



Teaching Notes & Resources

Key Stage 3/4

Themes: Race & Identity | History | PSHE

[Purchase Ghost Boys](#)



SCAN ME

Discussion Points

Ghost Boys by Jewell Parker Rhodes is a heartbreaking and powerful story about a black boy killed by a white police officer, drawing connections with real-life history.

This is a beautifully written, timely novel that features a diverse cast and strong African-American characters, and is a great choice for reading groups due to the themes covered. Below are some talking points from the author, which may help to frame your discussion:

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.



Discover more books at
HachetteChildrens.co.uk



Discover more resources at
HachetteSchools.co.uk



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.



Discover more books at
HachetteChildrens.co.uk



Discover more resources at
HachetteSchools.co.uk

