

### READING GROUP GUIDE

# The COST of KNOWING

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#### **ABOUT THE BOOK**

In the wake of his parents' deaths, Alex discovers he's gained the ability—or curse—to see any object or person's future with a single touch. The longer the touch, the farther into the future he can see. Now sixteen, Alex has endured the constant assault of visions he is powerless to prevent, including the death of his best friend, Shaun. Alex lives with deep guilt and dread that manifests as debilitating anxiety, panic attacks, isolation, and the refusal to touch anyone. This includes his girlfriend, Talia, for fear of confirming their looming breakup. In his world, Alex not only has to fear the racism that kills Black boys like him and his younger brother, Isaiah, but also the consequences of his touch. Even an ordinary photograph can trigger a horrifying prophecy like Isaiah's impending death. While Alex knows he cannot stop the inevitable, he is determined to break the curse and help Isaiah live out his last days with joy. *The Cost of Knowing* explores the experiences of young Black men in America, including the weight of feeling like their futures are set in stone and the Black boy joy that is possible despite it all.

#### **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

- **1.** Throughout the novel, Alex feels ashamed about his anxiety and fear; he asks himself what kind of man he is, feels nervous about sharing his feelings with Talia, and keeps his visions a secret instead of asking for help. Describe where this shame comes from and how his attitude toward anxiety evolves. Explain your answers using examples from the book.
- **2.** After Shaun's funeral, his mom, Maria Gomez, struggles to buy groceries and pay rent. She receives disability checks, but they are not enough. As a young Black man, Alex feels pressure to provide for Maria and Talia since they no longer have Shaun to help care for them. How do you think identities like race, gender, and socioeconomic status affect the process of grieving a loved one?
- **3.** What was the significance of the photo Alex touched? Do you think that if he had touched a different photo, he would have had the same vision of Isaiah's death?
- **4.** Alex is convinced people don't truly want to know future milestones because the "not-knowing is what makes life meaningful," but one of the first things Isaiah asks after learning Alex's power is how his life will play out. Why does Isaiah insist? Would you want to know your future? Give reasons for your choice.
- **5.** Alex and Isaiah are stuck in two manifestations of grief and anxiety. Use examples in the book to compare their experiences and their powers. What are the benefits and setbacks of each power? Which would you rather have and why?

- **6.** Lying in bed staring at the photo of his family, Alex's mind races through the what-ifs that could prevent Isaiah's death even though he knows his visions are certain. But we learn their great-great-grandpa Buddy Lyons "could touch anything and see *all* potential outcomes of his next decision," which suggests the future is not mapped out and decisions do affect outcomes. Alex's decisions could not prevent Isaiah's death, but they could affect how Isaiah spent his last days. Do you think there were decisions that *could* have saved Isaiah's life? How far back do those decisions go? Are they the decisions of a single person, a group of people, or an institution? Explain your answers.
- **7.** "How do you bring joy to someone who just wants to be left alone?" Alex presumes that Isaiah stays in his room because he doesn't want to socialize, yet Isaiah's biggest wish is to explore and make friends. Once they bond, the brothers realize there is so much joy to be shared between them despite their trauma. Reflect on a time when you felt alone but didn't know how to ask for help. Or reflect on a time when you assumed someone wanted to be left alone. What cues did they give off that made you think this? What would you have wanted others to do for you when you were feeling down? What do we owe our loved ones when it comes to vulnerability and compassion?
- **8.** In a tense conversation with Isaiah, Alex thinks about Shaun, his laughter, and his gift for knowing what to say in any situation. Alex wants to emulate Shaun. Who is someone in your life who you'd like to emulate in tense situations? What skills or personality traits stand out?
- **9.** Alex is terrified of taking Isaiah to the cemetery because he knows that event will bring them closer to his brother's death. That moment in the graveyard is where they let their guards down and learn about each other's powers. Do you think their conversation could have happened anywhere? Use examples from the book to describe what the graveyard symbolizes and why it's an important setting.
- **10.** A recurring theme in *The Cost of Knowing* is exploring what it means to be a Black man and the expectations set by society, culture, and family. Alex evaluates his dad's definition as he's placed in circumstances that highlight contradictions. Do you think it's possible to craft one definition that applies to every Black man? Explain your answer. Using examples from the book, what role do the women play in upholding or deconstructing a definition?
- 1. Isaiah's visions grant him the knowledge to trace his ancestry back to the Unguzi tribe of West Cameroon. Many Black Americans cannot trace their family trees that far back because slave traders kidnapped families and separated them upon arrival in the Americas. Isaiah can even name their ancestor, Daniel Alby, who "bought his own freedom in 1818 and the freedom of his family." Why were Black families separated? How did this action contribute to the oppression of Black people? Consider your own racial identity and how far back you can trace your own family. What power lies in having access to family history? What would it mean to be able to learn about and from your ancestors? If possible, use examples from the text to support your conclusions.
- 12. "Because the world remembers what he asked for. What happened to our ancestors is still punishing us, too. In more ways than one," Isaiah explains to Alex. This quote adequately sums up intergenerational trauma and how the decisions and experiences of our ancestors affect us. Do you think that breaking intergenerational trauma is the responsibility of one person? How did Alex's and Isaiah's ancestors and their powers help the next generation get closer and closer to breaking the curse? What do the brothers do differently that makes their attempt at breaking the curse successful? Explain your responses.
- 13. Alex's and Isaiah's powers are intrinsically connected to their family, but are they connected to their Blackness and how Blackness is perceived in America? How did their family's fears and powers shift with their environment? Facing their fears through joy broke the curse, but does it take away the weight of racism? Do you think it's possible other families have curses too? Would you define white supremacy as a curse? Explain your answers.
- **14.** Alex is so scared of losing Talia that his anxiety causes him to replay visions of their breakup. Using examples from the text, how do you think his worrying becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy? What would change if he lived in the present and was honest with her?

- **15.** The book delves into mental health specifically for Black boys and men and the pressures they feel to be strong and fearless. Yet Talia still struggles with Shaun's death, and Aunt Mackie is presented as the picture of strength. Alex sees her as someone who "substitutes duty where sadness should be." Share your thoughts on what that quote means and what Alex learns from Aunt Mackie and Talia about mental health.
- **16.** While the origin of the "Karen" meme is hazy, it's been recognized online as a nickname for white women who call the police on Black people for doing ordinary things like selling water on a hot day, hosting a barbecue at the park, or simply jogging down the street. Discuss the significance of naming one of the characters Karen. How does this character weaponize her white privilege and how are some white women complicit in acts of racism?
- **17.** Aunt Mackie reminds Alex that "'Joy in the midst of oppression is its own kind of bravery." What does she mean by that, and why does Alex keep repeating the mantra to himself? Does bravery look different across race and gender? Explain your answer. What does bravery mean to you?
- **18.** Discuss the differences in structure and style between the epilogue and the interludes featuring the husband and wife. Who are they? Why don't they have names? Why is their story repeated throughout the novel?
- **19.** Do you agree with Aunt Mackie's claim that sharing the curse of knowledge is "gon' be hard to do, until they live it. . . . You can't make her understand, baby. You live this every day. I live this every day'"? What difference would it make to share the burden of knowing? Explain your rationale.
- **20.** When Alex calls out Karen at Isaiah's funeral, she is seemingly more upset that Alex calls her a racist than by Isaiah's death. She attempts to generalize the experience and say that she too lost her son, even though it is in no way comparable. Discuss why you think she acts this way. Is being called racist more harmful than experiencing racism? Explain your answer.
- 21. "What kid should have to live every day in the shadow of four hundred years of bondage and another hundred of lesserthan-dom? Black kids, apparently. But then, how is a Black kid supposed to be a kid?" Alex asks. From this quote, what do you think "lesserthan-dom" means? Despite the pain, fear, and trauma, provide examples from the book that show Isaiah and Alex getting to be just kids. What obstacles did they encounter that almost prevented these moments?
- **22.** Comment on the exchange between Alex and Takaa in the graveyard and their use of the Akoose words "Kunze" and "Kə̂ŋ." What themes from the book can you connect to this exchange? What emotions did you experience as Alex met each of his ancestors and saw Isaiah in their dad's arms?

#### **EXTENSION ACTIVITIES**

- **1.** Read the 2015 Vox article "What exactly is a microaggression?" written by Jenée Desmond-Harris (https://www.vox.com/2015/2/16/8031073/what-are-microaggressions). In small groups, discuss scenes from the book that you identify as microaggressions and how they fit into the definition. How do microaggressions compare to what Alex calls "accidental racism"? How are microaggressions connected to the book's title?
- **2.** Consider the role Mrs. Zaccari played in the murders of Isaiah and the Black boy that hopped the fence at the Martins' house. While she didn't enact physical violence, she was still complicit. Alex connects her behavior to the "he looked at me complaint [that] got Emmett Till killed almost seventy years ago." He wonders, "Have we really made so little progress since then?" Write a reflective essay that answers his question. Compare real-life cases like that of Trayvon Martin, a Black boy shot and killed by a neighborhood watch member, and Ahmaud Arbery, a young Black man killed while jogging in his neighborhood, to the events in *The Cost of Knowing*. Include reflections on your race, gender, and socioeconomic class and how this affects how you choose to live in the face of injustice.

- **3.** Music plays a big role in the story, from providing peace to finding a common ground to educating listeners. While people like Mrs. Zaccari refuse to look past their assumptions to understand the power and sophistication of rap, Alex assures us "Shiv doesn't do anything by accident. The Rush has six references to a concept called the 'black gold rush,' the spark of mass incarceration in the nineties, before I was born. I learned things from that album that they won't teach us in school." Find a song that teaches you something you didn't learn in school about a social injustice and then find at least three further resources on the topic. Be prepared to present it to the class.
- **4.** "You said yourself anxiety is different for everybody," Isaiah tells Alex. "So why can't our visions be different for everybody?" *The Cost of Knowing* offers an emotional and accurate representation of anxiety and its very real physical repercussions. Research the symptoms of anxiety and discuss how anxiety manifests in the characters. Do you ever feel anxious in your life? How does it manifest? How do you cope? Alex provides some coping mechanisms that help him. Find at least one more example or use an example of your own. Work together as a class to compile a collaborative zine with resources on anxiety, including coping mechanisms and how to seek help and support.
- **5.** While Shiv Skeptic's song "The Game" is about video games, the meaning of the song seems to transform as Isaiah sings the lyrics directly to Alex: "So many lives to live. So many ways to die. So many ways to play. So many ways to say goodbye." Knowing Isaiah's power, do you think he suspected something would happen to him? We have access to all of Alex's inner thoughts and perspective, and we know his goal was to offer support and joy to his little brother. What do you think Isaiah's goals were even if he didn't know he was going to die? Keep those questions in mind and rewrite the concert experience from Isaiah's point of view.