

Resources for *Ghost Boys*

IN-CLASS INTRODUCTION

This lesson is designed to provide students with a one-class introduction to the book. The lesson can be used to start off a class reading of the text, or to encourage them to read it independently.

As a recipient of One Book resources, the Free Library requires that you devote one class period to introducing *Ghost Boys* to students, either using this lesson or your own plan.

Introduction

1. Let students know they are going to be meeting a character named Jerome. Have them track what details come out about him in the first chapter.
2. Read the first “Dead” chapter out loud.
3. Discuss – what do we know about Jerome so far? Do we know anything beyond the fact that he’s been shot? Why does he say at the end that he’s famous?
4. Keep reading the next chapter, “Alive.”
5. Discuss – now that we’ve seen him in the world, what do we know about Jermon that we didn’t? What was unexpected about his character?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

From Hachette's guide: <https://www.hachettebookgroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/ghost-boys-book-club-guide.pdf>

1. Why do you think the novel begins with Jerome's death? How did the alternating time periods affect your reading of the story?
2. Why does Carlos bring a toy gun to school? Why might he feel like it is the best way to protect himself from bullies?
3. Why does Jerome take the toy gun even though it feels wrong?
4. Had you heard about Emmett Till before reading Ghost Boys? If so, what did you know about him? What did you learn about him?
5. Why is Sarah the only person who can see Jerome and Emmett?
6. At the court hearing, the defending lawyer accuses Officer Moore of "racial bias" (page 86). What does he mean? How can a person be biased without realizing it?
7. At the hearing, Officer Moore says, "I was in fear for my life" (page 131), and that is why he shot Jerome even though Jerome was running away. Jerome wonders, "When truth's a feeling, can it be both? Both true and untrue?" (page 118). Why is the truth so hard to determine in these situations?
8. How did you feel when the judge announced that Officer Moore would not be charged with a crime? Why do you think Jewell Parker Rhodes chose this verdict?
9. Before Jerome moves on, he convinces Sarah to speak to her father about fighting racial prejudice even though she doesn't want to. Why is this Jerome's final act?
10. At the end of the book, Jerome realizes that he and the other ghost boys are able to communicate with certain people so they can "bear witness" to the ghost boys' stories. What does this mean? How does bearing witness tie into the statement, "Only the living can make the world better" (page 203)?
11. After reading this novel, how can you make the world better?

TALKING POINTS

From Hachette UK's guide to the book: <https://www.hachetteschools.co.uk/classroom-resources/ghost-boys-discussion-points/>

Bearing Witness

The novel's premise is that ghosts murdered because of racism have to tell their tale to the living. "*Only the living can make the world better.*" In the novel, I imagine hundreds of ghost boys inspired by Emmett Till, Trayvon Martin, Tamir Rice, etc. wandering, looking for the living person who can see and hear them and make a difference. The white officer's daughter, Sarah, sees the ghosts and she'll grow and work toward social justice.

Racial Biases

While Emmett Till was murdered in 1955 because of outright racism, Jerome, my protagonist, is murdered because of racism's legacy, racial bias. Hundreds of years of racial stereotypes contribute to white people (not all, but too many) as seeing black children as less innocent, more sexually knowing, and older than they are. Numerous studies indicate that black children (even as young as preschoolers) are suspended and punished more often than white children and even a young teen, as in the case of the protagonist Jerome, can be seen as a dangerous man by police.

Empathy and Middle Grade Awareness

Ghost Boys is a novel aimed at middle graders (ages 8-12) rather than young adults. To write a novel for middle graders, I needed to create empathy for ALL characters, adding history as a motivating cause rather than demonizing people. The novel's message is hopeful – "*Can't undo wrong. Can only do our best to make things right.*" Children as well as adults can change —"be the change" — in how they treat and see people. If a twelve or fourteen-year-old black boy can die (inappropriately) in America, I believe the subject of death and racism should be read about and discussed in an age-appropriate way.

Racially Inclusive

The main characters are Jerome, an African American, Carlos, a Hispanic American, and Sarah, an Anglo American. All these characters are relatable, empathetic, and well-developed. Carlos recognizes that if he had had the gun, he, as a young man of colour, might have been killed. All boys of colour are at risk because of prejudice.

Correcting Facts of Emmett Till's Murder

Till's death and his mother's decision to have an open casket served as a catalyst for the Civil Rights movement. For decades, in books, media, web entries, and court testimony, there was always the outright statement or allusion that Till acted in a sexually threatening manner toward the shopkeeper, Carolyn Bryant. Timothy B. Tyson's book *The Blood of Emmett Till* (published in 2017) corrects this distorted historical memory. Bryant, now 83, confessed she lied. *Ghost Boys*, I believe, is the only work of fiction (certainly the only work of middle grade fiction) that presents Till as the innocent he was, buying bubble gum.

Legal Justice versus Human Actions

Emmett Till, Trayvon Martin, Tamir Rice, etc. all had their murderers acquitted. So, too, the police officer in *Ghost Boys* is deemed innocent. Issues of justice and the complexity of the legal system are explored in an age-appropriate way.

Empowerment

Because ghost boys “bear witness,” they are empowered even in death and empower the living. *Ghost Boys* weaves African American and Hispanic religious traditions that honor the afterlife. “*Every goodbye ain’t gone.*” Rather the dead, the ancestors, are to be celebrated in ceremonies, family homes, and holidays such as Day of the Dead. Memories of the dead can help the living change.

Further Reading

Author Jewell Parker Rhodes: [My Personal Connection to Ghost Boys](#)

[The 57 Bus](#) – a compelling true story of gender, race and (in)justice in Oakland, California.

[What is Right and Wrong?](#) by Michael Rosen and Annemarie Young – an ideal companion resource to *Ghost Boys*, this book takes a balanced look at issues such as democracy, justice, fairness, prejudice and discrimination and encourages young readers to come to their own decisions.

SUGGESTED ANALYTICAL & CREATIVE ASSESSMENTS

From Jewell Parker Rhodes' Educator Guide: <http://jewellparkerrhodes.com/children/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/GHOST-BOYS-Educator-Guide-FINAL.pdf>

Historical and literary allusions, as well as relationships to other literary works.

- Variation on 5 Minute Research Project (see **Cultivating Background Research** above): After students research the historical and contemporary figures alluded to in *Ghost Boys*, invite them to analyze the author's use of these references to provide context and to illuminate the novel's themes. How do these allusions impact the reader's understanding of the novel?
- What is the significance of references to Peter Pan (p. 91-97, 99, 120) and *Little Women* (p. 188) in *Ghost Boys*? How do these allusions to classic children's literature impact the novel's themes around childhood innocence, the loss of young black lives, and cultural representation?
- Consider pairing *Ghost Boys* with another text in any genre. Support students in analyzing relationships between texts, rather than simply identifying similarities and differences. Invite students to explore how the texts "talk" to each other: How does one text enhance our understanding of the other? Depending on grade level, literary works for young people that could be interesting to explore in relation to *Ghost Boys* might include:
 - *All American Boys*, Jason Reynolds & Brendan Kiely
 - *Beloved*, Toni Morrison
 - *Between the World and Me*, Ta-nehisi Coates
 - *Coco*, directed by Lee Unkrich
 - *Dear Martin*, Nic Stone
 - *Finding Langston*, Lesa Cline-Ransome
 - *The Hate U Give*, Angie Thomas
 - *I am Alfonso Jones*, Tony Medina
 - *Invisible Man*, Ralph Ellison
 - *Long Way Down*, Jason Reynolds
 - *The Lovely Bones*, Alice Sebold
 - *Spoon River Anthology*, Lee Edgar Masters
 - "Strange Fruit" [Lyrics](#) by Abel Meeropol and Recordings by [Billie Holiday](#) and [Nina Simone](#)
 - *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Zora Neale Hurston
 - *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Harper Lee
 - *Towers Falling*, Jewell Parker Rhodes
 - *Wonder*, R.J. Palacio

The Civil Rights Movement. Emmett Till was a fourteen-year-old boy from Chicago who was lynched while visiting relatives in Mississippi in 1955. (Although the word "lynched" is often associated with hanging, it can refer to any extrajudicial murder, especially by a mob.) His mother, Mamie Till, insisted on having an open casket at his

funeral so that the world would bear witness to the torture and death of her child. *Jet* magazine's publication of the funeral photographs helped to spark the Civil Rights Movement. In the chapter "Civil Rights" in *Ghost Boys* (p.113-117), Ms. Penny, the librarian at Sarah's school, explains what happened to Emmett Till and shows Sarah these photographs. Support students in developing an understanding of the Civil Rights Movement and especially the role of young people in it through the Children's March.

- [The Body of Emmett Till](#) : This video from *Time* Magazine's "100 Photos: The Most Influential Images of All Time" provides additional background information and context about the impact of the funeral photographs of Emmett Till as well as the broader role that still and video images have played in both the Civil Rights Movement and the Movement for Black Lives. In keeping with the novel's themes, invite students to consider how the dissemination of images throughout these movements has variously served as a call to action, a form of activism, and a way to bear witness.
- [American Freedom Stories: Children's Crusade of 1963](#) : The Children's Crusade or Children's March is a logical historical touchstone in studying *Ghost Boys* , as it both illustrates the role of children in the Civil Rights Movement in response to the death of Emmett Till and anticipates contemporary youth activism such as the March for Our Lives.
- [The Sit-Ins](#) : This video was created for a fifth-grade class to foster an understanding of the lunch counter sit-ins as a key moment in Civil Rights history, particularly with respect to nonviolent protest.
- Variation on 5 Minute Research Project (see **Historical and literary allusions** above): In keeping with the novel's themes, honor students' voices by focusing on the aspects of the Civil Rights Movement that are most compelling and resonant for them. After students research the historical and contemporary figures and events alluded to in *Ghost Boys* , invite them to analyze the author's use of these references to provide context and to illuminate the novel's themes. How do these allusions impact the reader's understanding of the novel?
- Consider working with a local museum or historical society to host a field trip for your students so that they can engage directly with artifacts from this historical period. If a field trip is not possible, you might inquire about the possibility of a museum educator, teaching artist, or local expert visiting your school to speak with your students. Many institutions, notably the [National Museum of African American History and Culture](#) in Washington, DC, offer extensive online resources, allowing students to conduct a "virtual" museum visit.

ONLINE RESOURCES

LESSON PLANS & RESOURCES

Jewell Parker Rhodes' Website

A compendium of articles and Q&A with the author, both in print and audio recordings.

<http://jewellparkerrhodes.com/children/books/ghost-boys/>

Little, Brown Educator Guide

A comprehensive guide full of discussion prompts and activities from both a literary and social issues perspective.

<http://jewellparkerrhodes.com/children/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/GHOST-BOYS-Educator-Guide-FINAL.pdf>

MULTIMEDIA

Video Intro to the Author

Two minutes with Jewell Parker Rhodes.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1FVk4IPpOOs>

American Experience: The Murder of Emmett Till

Interactive website with video clips, primary sources, photographs, and write-up explaining the events and context of the murder.

<https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/films/till/>

Need for Justice in Emmett Till Case

The victim's cousin weighs in on the need for the case to be reopened.

<https://www.usatoday.com/story/opinion/policing/community-calls/2018/07/03/emmett-till-justice-violence-policing-usa-reader-views/753481002/>

The Tamir Rice Story: How to Make a Police Shooting Disappear

A long but compelling look at the justice system's response to the shooting. For older students.

<https://www.gq.com/story/tamir-rice-story>

Interview with the Author: Jewell Parker Rhodes

<https://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/childrens/childrens-authors/article/76583-q-a-with-jewell-parker-rhodes.htm>

In her latest novel for middle grade readers, Ghost Boys, Jewell Parker Rhodes blends history with current events and historical characters with fictional ones to weave a tale of an African-American boy whose life is cut short by a white policeman's bullet. We spoke with Rhodes about her personal experiences of racism in America, why Emmett Till, an African-American teenager lynched in Mississippi in 1955, plays a major role in a story set in contemporary Chicago, and how writing this novel was painful, but also cathartic for her. Ghost Boys is Indiebound's #1 Kids Indie Next pick this spring.

What inspired you to write *Ghost Boys*?

Every child everywhere deserves to have a childhood. It is a betrayal of innocence and trust when adults who have a responsibility to protect and nurture children instead harm or murder them. This is tragic. Yet, as a writer I believe words have the power to shape the world. I believe today's youth are going to make the world better. These two beliefs inspire me to write about resilience and to mirror children's unlimited capacity for compassion, empathy, and love. As an author I bear witness, my characters bear witness, and I know my readers will bear witness to the belief that everyone's story needs to be told and in the telling, we can cauterize grief and pain and transform it into a force for good.

Though I write about tough subjects, kids know that my stories are also infused with kindness, hope, and, ultimately, it empowers them. As the ghost boy Jerome says: "Only the living can make the world better. Live and make it better." That is the clarion call I believe all children want to hear: "Live.... Make the world better."

It is essential for adults not to patronize kids. They are far more sophisticated and knowledgeable about inequities in the world. More importantly, in a few short years they will be adults voting and participating in our civic discourse. Before that time, young readers need opportunities to discuss significant issues with their family members and in their school community.

This novel is for middle grade readers, yet it deals with some intense issues. Do you think middle grade readers—especially boys of African heritage—can handle such a story without being traumatized?

Children do not live in a vacuum. History and current events both demonstrate racism and racial biases. African-American families have to prepare their children at a young age for the possibility of prejudice and discrimination. From the 1915 silent film *The Birth of a Nation* to the 2017 film *Get Out*, cultural stereotypes about black people abound.

Last year, I talked to fourth graders in Louisiana about my novel, *Sugar*. The very first question came from a black boy who asked: "Why do white people hate us so much?" My heart broke. Why should any child in 2018 feel hated because of the color of their skin?

In 1992, my son was two when the L.A. riots exploded after four police officers were acquitted of wrongdoing during the arrest of Rodney King. I still worry about my son because I know racial bias still exists. Today, beyond increasingly segregated schools, studies document that black children are seen as less innocent, more sexually

knowledgeable, and physically older than their actual age. In schools, black children are far more likely to have police officers called to arrest them than be disciplined by school officials.

In my novels, I always focus on seeing, really seeing another human being. Forget labels, drop biases, and connect as people. In *Towers Falling*, Deja, an African-American homeless girl, is best friends with Sabeen, a Muslim Turkish American girl, and Ben, a Jewish military kid. In *Ghost Boys*, Jerome, an African-American Chicagoan, becomes friends with Carlos, a Hispanic boy relocated from Texas. Jerome as a ghost, and the white police officer's daughter, Sarah, see each other, too. Through understanding and empathy, Sarah takes steps to make her family and world better.

Now forget all the labels I've just used. The truth is that when I write, I focus on my characters' interior lives. With character-driven stories I hope to convey the feeling, the emotional truth that "people are people are people" and that all should be treated equitably and given respect.

What was your writing process for *Ghost Boys*?

Writing *Ghost Boys* was challenging and emotional. Emmett Till was murdered when I was a year old. As a woman and as a mother of a black son, I've had my own challenges with discrimination. And as a grandmother, I still live in a time when black boys and men can be murdered due to racism or racial biases. Before I could bear witness to tragedy, I had to experience my own catharsis.

I first wrote 27 pages and said, "That's it. I'm done with the novel." Then after several weeks, I'd dive back into [it] and write another 10 pages. Then, I'd repeat, "That's it. I'm done!" Over a two-year period, the novel grew in increments with long breaks in between, during which I read volumes on discrimination and felt sorrow. I had to experience my own painful journey in order to experience and reaffirm transformative love for our common humanity. I felt such a special obligation because I was writing for youth. My novel makes a space for strong emotions but doesn't slay hope and optimism, and celebrates the inherent power in each child "to be and make the change."

Why did you feature in such a prominent role Emmett Till, who was murdered in 1955, when there are so many other recent victims, including Trayvon Martin—who was murdered in 2012—who make only a cameo appearance?

All of the ghost boys symbolize individuals and the spiritual legacy of a community of boys who died too soon. The historical context from 1955 to 2012 is what is important. It allows me to draw distinctions between the overt and conscious racism of the 1950s with the still prevalent legacy of racial biases in the current day.

Research for the novel was ongoing. Even after *Ghost Boys* was in copyediting, I was able to rewrite Emmett's story to reflect [Mrs. Carolyn Bryant's recent admission that she lied](#) about Emmett physically and verbally assaulting her. *Ghost Boys* bears witness to the truth of Emmett's undoubtable innocence.

What function does Sarah serve in *Ghost Boys*? Why is only the daughter of the white policeman who killed Jerome able to commune with him—rather than Carlos, for example?

Because of his cultural beliefs in ancestors and Day of the Dead rituals, Carlos already has a friendship with Jerome that extends beyond life. It was exciting to me that Carlos's Hispanic traditions mirror Jerome's

grandmother's African diasporic belief that "Every goodbye ain't gone." Throughout the world, honoring the dead is a cultural theme. Over a million African slaves were in colonial Mexico and their afterlife beliefs may have influenced Day of the Dead and vice versa.

By Sarah seeing and hearing Jerome, Sarah becomes an empowered character who, with critical thinking skills and love, forgives her father and advocates for social justice. Sarah is changed by Jerome's story and, in turn, she will help improve the world. I love the line when Jerome asks about who could see Emmett as a ghost. Emmett replies: "A guy with a funny name. Thurgood Marshall." Why can't Sarah then be as impactful as Thurgood Marshall?

What do you hope young readers will take away from your novel?

I hope young readers will feel inspired and know that their thoughts and feelings matter. By their presence and their actions, young readers can make (and are making) the world a better place. Whether the book is read by one child or a trillion children, young readers should know that this author and wonderful booksellers are honoring them by fully and firmly believing that their lives, thoughts, and actions matter. Children are the heroes of our time. It is a special grace to hand a child a book. Storytelling is the human discourse that unites and inspires us all.

Young readers will "live and make the world better." They will tell their own powerful stories. And because of the example of booksellers, teachers, and parents, they will hand a book to their future children. And in another generation, future books may indeed fulfill Jerome's admonition—"Don't let me/(Or anyone else)/Tell this tale again/Peace out/Ghost Boy."