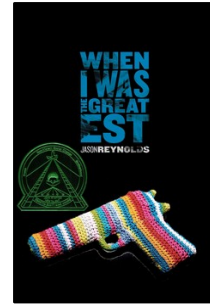


A Curriculum Guide for

When I Was the Greatest

By Jason Reynolds



About the Book

Ali couldn't be more excited about his invite to one of the best parties in the hood. Ali and his homeboys, Noodles and Needles, navigate through the neighborhood of Bed-Stuy, in Brooklyn, New York, getting ready for the greatest night of their lives. Just like his beloved changing neighborhood, Ali's relationships are shifting too. Loyalty, like his "fly" shoes, comes at a price. Is the price for loyalty too high? When is it time to bail on a homeboy? Decision making is not easy, especially at fifteen. Ali will figure out the true value of friendship and family in this worthy coming-of-age story, but will family and friendships survive?

Prereading Activities

1. Have students work with a partner to research "invisible disabilities." Each team can research a disability that is not necessarily visible to the untrained eye. Make sure to introduce Tourette's Syndrome to your students as an example. What is it? How is Tourette's an unseen disability? After each team has explored their topic, have teams explain the disability to the class and hold a class discussion. How could an unaware person misjudge or discriminate against someone with an "invisible disability"? What impact could the disability have on the impaired person, their family, and their environment?
2. Have students investigate and then discuss the repercussions of single-parent homes in America. What are the statistics of children in America being raised without a father, and how does it impact a child's life? Examine the statistics by race, minority, income level, and educational level of the parents. Have students create a chart comparing the statistics on the problems that arise when a child is raised in a fatherless home.

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. In the opening chapter, how does Ali feel about family? How do you know? Be sure to quote at least two examples from the novel.
2. What are the ages of Needles and Noodles? Which brother acts the oldest? What is ironic about their relationship?
3. Where is the novel set? Why does the author go into such great detail when introducing the setting? How does the setting contribute to the tone?

4. Who is Ali? Explain his character through his mannerisms, humor, social interaction, interests and skills? What type of characterization does the author use to introduce Ali to readers?
5. Compare and contrast Ali's family life to Noodles' and Needles' family life. Create a Venn diagram to help you list the similarities and differences.
6. In the opening chapters, the author uses the literary device called foreshadowing to hint at what is to come in the novel. Find two examples of foreshadowing in the beginning chapters. What is the author insinuating will happen?
7. Why do so many characters in the novel have nicknames? Explain how Ali, Needles, and Noodles get their nicknames. What effect does this have on each of the characters?
8. How does Noodles treat Needles? How is his treatment of Needles different from the way the neighborhood treats him?
9. Analyze Doris's decision to give knitting needles to Needles. Explain whether you think it was a good or bad idea.
10. How does the author's choice to include the story about the big guy sitting down to knit with the ladies in KnitWit make knitting seem more appropriate for Noodles? What was the author's purpose of including this detail?
11. How does Ali know that Noodles is not really a tough dude?
12. What happened to Ali's father? Where is he now? How does Ali feel toward his father?
13. Who is Malloy? How does Malloy feel about fighting? Would Malloy still have trained Ali if Ali said he was mad at his father? How do you know?
14. What is the relationship between Noodles and Needles and their mother? What type of person is she? What inferences can be made about her character?
15. Who stood up for Noodles to go to the party? Why does this person want Noodles to attend the party?
16. What is the significance of the barbershop incident? How does the relationship between Ali and Noodles start to change after this incident? How does Ali's mom feel about Ali being friends with Noodles? What does Noodles do at the barbershop that demonstrates his true character? What kind of kid is he?
17. What is Brother's point of view of society? How does Brother's character affect the reader's perception of Bed-Stuy? How does Brother's character add to the conflict within the setting?

18. In Chapter 6, Ali says, “There was no way for us to get it unless we did something crazy, which I wasn’t down for. Noodles, on the other hand, as usual, was all about pulling a caper.” What does it mean to be “pulling a caper”? What literary device is the author using?

19. How does the author help the reader relate to the characters in the novel? How does the author add to the character’s authenticity? Explain by using specific quotes from the novel to support your argument.

20. What is the overall impact the author’s word choice has on the novel? How does the word choice affect the tone? What is the tone of the novel?

21. Throughout Chapter 9, Ali keeps referring to his shoes. How important is it to Ali to keep them clean? Why do you think the shoes are so important?

22. Examine the minor character roles in the novel, such as Ms. Brenda, Malloy, Brother, and Black. How do their characters impact the novel? How does the author utilize minor characters to develop the themes throughout the novel? Explain the themes.

23. How does Noodles react when he is under pressure? Does his behavior influence Ali’s character?

24. How sympathetic is Ali toward Noodles when they get back from the party? How do you feel toward Noodles?

25. In Chapter 10, Ali says that in his neighborhood his word is his bond. What are some other examples of neighborhood codes of honor? What does this say about the neighborhood? How does this impact the mood of the novel?

26. In Chapter 10, we find out why Noodles is really mad at Needles. Do you think he has a valid reason to be mad at him? Does this realization help develop a major theme throughout the novel?

27. How is the conflict in the novel resolved? Was the resolution predictable?

Post-Reading Activities

1. How is Noodles a product of his society? Contemplate the historical and political aspects of his neighborhood. How could the environment shape his beliefs and behaviors? How do those beliefs and behaviors shape his character? Write a reflection piece on how Noodles could change his behavior and beliefs to ultimately change his future. What specific actions could he do to alter his future?

2. How do the male characters in the novel help the reader to see the harsh reality that young black men face in our society? How do the different perspectives of each male character help the reader to see the struggle of the young black male?

3. Have students research gentrification and the impact it has on the neighborhoods in New York. What neighborhoods are being affected and why? What is the big debate about? Why are some people for gentrification while others are completely against it? What elements and/or examples in the novel allude to the process of gentrification and its effect on the neighborhood people? Using specific examples from the novel and the student's research have students create a PowerPoint presentation on the impact of gentrification and the consequences it has on the neighborhoods.

This guide was written by Michelle Carson, Reading Teacher, Reading Endorsed, Palm Beach Central High School, FL.

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