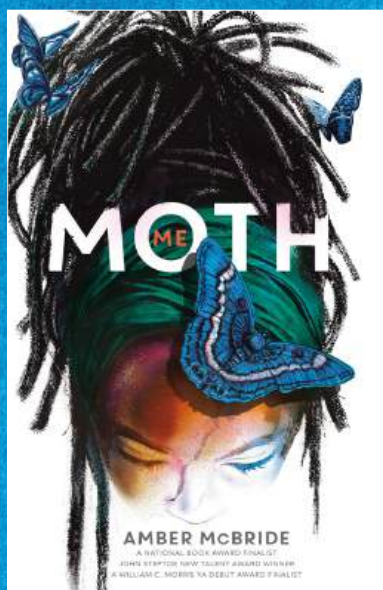
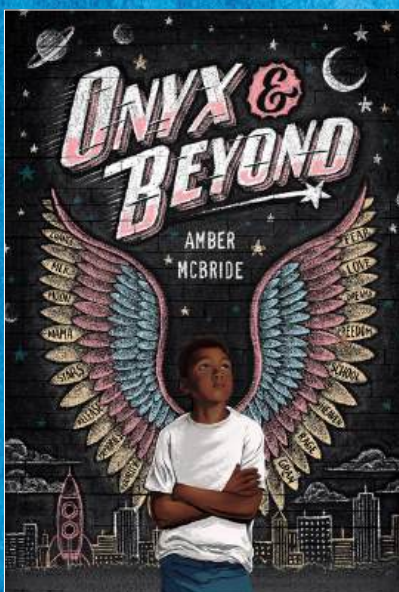


# AN EDUCATOR'S GUIDE TO THE NOVELS OF AMBER MCBRIDE

Explore themes of identity and empowerment, community, spirituality, love, and more through middle grade and young adult stories by an award-winning author.





# AMBER MCBRIDE

## EDUCATORS GUIDE'S



**AMBER MCBRIDE**'s stories will captivate the heart, mind, and spirit. If you are a careful reader, you will find that all of her works are connected, with small Easter eggs hidden in the pages of each title, giving glimpses of what you'll discover when you read them all. Fans of dystopias will learn in *Gone Wolf* about the many ways history repeats itself and the price young people pay when we build society on a faulty foundation. If you are a middle-grade reader or educator exploring the Civil Rights Movement through the eyes of a young boy whose life circumstances necessitate maturity beyond his years, you'll find an accessible story told by a relatable character in *Onyx & Beyond*. *We Are All So Good at Smiling* takes readers on a heroic and haunting journey to the heart of a forest in order to process pain and discover the answer to whether any of us can ever truly heal from trauma. Readers and educators alike will read *Me (Moth)* over and over, each time discovering new layers of symbolism and meticulously crafted language that haunts as it heals. In *The*

*Leaving Room*, readers will explore the connection between love and loss and how to find your voice even when living in the liminal space between life and death. Each story offers a bridge to understanding how and why humans use storytelling to heal.

Told through carefully constructed poetry and prose, McBride's works, though written for young readers, explore themes that are relevant to readers of every age. As a literacy teacher and teacher of educators, I first fell in love with *Me (Moth)* and having read it several times, I find something new to appreciate and explore each time. If it helps, think of this guide as an opportunity to explore each of McBride's works individually or read them as a body of work collectively. This guide will help you understand key themes, provide background information, and give guidance for how you might approach teaching with these titles. However, it is by no means exhaustive, and the librarian in me would be remiss if I didn't remind you that the best teachers are always scholars first, continuing to seek information where questions remain. Prepare readers to explore these novels with the following pre-reading questions:

1. What are McBride's beliefs about storytelling and spirituality?
2. What does she say about mental illness and healing?
3. What are some of her ideas about collective memory and fantasy?
4. What can you infer about the importance of symbolism from the covers of these books?
5. What connections can you make between McBride's identity and life experiences and those of her characters by reading summaries of each title?

**BONUS:** As you read, remember to keep track of the repeated references to symbols, characters, and events that are keys to decoding the thematic DNA linking stories. I think you'll find the echoes you uncover to be dreamlike. Just as fragments of the real world appear in our dreams, worlds are created when stories are written about them. Enjoy exploring these worlds.



Yours sincerely,  
Julia E. Torres (Reader/Teacher)



# CONTENTS

## OVERARCHING THEMES: THEMES THAT APPEAR IN ALL TEXTS OR “THEMATIC DNA”

**Loss, Grief, and Healing** is a vehicle for change in each book. The central character will typically undergo a traumatic loss and the book will start shortly after the loss has occurred so readers understand that story, memory, and fantasy are all part of the healing process and the character’s identity formation.

**The Power of Storytelling** is a double framing in that each of the works is either a prose novel or a novel in verse that contains one or more stories in the form of stream of consciousness, monologues, dialogues, poems, letters, flashcards, and more.

**State of Mental Health** features in every story as characters work through trauma and depression caused by their environment or specific events. Their journeys toward healing take them through dreamlike states and fantasy worlds, crossing the boundary between what is real and what is imagined.

**Spirituality** are prominent features of the thematic DNA that appears in every text. Hoodoo is an African American folk-magic practice that is influenced by West African spiritual traditions, indigenous herbalism, and ancestral veneration. It was hidden by enslaved people by using Christianity as a cover. Native American spirituality is featured prominently in *Me (Moth)* but each novel carries whispers of ancestral wisdom in the form of West African spiritual teachings and beliefs blended with Christianity. The result is a uniquely African American cultural practice.

**Folklore and Escapism** are the means through which characters escape reality and deal with pain. The fantasies often include characters from African, Native American, and European folklore.

**Memory** appears in every story either as a catalyst for transformation or a way that individuals work through their trauma. Some characters find transformation in uncovering their memories so that they can release pain and remain with the positive aspects of their relationships and experiences.

**Relationships** are a necessary part of the healing process for all characters. Sometimes the relationships are just with one person, sometimes they are with members of a community, and often they involve friendships, but they always transform the protagonist and serve as a force for good.

**Identity** formation is always impacted by grief, loss, and traumatic experiences. Each character experiences the formation and sometimes destruction of an identity as their narratives progress.

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## TITLE-SPECIFIC THEMES

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### GONE WOLF

- Generational Trauma and Systemic Racism
- Identity and Empowerment
- The Power of Storytelling
- Resistance and Liberation

### ONYX & BEYOND

- Family, Caregiving, and Responsibility
- Community and Support
- Hopes and Dreams

### WE ARE ALL SO GOOD AT SMILING

- Spirituality and Magic
- Folklore and Escapism
- Nature Friendship

### ME (MOTH)

- Romantic Love
- Travel
- Family

### THE LEAVING ROOM

- Silence and Expression
- Death
- Time
- Visibility/Invisibility



# GONE WOLF EDUCATOR GUIDE

## PRE-READING ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

1. Is it possible to eliminate prejudice and hatred in a diverse society?
2. How does media influence human behavior and interactions?
3. Does society support or reject people who “go wolf”?

## THEMES

### THEMATIC DNA

Loss, Grief, and Healing • The Power of Storytelling  
State of Mental Health • Spirituality and Magic • Folklore and Escapism  
Memory • Relationships • Identity

### TEXT DEPENDENT

#### Generational Trauma and Systemic Racism

Imogen struggles with and overcomes the psychological violence inflicted on her by the government, which utilizes systemic racism and indoctrination to program her thinking. *Look for the way that Imogen describes herself and others and how she is described by others.*

#### GRIEF AND HEALING

Imogen experiences grief at different times and in various ways throughout the course of the novel. At the end, readers understand her world to be both a coping mechanism and a vehicle for her evolution. *Look for moments when Imogen experiences direct loss or refers to a prior loss and how she processes grief.*

#### IDENTITY AND EMPOWERMENT

In a dystopian stratified society, individual identity is often stripped away and replaced with a systemically created one. *Look for the identities that are assigned to people and those they take on for themselves. Also, the names individuals are given and those they choose for themselves.*

#### THE POWER OF STORYTELLING

*Gone Wolf* has many stories within the framing of the principal narrative, as is characteristic of McBride’s writing style. Each story serves a purpose and the stories within the story build upon one another in order to create an augmented experience for the reader. *Look for stories told through the alternative framing in the form of letters, Bible Belt flashcards, Black History for Kids, etc.*

#### RESISTANCE AND LIBERATION

“Going wolf” has many meanings, but an essential takeaway is that resistance will always be necessary to achieve lasting liberation. *Look for Imogen’s thinking about resistance and liberation and the characters who teach her about the true meaning of both concepts.*

# CRAFT ANALYSIS

**Color Symbolism:** *Gone Wolf* has color symbolism throughout. Rather than determining the colors in advance, discuss with readers what the following colors symbolize in the wider world, then seek evidence from the text to support your thinking:

**Color Symbolism:** *Gone Wolf* has color symbolism throughout. Rather than determining the colors in advance, discuss with readers what the following colors symbolize in the wider world, then seek evidence from the text to support your thinking:

***Black • White • Blue***

**Allusion:** Allusion plays a big role in understanding *Gone Wolf*. Young readers may not have the background knowledge required to understand every instance of allusion, and that is okay. The Author's Note in the back of the book will provide some important information for readers to do additional research.

**Allegory:** *Gone Wolf* is an allegorical tale and, as in many of McBride's works, the characters' names offer deeper clues to their traits and sometimes to their future fate. This is known as:

- Symbolic or allegorical naming
- Nominative determinism (when the name offers clues to a character's future fate)
- Phonetic punning (when a pun relies on the way a name sounds: for example, *Imogen imagines*)

Offer readers examples of other allegorical tales where characters, events, ideas, and places represent abstract concepts in order to provide a framework for understanding allegory. Examples include *The Chronicles of Narnia*, *The Little Prince*, *The Tortoise and the Hare*, *The Ant and the Grasshopper*, *The Monkey King*, *Anansi*, and *The Chief's Daughter*.

Keep in mind that allegorical tales and fables are usually connected to the cultures that create them. Therefore, we cannot assume that readers with ties outside of the Western world will be familiar with Western allegorical tales.

**Dystopia:** Help readers identify the following elements of dystopian fiction as they appear in *Gone Wolf* by creating a chart or graphic organizer to track text evidence aligning with some or all of the following elements:

- Oppressive government
- Loss of Individual freedom
- Propaganda and thought control
- Surveillance
- Dehumanization
- Advanced but misused technology
- Environmental decay
- Illusions of utopian society (discuss the idea of utopia)
- Class stratification
- Rebellion or resistance
- Moral or philosophical messages
- Widespread physical or psychological illness

Build on prior knowledge by brainstorming a list of other dystopian movies or books readers have experienced or know about.

**Poetic Devices:** McBride is a poet and uses poetic devices in all of her novels in verse, but also in her prose. Look for the following to occur throughout each of her works:

|   |   |
|---|---|
| <b>SOUND DEVICES</b>                        | Alliteration • Assonance • Consonance<br>Onomatopoeia • Rhyme/Meter |
| <b>FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE</b>                  | Simile • Metaphor • Personification<br>Hyperbole • Symbolism        |
| <b>STRUCTURAL AND MEANING-BASED DEVICES</b> | Imagery • Enjambment<br>Juxtaposition • Repetition • Irony          |
| <b>BONUS WORDPLAY</b>                       | Allusion • Pun  |

## OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

**Education and the Bible Boot Learning Flashcards:** Use a two-column note tracker or online whiteboard tool to keep track of information communicated in the Bible Boot flashcards. Establish a common framework for understanding the text by:

1. Discussing education as a form of indoctrination and a way society teaches young people to accept an established status quo.
2. Discuss the Bible Belt in the United States, both its geographic and social constructs.
3. Discuss conservative versus liberal thinking and the fact that it exists in every society. To do this, you might draw a Likert scale and present two opposing views, and briefly examine the ways that upbringing and family environment influence thinking and behavior.

**Numerology** is the belief that numbers have special meaning and can influence people's lives. In all of McBride's books, numbers have a subtle significance that can be more deeply understood by having a basic understanding of the science of numbers. *For example, the number eleven is considered a "master number" and indicates an intuitive leader or spiritual messenger. It is symbolic of awakening or enlightenment and often indicative of a person with visionary goals.*

**Chapter Headings:** Each chapter heading provides short contextual clues not only to what the chapter will be about but also to any connection a specific chapter has to a subplot or backstory. Pay attention to chapter headings by listing them separately and making inferences about their connections to one another and the larger story.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Consider the quote, "An Overseer is a person who teaches you." Examine the compound word over + seer. Historically and today, is an overseer a person who teaches? If so, how? What else do they do? Who are the overseers in your world? How are psychological and physical slavery the same? How are they different? Why do we no longer refer to people as "slaves" but as "enslaved persons" instead?
  - Educator Resource: ['Slave' or 'enslaved'?: NPR Public Editor](https://www.npr.org/2015/05/15/408111111/slave-or-enslaved/) (bit.ly/abguide1)
2. How does isolation impact Inmate Eleven's mental health? How do Ira and Larkin support her? What physical supports exist in your world?
3. What is the significance of all the wolves being named Till? What does this teach readers about the term "going wolf"?
4. Why do humans label one another? What purpose does labeling serve?
5. Why is it important to have leaders like Mr. King who exist in opposition to those like President Tuba?

6. What is the connection between the media and mass hysteria?
7. What does Imogen learn about storytelling and the connection between real and imagined truths?
8. What purpose does it serve when a character physically dies in *Gone Wolf*?
9. Do you believe “going wolf” can trigger a spiritual rebirth?
10. Bonus: What does Imogen notice about moths, butterflies, and Whimsy? How does this connect to McBride’s other books?

## ACTIVITIES

### GRADES 6–8

- A. Create a mini-poster for a character in *Gone Wolf*. In the top left corner, draw what you imagine they look like. In the bottom left corner, write your favorite quote from them. In the bottom right corner, identify three problems they face. In the top right corner, identify three of your favorite character traits.
- B. Write a cycle of three poems using any of the poetic devices studied while reading *Gone Wolf*. The only requirement for a poetry cycle is that the poems must be connected. Consider writing a poetry cycle covering three periods of time, or with poems connected by theme. Consider using some of Imogen’s poems for inspiration.

### GRADES 9–12

- A. Create a journal, podcast, or YouTube show where you talk about current events using a real or imagined format. For example, you can create a news bulletin for the citizens of an imaginary country modeled after the one where you live. Use the RAFT format to help plan your news bulletin and consider adding in social commentary. ([bit.ly/abguide2](http://bit.ly/abguide2))
- B. Write an open letter to the citizens of any place, real or imagined, exposing your view of a widely accepted truth they should consider and perhaps resist. Model your letter after those in *Gone Wolf* written by Truth Tubman or Martin King. ([bit.ly/abguide3](http://bit.ly/abguide3))

## STANDARDS ALIGNMENT

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.6-12.2 | CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.6-12.4 | CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.6-12.5 | CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.6-12.3  
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.6-12.6 | CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.6-12.5



# EDUCATOR GUIDE

# ONYX & BEYOND

## PRE-READING ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

1. How can imagination and ambition help people process difficult situations?
2. What happens when the “rules” of caregiving are reversed? For example, a caregiver needs to be taken care of.
3. How can having community and individual hopes and dreams help us navigate tough times?

## THEMES

### THEMATIC DNA

Loss, Grief, and Healing • The Power of Storytelling • State of Mental Health • Spirituality and Magic  
Fantasy and Escapism • Memory • Relationships • Identity

## TEXT DEPENDENT

### FAMILY, CAREGIVING, AND RESPONSIBILITY

At the age of twelve, Onyx becomes a caregiver for his mother. Through this role reversal, he attempts to hold on to as much of his childhood as possible while trying to protect his mother from institutionalization and the effects of a society that doesn't do the best job caring for those experiencing cognitive decline. Look for moments when Onyx talks about his feelings regarding his responsibilities and the love he has for his mother.

### COLLECTIVE GRIEF AND LOSS

The death of Onyx's grandmother has an impact on him in that his mother no longer has a caregiver and he no longer has a safety net. This loss, coupled with the national grief in the wake of Dr. King's assassination, has a profound impact on him as he experiences the aftermath and learns to rebuild himself and reshape his identity. Look for descriptions of feelings, post-traumatic events, and images associated with processing loss.

### COMMUNITY AND SUPPORT

Initially, Onyx navigates all the change around him on his own. Throughout the novel, he learns about the importance of letting community share his trials and tribulations. Look for moments when Onyx leans on extended family and others around him for support and it turns out to be a good idea to do so.

### HOPES AND DREAMS

Onyx holds on to his dream of becoming an astronaut throughout the book. He also believes in the power of the geophysical world (crystals and heavenly bodies like the moon) to impact his life and potentially help heal his mother. Look for descriptions of hopes, dreams, and moments when *Onyx retreats into fantasies about his future.*



# CRAFT ANALYSIS

## ALLEGORY • ALLUSION

**Historical Framing:** Black Americans experienced a lot of social unrest and change in the 1960s and '70s. Onyx's journey is directly connected to the larger story of social change during this period. *Look for key moments connected to the Civil Rights Movement and scenes where Onyx has direct or indirect (through the news or television) experience with racial injustice.*

**Narrative Structure:** The verse structure in *Onyx & Beyond* mirrors Onyx's emotional journey. Sometimes dialogue is set apart, sometimes it is connected to a verse. The poems also vary in shape and typography, mirroring Onyx's emotional and mental states. *Look for the use of white space and fragmented, dreamlike language, nonlinear sequences, and monologues.*

**Symbolism:** Onyx is named after a protective stone and the motif of protection recurs throughout the novel as he alternates between needing protection and feeling responsible for providing it. *Look for other motifs and symbols like mirrors, wings, and masks that provide subtle clues for the reader about the evolution of his character.*

## OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

**The Myth of Icarus:** *Onyx & Beyond* shares close parallels to the Greco-Roman myth of Icarus. Share the story with readers and then brainstorm about how the two stories connect with respect to ambition, imagination, longing for escape, and earthly limitations.

- Consider using the following journal prompt or chart as a guide: *Both Icarus and Onyx dream of flying beyond their worlds. How do their stories show the power—and dangers—of dreaming big? What makes Onyx's journey and outcome different?*

| ELEMENT              | ONYX   | ICARUS  |
|----------------------|--|---|
| Dream/Goal           | To become an astronaut to find a cure for his mother's dementia.                 |   |
| Symbol of Aspiration |  | The sky and sun, which represent freedom, ambition, and glory.  |
| Emotional Motivation | Love for his mother and grief as well as a feeling of responsibility.            |   |
| Obstacle/Danger      |  | The sun's heat and his own resistance to listening to warnings. |
| Outcome              | Dreams are powerful, but human support and connection are necessary to survival. |   |

# DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- **Part 1: New Moon, 1968**

- **Pre-reading:** Do you or someone you know have a collection? What is it you or that person collect and why? If you don't have a collection, what is something you would want to collect? Why?
- **Post-reading:** What do we learn about Onyx in the opening part of the book? What stood out to you about him? Why did it stand out?

★ Part 1 Kahoot ([bit.ly/abguide4](https://bit.ly/abguide4))

- **Part 2: Waxing Crescent Moon, 1970**

- **Pre-reading:** What is your nickname? How did you get it? Do you like your nickname?
- **Post-reading:** Onyx talks about several challenges he is facing. What do you think is the biggest challenge he is currently dealing with? Why is it the biggest?

★ Part 2 Kahoot ([bit.ly/abguide5](https://bit.ly/abguide5))

- **Part 3: First Quarter Moon, 1970**

- **Pre-reading:** Are you good at keeping secrets? Do you think it is important to keep secrets? Why or why not?
- **Post-reading:** Onyx continues to talk about his "wings." What does Onyx mean by his wings? Why do you think he keeps talking about them? What significance do they hold in his life?

★ Part 3 Kahoot ([bit.ly/abguide6](https://bit.ly/abguide6))

- **Part 4: Waxing Gibbous Moon, 1970**

- **Pre-reading:** Describe a time you got into a fight (physical or verbal) with a friend or former friend. What was the fight about? Did you and the other person stay friends after?
- **Post-reading:** Onyx talks a lot about his relationships with different people in his life. Pick one of the following characters and describe Onyx's relationship with them: Mama, Gran, or Pops. What significance does the person hold in Onyx's life?

★ Part 4 Kahoot ([bit.ly/abguide7](https://bit.ly/abguide7))

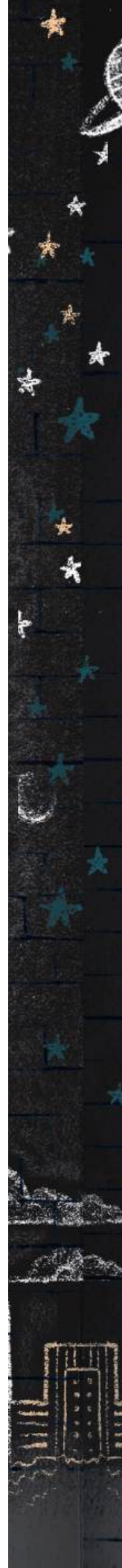
- **Part 5: Full Moon, 1970**

- **Pre-reading:** Describe a time you tried to do something but failed at it or weren't able to do it. It could be something related to school, sports, video games, your personal life, etc. How did you feel when you weren't able to do it?
- **Post-reading:** At the end of the section, Onyx tries to "fly" from his window but fails (pages 160 to 162). Why did he try to fly? Why is this moment significant for him?

★ Part 5 Kahoot ([bit.ly/abguide8](https://bit.ly/abguide8))

- **Part 6: Waning Gibbous Moon, 1970**

- **Pre-reading:** Describe a time you tried to secretly do something but got caught. What did you try to do? How did you feel when you got caught?
- **Post-reading:** The section ends with Onyx asking, "Now what will happen to Mama?" Why does Onyx think he has failed his mother? Do you think he has failed his mother? What would you do if you were in Onyx's situation?



★ Part 6 Kahoot ([bit.ly/abguide9](https://bit.ly/abguide9))

● **Parts 7–9: Third Quarter Moon, Waxing Crescent Moon, and New Moon Again**

- **Pre-reading:** Describe a time your family helped you with something. What did they help you with? How did it make you feel?
- **Post-reading:** Onyx says, “I can fly. I can do anything.” Why does he now believe he can fly? Why is this moment significant for him? Do you believe Onyx is in a better situation now?

★ Part 7–9 Kahoot ([bit.ly/abguide10](https://bit.ly/abguide10))

## ACTIVITIES

### GRADES 6–8

- A. Find a picture of yourself and, digitally or on paper, add wings. On each feather (make sure you have at least six on each side) write words that describe who you are and who you want to be. Then record a short voice note explaining your choice of words and what they mean.

Consider including:

- A family member who helps you find success
- A friend who helps you find success
- A dream you have for your future

- B. Onyx keeps a “super secret” journal where he shares stories, speaks to his relatives, and confesses secrets. Write a “super secret” journal entry to yourself in the same style as Onyx.

### GRADES 9–12

- A. Write letters from one character to another: Onyx, his mother, a member of his support circle, or even his grandmother (watching over everyone from beyond this life). Include emotional reactions to historical or other impactful events to show you understand each character’s internal struggles, motivations, conflicts, and how they might change over time.
- B. Design a vision board capturing your hopes, goals, and dreams, or Onyx’s. You might use Pinterest, Google Slides, or another digital image annotation tool like Thinglink. Include literal elements as well as figurative or symbolic items and explain them in your annotations or with captions or text boxes. Consider including at least one quote from the book as well as your own words of wisdom.

## STANDARDS ALIGNMENT

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.6-12.1 | CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.6-12.2 | CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.6-12.3  
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.6-12.4 | CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.6-12.5 | CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.6-12.6 | CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.6-12.3

A portion of this *Onyx & Beyond* teacher’s guide was written by Wyatt Oroke (Mr.O), a nationally recognized middle school English teacher in Baltimore City. Mr. O was named Baltimore City Teacher of the Year in 2020, Maryland State Teacher of the Year in 2021, and was a two time featured guest on the Ellen DeGeneres Show.

# WE ARE ALL SO GOOD AT SMILING EDUCATOR GUIDE

## PRE-READING ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

1. Why do people sometimes outwardly pretend to feel differently than they do in order to mask their true reactions or feelings?
2. What are some cultural norms and values taught through folktales, fairy tales, and fables?
3. How and why do humans use stories involving folklore to help process emotional pain?

## THEMES



### THEMATIC DNA

Loss, Grief, and Healing • The Power of Storytelling • Relationships • Identity

### TEXT DEPENDENT

#### Mental Health

Whimsy struggles with suicidal ideation and depression in the wake of experiencing the traumatic death of her older brother. *Look for ways that Whimsy processes the various stages of this loss and refers to internal and external mental health supports.*

#### Spirituality and Magic

McBride references Hoodoo and African spiritual traditions throughout all of her works. *Look for references to Hoodoo practices and figures as well as central characters using Hoodoo practices to build bridges between the natural and spiritual worlds.* ([bit.ly/abguide11](https://bit.ly/abguide11))

- Educator Resource: [Black Magic Matters: Hoodoo as Ancestral Religion](https://bit.ly/abguide12) ([bit.ly/abguide12](https://bit.ly/abguide12))

#### Folklore and Escapism

In all of McBride's books, characters use fantasy as a form of escapism and a way to retreat from a world that is tough to navigate or rife with negative experiences, such as racial trauma or a traumatic event. *Look for fantastic characters and visual cues that a character has retreated into their imagined world.*

#### Nature

Nature is an important part of African and African American spiritual traditions. In *We Are All So Good at Smiling*, look for *the garden, forest, and trees as symbols for different aspects of Whimsy's healing journey.*

#### Memory

Another important theme is memory because not only does Whimsy have repressed memories of a traumatic event; she has shared memories with those closest to her and each of them remembers places, people, and events slightly differently. Understanding cultural memory is an important part of being able to decode stories involving figures from African folklore. *Look for Whimsy's descriptions of certain recurring places and dreams or nightmares.*

## Friendship

Whimsy has the help of friends in navigating through so much of her trauma. In all of McBride's books, community and those we love are a force to help navigate troubled times and difficult situations. *Look for characters with deep friendships and the role their relationships play in helping them heal.*

# CRAFT ANALYSIS



## ALLUSION

## POETIC DEVICES

In *We Are All So Good at Smiling*, readers should pay close attention to form, particularly italics, lists, enjambment, and the arrangement of stanzas on the page. Symbolic characters and imagery will also stand out.

**Personification** is a unique part of *We Are All So Good at Smiling*. The personification of emotions, for example *Sorrow*, mirrors anthropomorphism found in many African folktales and symbolic figures from many European cultures.

# OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

**Fairy Tales, Fables, and Folktales** exist in every culture and though readers may not be familiar with African folktales or Grimm's fairy tales, an overview of the difference between these genres and the purpose for each will help readers understand why McBride chose to frame the story by combining elements in the way she did.

## DEFINITIONS

**Fairy tales** are often rooted in European storytelling traditions and present a clear battle between good and evil. They involve mythical or fantastical creatures, archetypal characters, and magic. A moral is often implied but not directly stated.

**Fables** teach a specific moral or lesson and are usually not long. They feature anthropomorphism and a simple plot in which the moral is revealed at the end.

**Folktales** are traditional stories passed down through generations within a culture and used to teach customs or preserve history. Everyday people are the principal characters who reflect the values of the culture from which the tale originates. Sometimes, magic and the supernatural are present, but not always.

- Educator Resource: Black Folktales by Julius Lester ([bit.ly/abguide13](https://bit.ly/abguide13))

## The Heroic Cycle

# DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What do you know about Fae? Have you heard of their world or their role across cultures?
2. Do you know any real people who share characteristics with fantasy characters from folktales or fairy tales?
3. What are some of Whimsy's fears? How do you know what they are?
4. How can you tell who is "talking" in each poem? What are the clues that a particular character is sharing their voice or thoughts?
5. How does Whimsy see herself? How do those in her community see her? Do people's views and opinions of us influence the way we see ourselves?
6. What coping mechanisms does Whimsy have for navigating her depression?
7. How does Faerry act as a **foil** and a mirror for Whimsy? How is he an ally as she travels her heroic cycle?
  - Educator Resource: [Rewriting the "hero's journey" to fit a feminine narrative—Nieman Storyboard](https://bit.ly/abguide14) ([bit.ly/abguide14](https://bit.ly/abguide14))
8. Consider memory and the way that people can experience the same event but remember it very differently. Discuss

a time when this was relevant to your life.

9. What options do teenagers have to help them cope when they experience tremendous loss or traumatic events?
10. Who is one person in your life, real or fantasy, who has helped you navigate loss? What are some of their characteristics?

## ACTIVITIES



### GRADES 6–8

- A. Research some of the mythical figures mentioned in the poem “Group Therapy.” Choose one and create a “body biography” to teach others about them as a character. What is their role in their original myth? Do they cross cultural boundaries? Sometimes, a character like Anansi the Trickster, can be found in multiple other cultures by a different name. Use your resources to look for cross-cultural similar characters and include information about the other character names in your bio.
- B. Write two poems capturing an event from two different perspectives. One poem should describe what actually happened. One should describe a fantasy or imagined version of the same event. *Bonus: Weave the two together into one poem with the real events in one font and the imagined events italicized or in a different font. Use the poems “Story One: What the Children Saw” (page 247) and “Story Two: What the Parents Saw” (page 250) if you need a model.*

### GRADES 9–12

- A. The candy house in the forest is a symbol that McBride uses to describe a place that entices but is not exactly what it seems and actually turns out to be harmful or dangerous. Identify one danger young people face that seems appealing but can actually be harmful. Then create a symbol for it and write a short fable or folktale about it. Consider the following topics:
  - Substance use
  - Social media
  - Fast food
  - Consumerism
- B. Write a poem in which an emotion is personified, for example *Sorrow*. Include mannerisms, thoughts, or behaviors that the emotion might have as well as a physical description that matches what they look like. *Bonus: Include poetic devices and play with form through creative use of stanzas and the arrangement of words on the page. Use “The House Sorrow Built” and “Meeting Sorrow Again” as models.*



## STANDARDS ALIGNMENT

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CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.6-12.7 • CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.6-12.9

## PRE-READING ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

1. How can survivor's guilt impede healing from trauma or loss?
2. How is new love like medicine?
3. How can travel or a change of environment transform a person?

## THEMES

### THEMATIC DNA

Loss, Grief, and Healing • The Power of Storytelling • State of Mental Health

Spirituality and Magic • Folklore and Escapism • Memory • Relationships Identity

### TEXT DEPENDENT

**Romantic Love** plays a pivotal role in the way Moth perceives the world and experiences the main relationship she has, with Sani. Her other relationships, primarily with her grandfather but also with her other family members, evoke feelings of love, but none so strong as the romantic feelings she has. *Look for descriptions of her evolving feelings for Sani and his for her as well as phrases that describe their soulmate connection.*

**Travel** is the way that Moth and Sani bond and connect with each other and the way that they discover their shared cultural heritage. *Look for the places they visit and what they do in each place, as well as the descriptions of how the places are part of a larger story of self-discovery.*

**Family** and memories about what happened to them are a key component of Moth's transformation. The moments when she remembers the accident evolve as she learns to manage her survivor's guilt and shifting feelings of loneliness and isolation. *Look for Sani's relationship with his family and Moth's connection to her grandfather and the various descriptions of family members.*

## CRAFT ANALYSIS

**Poetic Structure:** The novel makes use of line breaks, white space, and fragmentation to mimic Moth's fragmented state of mind. *Look closely at the arrangement of words on each page and the uses of italics and enjambment.*

**Voice:** Moth's voice blends with Sani's, mirroring their connection and blurring the line between thought, memory, and dreamlike states that clue readers into her state of mind. *Look for poems where Moth retreats into memory or describes those around her as well as those where she meditates on the connection between her inner thoughts, lived experiences and the natural world.*

**Nonlinear Framing:** The novel's use of nonlinear framing offers readers the opportunity to delve into the deeper moments of vulnerability and emotional reveries Moth explores as she's transforming. Rereading is strongly suggested. *Look for poems that uncover Moth's mental journey and thoughts about spirituality, memories of the past, or her emotional journey with Sani.*

**Repetition:** The same images, symbols, motifs, and sound devices are used repeatedly throughout the book to reinforce emotional impact and to mimic the cyclical nature of the grief cycle. *Look for the repetition of images and motifs. Bonus: Look for the repetition of song lyrics.*

- Educator Resource: *ME (MOTH)* | Amber McBride & Mahogany L. Browne ([bit.ly/abguide15](https://bit.ly/abguide15))

# OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

**Duality:** Moth describes in several poems what her name means and that she identifies more with the moth that rules the night and leaves someone a little bit dirty than she does with a butterfly that rules the day. *Look for scenes with descriptions of light and dark, night and day, moths and butterflies, the living and the dead.*

**Identity, Invisibility, and Belonging:** All three are key considerations in that both Sani (a Navajo boy) and Moth (a Black girl) feel like nobody sees them. Systemic erasure as well as cultural and emotional disconnection contribute to this. *Look for poems that include descriptions of feeling ignored or disconnected from others around them—and of wanting to be seen.*

**Music:** Road-trip songs are woven throughout the novel and each poem. *Look for italicized lyrics and the road-trip playlist at the end of the book. Bonus: Listen to the songs on the list and make one of your own that matches a particular mood or season from your life.*

**Transformation:** As they transform, something happens to the way each character sees themselves and each other. *Look for the moth as an extended metaphor for transformation and a motif as Moth describes being buried in the earth and reborn.*

**Soul Connections:** Moth’s deepest relationships transcend the physical world. She also mentions the red string of fate or destiny that she believes connects her to Sani. *Look for descriptions of her grandfather and other family members and descriptions of her connection to Sani. Compare them to her descriptions of her interactions with others.* ([bit.ly/abguide16](https://bit.ly/abguide16))

# DISCUSSION QUESTIONS



1. Who gave Moth her name and what does it mean both literally and figuratively?
2. What is the significance of hair in many Native American cultures and traditions?
3. Who is Moth’s spiritual guide and how does the text indicate his presence?
4. What does Moth feel guilty about and why do you think she feels guilty?
5. What’s unique about the black witch moth and how is the name of this particular type of moth related to the character Moth?
6. How are the worlds of the Navajo symbolic of the stages of Moth’s journey to understanding herself?
7. What connections do you see between Hoodoo and Navajo spiritualism?
8. How are Sani’s and Moth’s experiences with intergenerational trauma mirrored in the poems “Things My Grandfather Taught Me About the South” and “Things Sani Knows About the South”? Why might it be important that Moth’s knowledge came from her grandfather and Sani’s is firsthand?
9. What ability does Sani have that he explains at Fort Smith?
10. Is the connection between Sani and Moth a blessing or a curse?

# ACTIVITIES



## GRADES 6–8

- A. Make your own list of rules. Model it after Moth’s Rules (page 11) and consider including varied syntax and punctuation in order to differentiate the items and to emphasize the ones that are most impactful.
- B. Use Google Maps to create an annotated map of the places Moth and Sani travel. Identify poems that align with each stop in their journey (page 93) and analyze the connection between what they intended to experience and what actually happened. Then make a map of a road trip that you would take and annotate it with what you would like to experience in those places. *Bonus: Consider writing a poem or two to accompany the map and that aligns with the most important features of each place.*

## GRADES 9–10

- A. Using an element from nature that is a metaphor for your life or a characteristic of yours, write a poem of definition like “Moths.” (pages 26-27) *Bonus: Include an allusion to history or mythology and play with the arrangement of words on the page. Include a description of a person or memory that was impactful in shaping your identity.*
- B. Sani and Moth connect through telling stories, traveling, and sharing music and their pain. Choose one form of connection you have with someone and write the story of how you found the connection in the form of at least three poems. You may choose to tell the story as a transition between seasons, the life stages of an insect or other creature, or any other cycle in nature.

### STANDARDS ALIGNMENT

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# THE LEAVING ROOM

## EDUCATOR GUIDE



### PRE-READING ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

1. What knowledge or beliefs do you hold about what happens after this life?
2. Do you believe love transcends the death experience?
3. What is the connection between memory, life, and death?

### THEMES

Thematic DNA • Loss, Grief, and Healing • State of Mental Health • The Power of Storytelling  
Spirituality and Magic • Folklore and Escapism • Memory • Relationships • Identity

### TEXT DEPENDENT

The novel includes poems with clear moments between **Silence and Expression** as characters explore their emotional spaces and navigate a physical space that may not be happening exactly as expected. *Look for blank spaces on the page and poems that don't include clear dialogue between characters but offer instead silent reflective moments.*

**Death** is a key theme for this narrative as characters either associate with or dissociate themselves from the idea of being living or dead or somewhere in between. *Look for moments when characters discuss *The Leaving Room* and their identities and relationships to each other.*

**Time** does not happen linearly in the narrative and characters travel back into the events of their lives through recipes and memories captured in memory jars. *Look for moments when memories surface and characters realize they are in a liminal space in order to process events or their own states of being or consciousness.*

**Love** is one of the forces that keeps characters tied not only to their mortal lives but also to their memories and to one another. *Look for different types of love and the ways characters show love through acts of service, physical expression, etc.*

**Identity** in *The Leaving Room* is explored as each character is introduced and through their relationships to one another. For example, Queer identity is explored through the relationship between Gospel and Melodee. *Look for moments when identity descriptors stand out and others where the characters and their relationships to each other reveal aspects of their identities.*

**Family** ties bind each character to their memories and to the events of their mortal lives but they also form a kind of found family as they learn to accept their circumstances and make peace with the rules and their pasts. *Look for recipes and memories the characters explore in conversation with one another and the figures they meet in *The Leaving Room*.*

### CRAFT ANALYSIS

Allusion

Allegory

**Nonlinear Storytelling and Liminal Space:** *The Leaving Room* creates a setting that is in between the living world and the world beyond. It is deliberately a play on "living room" where families live and learn and connect with one another. *Look for young people connecting with one another in a setting and poems that are full of symbolic imagery and sensory input.*



**Mixed Format:** The memory jars present a framing that gives readers the opportunity to explore the liminal space through small pieces of information provided about characters before reading about their thoughts and experiences. *Look for poems that offer collections of memories, sensory detail, and emotional responses simultaneously.*

**Stream of Consciousness:** Much of the novel’s narrative is told through poetry as reflective of the mental states Melodee (Maple, Suvi, Flora, Alaska, Dalia) and Gospel travel through as they process grief, loss, death, and what comes next. *Look for poems that describe thoughts and feelings through symbolic images and a thoughtful arrangement of words on the page.*

**Symbolism:** *The Leaving Room* is a symbol of the transitional time and space between life and death. The character names are additional symbols that provide clues to their roles in the narrative. Look for the deeper meaning behind characters’ names—for example, Melodee = music—then draw connections between their actions and relationships to other characters in order to understand the abstract ideas they represent.

## OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

**The Stages of Grief** are connected to the character journey into and out of *The Leaving Room*. They are part of each memory jar and are in the poem “Mirrors & Quakes.” (page 186) Readers should understand the cycle of grief and discuss what the characters in *The Leaving Room* might be grieving.

**Gospel:** Understanding the literal and connotative meanings of the word “gospel” (which means “good telling”) is important when reading African American literature. When enslaved people were brought to the Americas, the Christian gospel was used as a rationale for committing atrocities. As a way to cope and heal, Africans created a blend of Christianity with African spiritualism that took shape in a new gospel.

- Educator Resource: [Uncovering the Power of Hoodoo: An Ancestral Journey](https://bit.ly/abguide17) (bit.ly/abguide17)

**Keepers, Stayers, and Leavers:** Readers should use their resources to explore the ideas different cultures have about life, death, and the space in between and any potential figures they might meet in the afterlife. To better understand the role of Keeper, Stayer, and Leaver, collect text evidence using the following organizer.

|        | WHAT THEY DO | WHAT THEY SAY | WHAT I THINK |
|--------|--------------|---------------|--------------|
| KEEPER |              |               |              |
| STAYER |              |               |              |
| LEAVER |              |               |              |

- Educator Resource: [How Afterlife Traditions Help Us Process Death](https://bit.ly/abguide18) (bit.ly/abguide18)

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What are the rules of the leaving room?
2. What connections can you identify between a gospel and Gospel as a character?
3. Watch this [YouTube video about Methuselah](#). What connections can you make to *The Leaving Room*? Research the name “Methuselah” what other connections exist. (bit.ly/abguide19)
4. Read the poem “Young Spirits” (page 38) then discuss the differences that might exist between the death experience of young people and those who die when they are older, with more memories.

5. How does Gospel appear to Melodee? (pages 110-111) How does Melodee appear to Gospel? Why are the mirror images important and how does a poem in list form help characteristics stand out?
6. How are the stages of grief connected to the experiences each character has?
7. What connections can you find between the seasons and the events that happen in the book?
8. How does music impact the characters and their experiences with one another and their own mental state?
9. What's the relationship between the senses (sight, taste, smell) and the experiences the characters have?
10. How does love (romantic and family) connect the characters to their lives and assist with the process of leaving?

## ACTIVITIES

### Grades 6–8

- A. Create your own Mancala board from materials you have available and play according to the rules in “I Think Too Much...” (page 19) What connections can you identify between Mancala and the cycle of death and birth (and potentially rebirth)? *Bonus: Create a Mancala tournament with others in your community.*
  - Educator Resource: [Mastering the Art of Mancala](http://bit.ly/abguide20) (bit.ly/abguide20)
- B. Write a poem from a family recipe blended with some information about the person who originated the recipe. If your family is found family, that's great! Use the memory-jar format, which combines a recipe with a poem. Record yourself reading your recipe and poem and create a QR code that links to your voice note. Then put your poem inside a mason jar with fairy lights (for effect). If you're in a classroom, fill the room with memory jars and turn out the lights. Host a gallery walk where visitors can walk around listening to the contents of each memory jar. *Bonus: Make some of the recipes.*
  - Educator Resource: <https://www.speakpipe.com/> (bit.ly/abguide21)

### Grades 9–12

- A. Write a poem modeled after “Bickering is Very Human.” (page 46) Create a conversation between two characters. One should be a Keeper and one might be a person who has died, passed on, or a Leaver. Experiment with the arrangement of lines and space on the page as well as the inclusion of acrostic poetry.
- B. Make a visual map of *the Leaving Room* with lines from any of the poems combined with visual imagery to describe what you think happens there. Include both filled and empty space as well as important characters and symbolic objects. Include annotations to explain symbols and characters where appropriate.

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