting the Stage chart with a partner to check similarities and differences in your predictions.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- ◆ The author describes Zagora as a person who has “adventure in her heart,” which is probably why Zagora admires Freya Stark, the first Western woman to travel through the Arabian deserts. Zagora places Freya Stark at the top of her “Ten Most Admired Heroines” list. Who are your heroes and heroines? What qualities do you admire about them? What characteristics about yourself are reflected in the personalities and achievements of your heroes and heroines?
- ◆ The Pym family’s daily life takes a dramatic turn when a letter from Dr. Pym’s long-lost friend, Pitblade Yegen, arrives at their home. What are the different reactions from Dr. Pym, Zagora, and Duncan about a possible trip to Morocco to locate Yegen?
- ◆ What is the significance of the rogue planet Nar Azrak and the Oryx Stone in the legend of Zahir? What roles do the planet and stone play in the Pym’s family quest to find Pitblade Yegen? How does the fact that Nar Azrak is on a collision course with Earth add to the tension in the quest to get to Zahir?
- ◆ Zagora muses about the importance of omens, from shooting stars to comets to eclipses of the moon. Looking out the train window on the ride to Marrakech, she believes she sees a line of oryxes on the horizon. As extinct oryxes, scorpions, and horned vipers appear, Zagora is convinced that each is an omen. How do the omens and Zagora’s discovery that she has “desert sight” enabling her to see into the past, help the reader understand what has happened in the story and what might happen next?
- ◆ The character of Mina Ash-Shaulah first appears in the narrow alleys of the casbah. Mina tells Zagora that her name, Amina, means “trustworthy” in Arabic. Instead of trusting her, Zagora finds Mina somewhat mysterious and frightening. Why is it important that Mina’s true identity and motivation to obtain the Oryx Stone aren’t revealed until towards the end of the story?
- ◆ Pitblade’s cousin, Olivia Romanescu, presents herself as an entomologist interested in finding a way to use scorpion venom to create painkillers for treating trauma. Olivia also seems to have a strong interest in acquiring the Oryx Stone. What are your thoughts and opinions about the distinct parts of Olivia’s personality—to help develop medicines to help human suffering and to unearth meteorites in Zahir for profit?
- ◆ The Pym family picks up an additional passenger on their journey to Zahir. Razziq is a child of the desert. How does he gain the trust of the Pym family? How is he an asset to the family as they struggle to find Pitblade Yegen and to battle the desert to reach Zahir?
- ◆ When Zagora, Duncan, and Razziq find Pitblade, he’s not at all how they expected him to be. How has desert life changed him, both physically and mentally?



Christine Brodien-Jones studied writing at Emerson College in Boston and has worked as a reporter, an editor, and a teacher. A journey to the Moroccan desert with her family sparked her interest in the mythology of the Sahara and inspired her to write *The Scorpions of Zahir*. Her previous middle-grade novel, *The Owl Keeper*, was popular with young readers. Ms. Brodien-Jones divides her time between Gloucester, Massachusetts, and Deer Isle, Maine. Learn more about her life and work at her website: www.cbrodien-jones.com.

The activities in this guide were created by Leigh Courtney, PhD. She teaches in the Global Education program at a public elementary school in San Diego, California. She holds both master’s and doctoral degrees in education, with an emphasis on curriculum and instruction.

ACTIVITIES

Tea and Talk

In the story, Duncan might prefer some of the junk food he has stashed in his rucksack, but Razziq reminds him that it is customary to share mint tea with their host, Abdul. Try out the Moroccan custom of sharing tea. Sip some Moroccan mint tea and discuss your favorite character in the novel with other readers. Complete a character sketch detailing information about your character in preparation for tea time.

Moroccan Mint Tea

- 2½ cups of boiling water
- 2 tsp. loose leaf green tea (or two bags of green tea)
- 6 crushed mint leaves

After combining ingredients, let the tea steep for 5 minutes. Strain mixture and discard solids. Pour mint tea into cups. Serves 4.



A Catalyst for Change

The desert is a vast and unforgiving place with searing heat and limited resources. The Pym family is told that “one person enters the desert and another person comes out.” Think about how each character is changed by his or her experience in the desert. On the Desert Changes chart (guide page 5), record characteristics each character possessed before embarking on the desert journey, and new character traits that emerged after his/her time in the desert.

Star Gazer

Duncan is described as someone who “adore(s) astrophysics and space science.” In fact, he brings all sorts of space paraphernalia with him to Morocco, from star charts to books on astronomy. He is delighted to find an astrolabe in Abdul’s shop. An astrolabe is a tool scientists use to describe the position of stars in the sky. Make your own astrolabe to measure the position of stars in relation to the horizon.

Items needed:

- A 12-inch piece of string
- A plastic protractor
- A small weight (a rock or a washer works fine)
- Pen and paper

Instructions:

Tie a 12-inch piece of string to the hole in the middle of the crossbar on the protractor. Tie a weight to the other end of the string.

Hold the protractor so that the curved part is down and the zero degree mark is closest to you.

Sit on the ground and look along the flat edge of the protractor with your eye at the zero mark. Point the flat edge at the star whose position you want to measure.

Once you have the star at the end of your sight, hold the string against the side of the protractor.

Note which degree mark the string crossed. Write this down on paper. This number tells you how many degrees above the horizon your star is.

Record measurements for several stars.

Return every 30 minutes and take new measurements of the same stars. Notice the pattern in which the stars seem to move across the sky as the Earth turns.



Desert Diary

Zagora’s enthusiasm for Zahir was first ignited by the beat-up leather-bound book she discovered in her father’s cluttered desk. This weathered journal, with its fragile pages and fading ink, had belonged to Edgar Q. Yegen, a desert explorer. At the end of her journey to Zahir, Zagora decides to begin a journal much like Edgar Yegen’s and she titles hers, *The Journal of Zagora M. Pym, Intrepid Explorer/Desert Adventurer*. Imagine that you are Zagora and that you have returned to Zahir. What adventures might await you? Would it involve scorpions? Oryxes? The Azimuth? Write a detailed journal entry from Zagora’s point of view about her desert adventures (guide page 6).

THE PROLOGUE: SETTING THE STAGE

Read the prologue to *The Scorpions of Zahir* and complete the chart below. Formulate predictions about what you believe will happen as the novel continues.

Story information from the prologue:



Setting

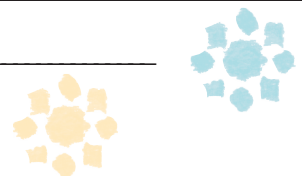
Time Period

Characters

Realistic Elements

Fantasy Elements

I predict that _____



DESERT CHANGES

Complete the chart below by listing traits that describe each character *before* he/she journeys into the desert. Record new characteristics that illustrate how each character is changed *after* his/her experiences in the Sahara.



Character	Before	After
Zagora		
Duncan		
Dr. Pym		
Mina		

Name _____

THE JOURNAL OF ZAGORA M. PYM,
INTREPID EXPLORER/DESERT ADVENTURER

