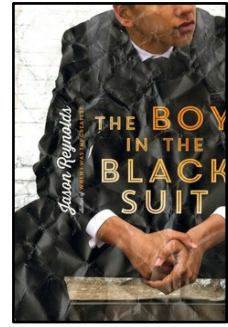


A Curriculum Guide to

The Boy in the Black Suit

By Jason Reynolds



About the Book

Matt Miller has just incurred a serious loss—his mom died. Only seventeen, Matt has to become the man of the house, since his dad can't step up to the task or handle life without his wife, and turns to bottles of whiskey for solace. Matt's situation at home forces him to find a job that leads to an eerie fascination with funerals. Although strange, Matt finds more than comfort at the funeral home. He finds himself on a journey exploring new friendships, coping with loss, and ultimately, discovering love. Who is to judge why, how, and when someone gets over the loss of a loved one?

Prereading Activities

1. Read author Jason Reynolds's blog on iamjasonreynolds.com and write an objective summary about its content. Based on his posts, what is Jason passionate about? What issues are important to him? Do you think some of these issues or passions will translate into his writing?
2. Have students study the grieving process. When reading the novel, have students create a chart that shows how the main character goes through the grieving process. What are the stages of grieving? While reading the book, have students take note of Matt's various stages of grieving. How does Matt handle his loss? How does he handle his pain? What and/or who helps Matt get through his issues?

Discussion Questions

These discussion questions align with the following English Language Arts Common Core State Standards: (RL.7–12.1, 2, 3, 4, 5)

1. What happens to Matt in the exposition of the novel? Does this set the tone for the rest of the book? How are the students at school treating Matt? Are they treating him differently?
2. How do Matt's thoughts and actions demonstrate he is a conflicted character? How does the author let the reader know what he is thinking versus what he actually says?
3. How does Matt first meet Renee? What type of girl is Renee and how do you know?
4. Who is Mr. Ray? Describe Mr. Ray's character using details from the story. What conclusions can be drawn about Mr. Ray from the first few chapters in the novel?
5. The author specifically mentions the funerals for the elderly, as well as the funerals for teenagers that have passed through Willie Ray's doors. Use deductive reasoning to explain why the author would mention teenagers' funerals.

6. Analyze the slang words that the characters use. Sort the slang and/or dialect said by two different characters and create a list of examples for each character. How does the use of slang words affect each character? Why would the author use slang from two different time periods?
7. Examine when Mouse gets up to talk at the funeral. What is ironic about Mouse's character? What elements of his character make the irony comical?
8. Consider why Matt attends the funerals. What satisfaction does he receive from the funerals? What does his reaction indicate about his coping skills?
9. Why couldn't Matt make an omelet? How do you know? What is Matt struggling with?
10. What happened at Chris's house that made Matt and Chris go from good friends to best friends? How does disobeying Chris's mom affect them at the end of this chapter?
11. Locate a paragraph in Chapter 3 that contains examples of sensory imagery. Try to find one that appeals to multiple senses. Create a chart to show the sense it appeals to and the words and/or phrases that the author uses to demonstrate that particular sensory imagery.
12. What happens in Chapter 3 that adds to the conflict in the novel? How will this episode affect Matt's character?
13. In Chapter 4, Mr. Ray is talking to Matt about Matt's clothes. What does Mr. Ray say about the way boys dress these days? How does Matt's clothing and style contrast to other boys in his neighborhood? What does this indicate about Matt?
14. In Chapter 5, Chris says, "Because you were blowing me up like something was wrong." What does he mean by this phrase? How do you know? What literary device is the author using?
15. How does Matt feel toward Renee? How do you know? Why do you think Matt cares about what Chris thinks of her?
16. Examine the way Matt spends his sixteenth birthday. How does this contrast from the TV show he was watching? What can you infer about Matt's relationship with his family by how he celebrated his sixteenth birthday?
17. What happens to Matt's father in Chapter 5? Did the author foreshadow in earlier chapters that this would happen?
18. Matt has to decide whether or not he wants to go to school after his dad's accident. Would you go to school? What are the benefits of staying home versus going to school?
19. What effect does Mr. Ray's character have on the novel, overall? What is his role throughout the book? How does his role help to develop a theme?

20. Why does Mr. Ray take Matt to his house? What is unexpected about Mr. Ray's house? What does Matt find out when he goes downstairs?
21. How is the title of Chapter 5 appropriate to that chapter? How are the men in the novel handling the pain of loss? What does this say about how society expects men to handle loss?
22. What does Mr. Ray compare the game of chess to? What reasons does he give? Do you agree?
23. Evaluate Matt and Chris's friendship. How do their characters defy the media's perspective of young black males? How are Chris and Matt alike? How are they different? How are they different from other kids in the hood?
24. Explain the ways in which Renee surprises Matt. Why couldn't Matt find what he was looking for with her?
25. Consider what impact the Cluck Bucket has on the neighborhood? What role does it play in the novel? How do the Cluck Bucket and the setting of the story help to develop a theme?
26. The phrase "I got you" is frequently used by characters. What does this mean? How do you know? Use context clues and specific examples to explain.
27. What conclusions can be drawn about why Matt hates flowers? What could the flowers be symbolic of? What is ironic about the names of the two women Matt cares about: Love and Daisy?
28. Take a position on why Matt finally decides to go see his mother. Why does he go? How can Matt's visit help to build a resolution?
29. What does Matt decide to bring to Love's Thanksgiving? How does his decision make him feel closer to his mom? What does this gesture show about how Matt feels about Love?
30. Where does Love take Matt for Thanksgiving? How is this place very different from where he thought they were going to go? What does this say about Love's character?
31. Who is Candy Man? What game do Matt and Candy Man play when they meet? What does Matt find out about Candy Man? What type of irony is the author using in this scenario?
32. What makes Love mad in the car ride home? How does her reaction affect Matt? What may happen to their relationship if they do not communicate again?
33. What connection does Matt have with Martin Gandry? How do you think Mr. Ray feels when Matt tells him he met Martin Gandry? Reflect on whether or not Matt did the right thing by telling him.

34. Examine Matt’s relationship with Mr. Ray. How does the relationship they share bring a little closure in their lives for both of them?

35. What happened to Love on Valentine’s Day? Matt decides to tell Love where he was on Valentine’s Day. What brings Matt and Love together? What do they have in common? Examine the tragedies in each of their lives. Create a chart or diagram to show similarities.

36. Where do Love and Matt go on their first “real” date? What is ironic about their destination? What gift does Love give Matt? How does the gift help him? Is the gift symbolic?

Post-Reading Activities

1. Have students work with a partner to do this assignment. Inspect the author’s references to Shakespeare and Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* throughout the novel. In what ways does the author use the references? What impact do the references have on the overall novel? Research the background of *Canterbury Tales* and Chaucer’s style of writing. In what ways did his writing go against the normal writing style of that period? What was controversial about Chaucer’s stories? Create a chart comparing and contrasting a variety of elements from Jason Reynold’s novel *The Boy in the Black Suit* with Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*. Compare and contrast literary elements, such as style, diction, themes, characters, conflict, etc.

2. The *repast* is the taking of a meal after a funeral. Investigate how food is woven into the story. Why does the author pay such great detail to the use of food? How are songs and music mentioned in the novel? How does the music and food give the book a soul? What effect do food and music have on the overall novel?

3. Create a chart for the female characters in the novel, including the minor characters. Explore what role they each have in the novel and how they contribute to the neighborhood. Then generate a compare and contrast chart for the male characters in the novel. What do all the characters have in common? How do the female and male characters differ? After the chart is complete, have students write an objective summary on how the male and female characters are the same and/or different.

4. Contemplate whether or not you would work at a funeral parlor after the death of someone close to you. Using Matt’s experiences as a basis, write a short essay explaining your reasoning.

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