Read for Understanding

1. Genre What kind of text is this passage? How do you know?

2. Topic What is the passage mostly about?

Reread and Summarize

3. Word Choice In each section, circle three words or phrases that express the big ideas in that section. Note next to each word or phrase why you chose it.

- Section 1: paragraphs 1–2
- Section 2: paragraphs 3–7
- Section 3: paragraphs 8–11
- Section 4: paragraphs 12–20

4. Summary Use your topic sentence and notes to write a summary of the selection.

Name _____ Date _____

from The Cruelest Journey

by Kira Salak

1 In the beginning, my journeys feel at best **ludicrous**, at worst insane. This one is no exception. The idea is to paddle nearly 600 miles on the Niger River in a kayak, alone, from the Malian town of Old Ségou to Timbuktu. And now, at the very hour when I have decided to leave, a thunderstorm bursts open the skies, sending down **apocalyptic** rain, washing away the very ground beneath my feet. It is the rainy season in Mali, for which there can be no comparison in the world. Lightning pierces trees, slices across houses. Thunder racks the skies and pounds the earth like **mortar fire**, and every living thing huddles in **tenuous** shelter, expecting the world to end. Which it doesn't. At least not this time. So that we all give a collective sigh to the salvation of the passing storm as it rumbles its way east, and I **survey** the river I'm to leave on this morning. Rain or no rain, today is the day for the journey to begin. And no one, not even the oldest in the village, can say for certain whether I'll get to the end.

2 "Let's do it," I say, leaving the shelter of an **adobe** hut. My guide from town, Modibo, points to the north, to further storms. He says he will pray



Remi Benali, 2003.

Kira Salak paddles down the Niger River.

In Other Words

ludicrous foolish
apocalyptic powerful and intense
mortar fire bombs
tenuous fragile, weak
survey look over, study
adobe clay

Geographical Background

Timbuktu is in the African country of Mali. From 1400 to 1600, it was a key trading post and center of learning. The Niger River flows south of Timbuktu.



LIVEWORKSHEETS

for me. It's the best he can do. To his knowledge, no man has ever completed such a trip, though a few have tried. And certainly no woman has done such a thing. This morning he took me aside and told me he thinks I'm crazy, which I understood as concern and thanked him. He told me that the people of Old Ségou think I'm crazy too, and that only uncanny good luck will keep me safe.

3 Still, when a person tells me I can't do something, I'll want to do it all the more. It may be a failing of mine. I carry my inflatable kayak through the narrow passageways of Old Ségou, past the small adobe huts melting in the rains, past the huddling goats and smoke of cooking fires, people peering out at me from the dark entranceways. It is a **labyrinth** of ancient homes, built and rebuilt after each storm, plastered with the very earth people walk upon. Old Ségou must look much the same as it did in Scottish explorer Mungo Park's time when, exactly 206 years ago to the day, he left on the first of his two river journeys down the Niger to Timbuktu, the first such trip by a Westerner. It is no coincidence that I've planned to leave on the same day and from the same spot. Park is my benefactor of sorts, my guarantee. If he could travel down the Niger, then so can I. And it is all the guarantee I have for this trip—that an obsessed nineteenth-century adventurer did what I would like to do. Of course Park also died on this river, but I've so far managed to overlook that.

This morning he took me aside and told me he thinks I'm crazy...

4 Hobbled donkeys cower under a new onslaught of rain, ears back, necks craned. Little naked children dare each other to touch me, and I make it easy for them, stopping and holding out my arm. They stroke my white skin as if it were velvet, using only the pads of their fingers, then stare at their hands for wet paint.

5 Thunder again. More rain falls. I stop on the shore, near a centuries-old kapok tree under which I imagine Park once took shade. I open my bag, spread out my little red kayak, and start to pump it up. A couple of women nearby, with colorful cloth wraps called *pagnes* tied tightly about their breasts, gaze at me cryptically, as if to ask: *Who are you and what do you think you're doing?* The Niger churns and slaps the shore, in a **surly** mood. I don't pretend to know what I'm doing. Just one thing at a time now, kayak inflated, kayak loaded with my gear. Paddles fitted together and ready. Modibo is standing on the shore, watching me.

In Other Words
labyrinth maze, network
surly annoyed, unfriendly

Reread and Analyze

5. Nonfiction Text Features
In the Geographical Background feature on page 84, circle the name of Salak's destination. What does this information add to the main idea?

6. Determine Importance
Reread paragraph 3. Underline the text that explains why Mungo Park is important as a "benefactor" to Salak.

7. Development of Ideas
Go back to paragraph 5. Highlight the details that show how Salak prepares to leave in her kayak.

8. Development of Ideas
How do the details about getting ready to launch show what is important to Salak?

LIVEWORKSHEETS