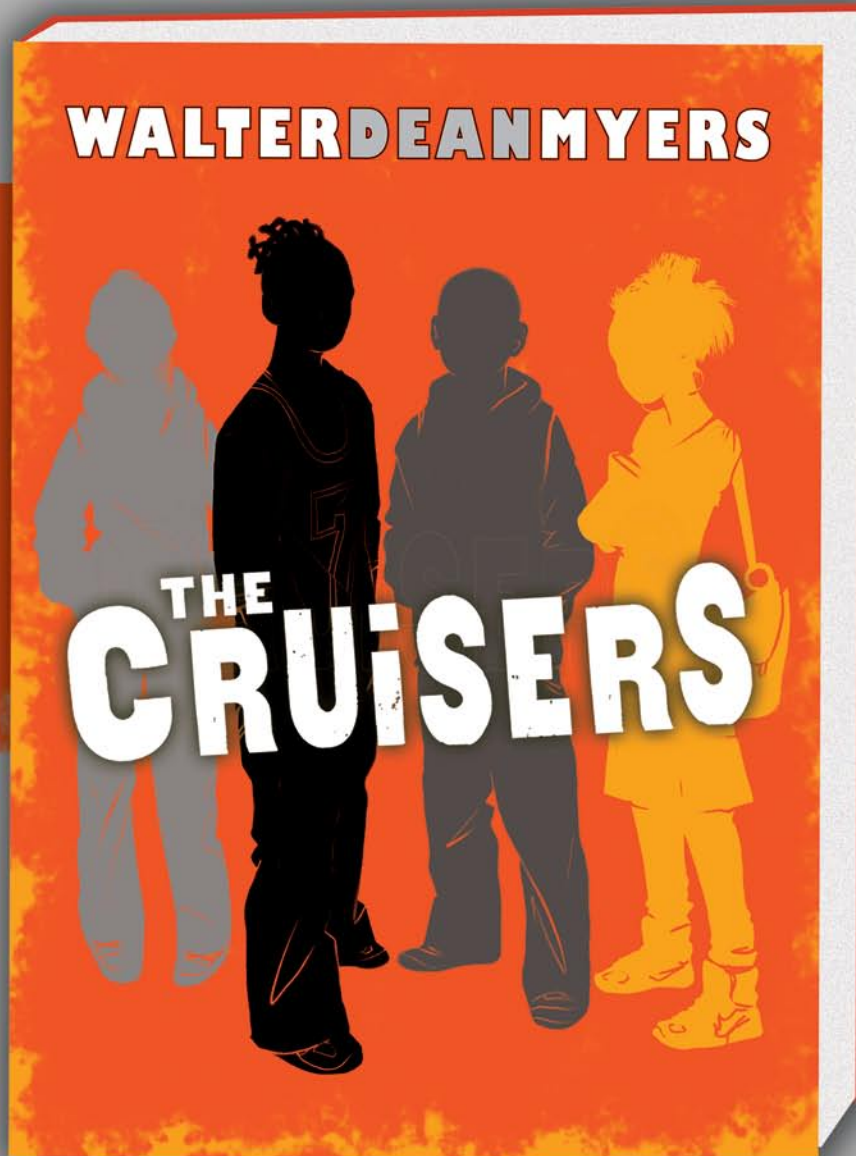


DISCUSSION GUIDE



ABOUT THE BOOK

Zander Scott and his friends LaShonda, Bobbi, and Kambui are in trouble. Even though they're students with a talent for writing and creative expression at Da Vinci Academy for the Gifted and Talented, one of the best schools in Harlem, their grades are slipping, and Mr. Culpepper, the assistant principal, is ready to be rid of them. When the school starts a unit on the Civil War, and Mr. Culpepper splits students into Union and Confederate sympathizers, Zander and his crew are given a charge—to negotiate a peace between both sides before the war actually breaks out.

That's when Zander and his friends come up with the idea to launch an alternative school newspaper called *The Cruiser*. The result is nothing they could have expected and everything they could have hoped for. Acclaimed author Walter Dean Myers delivers the first in a four-book series that will have boys and girls cheering for a group of outsiders who might just be the coolest kids in town.

Pre-Reading Activities

Ask readers to share what they know about the Civil War, particularly its causes and outcomes.

Ask readers to share their understanding of the phrase “freedom of speech.” Review the First Amendment of the Constitution with them and discuss how it guarantees the right of “freedom of speech.”

Watch the film *Gone with the Wind*. If time does not permit viewing the whole film, watch highlights. After watching, discuss how the film portrays the Civil War and slavery. To which side is the story sympathetic? What does the film suggest are the causes of the war? How does it depict black people and slavery?

Ask readers to look at the *Declaration of Causes of Seceding States from Georgia, Mississippi, South Carolina, and Texas* at sunsite.utk.edu/civil-war/reasons.html. Compare and contrast the reason for secession cited by each state. How many times is slavery mentioned in the declarations?

Discussion Questions

1. How does LaShonda’s article in *The Cruiser* poke fun at Mr. Culpepper’s motto: “Education is a journey on the high seas of life”?
2. What do you think LaShonda means when she says *The Cruiser* “speaks for the real people of this school”?
3. Whom does LaShonda consider the “real people” at Da Vinci Academy?
4. How do you think the Cruisers differ from most of the other students at Da Vinci Academy?
5. What are some words you would use to describe how Mr. Culpepper speaks to the Cruisers?
6. How would you describe Zander’s relationship with his mom? Do you think it’s a typical mother-son relationship?
7. How does Zander feel about his father?
8. What do you think of the guest editorial in *The Palette* by Alvin McCraney and the Sons of the Confederacy? Do you think it’s appropriate to publish in the school newspaper? Does LaShonda have good reason to be angry about the editorial?
9. Kambui thinks Alvin is lying when he says the editorial is about freedom of speech. Kambui says “what he’s really dealing with is race.” Do you agree?
10. Why does Sidney Aronofsky feel the need to tell Zander that he does not agree with *The Palette* editorial? What is something else Sidney could do to show that he does not agree?

11. What makes Zander angry about the meeting between the Cruisers and the Sons of Confederacy? How do you think he could have handled it differently?
12. Why does Mrs. Maxwell disagree with Mr. Culpepper that it would be best to stop having student groups represent the North and South?
13. Kambui says that he is “not suggesting violence” in his editorial, but how is that claim inconsistent with the rest of what he says?
14. Why do the Sons of Confederacy start their own newspaper?
15. What are some of the things the soccer team does to make tensions flare?
16. When Zander is talking to his mom, he says: “Some guys in school are making jokes about slavery and saying it’s funny. Maybe some things just aren’t funny.” Do you agree with Zander? What are some subjects that should be off limits to jokes?
17. In *The Cruiser* editorial by Zander and Bobbi McCall, they say that there is a difference between “freedom of speech” and “freedom to say anything ... without being responsible.” What responsibilities do you think come with freedom of speech? How is what the Sons of Confederacy said irresponsible?
18. What do you think LaShonda’s diary entry reveals about her?
19. Why do all the reasons given for the causes of the Civil War seem “flaky” to Zander? What do you think of Zander’s observation: “Maybe race was more like drugs than people thought. When they could use race it was good, but nobody wanted to own it when they got caught using it”?
20. What are the concerns Zander’s mom has about him appearing in the satire of *Gone with the Wind*?
21. In the open letter to Hattie McDaniel that Zander writes for *The Cruiser*, he says “[T]he problem I’m having is that when you don’t name something you can’t deal with it unless everybody is agreeing to it.” Do you agree? How does Zander’s sentiment apply to the Civil War project?
22. What message do you think LaShonda is sending to Alvin McCraney with her “Robby McRabbit” story in *The Cruiser*?
23. What do you think Zander means when he says “if we can make the Sons of Confederacy responsible for what they’re saying and doing, we’ll have something going on that we can deal with”?
24. How do most of the Da Vinci kids respond to the signs the Cruisers wear?
25. Do you agree with Zander when he says of the Sons of Confederacy that “you don’t have to think wrong to be wrong”?

26. Zander asks himself: “If I had been white would I have spoken up? Was it really just about principles or was it mostly about the personal hurt?” What do you think are the answers to those questions?
27. What good do you think came out or will come out of this Civil War project?

POST-READING ACTIVITIES

In their editorial, Zander and Bobbi discuss the London Anti-Slavery Conference of 1840, at which the American delegates Lucretia Mott and Elizabeth Cady Stanton were refused seats. Working in pairs or small groups, ask readers to use online and print resources to research the life and work of these two women. Encourage students to make connections between the abolitionist and women’s rights movements. Have them share their findings when their research is concluded.

Ask readers to visit the website of the Sons of Confederate Veterans www.scv.org/. After reviewing the content of the website, ask readers to discuss the purpose of the organization and its viewpoint on the causes and outcomes of the Civil War.

In “Life on the High Cs,” LaShonda argues that too much pressure is put on getting top grades. Write a letter to the editor of *The Cruiser* in which you explain why you agree or disagree with LaShonda’s argument.

The book concludes with an invitation from Ashley Schmidt to submit to *The Palette* “examples of historical events that might be viewed differently from a slightly altered perspective.” Take Ashley up on her invitation and submit an essay for publication in *The Palette*.



SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

FICTION

Avi. *Nothing but the Truth: A Documentary Novel*. Orchard, 1991

When Philip Malloy is reprimanded for humming along to “The Star-Spangled Banner,” the seemingly insignificant incident quickly snowballs into headline news and controversy. Avi combines diary entries, phone conversations, discussions, and high school faculty memos into a provocative exploration of the way emotions and preconceptions define and distort truth.

Bennett, Cherie and Jeff Gottesfeld. *A Heart Divided*. Delacorte, 2004

When sixteen-year-old Kate moves from New Jersey to attend high school in Tennessee, she becomes embroiled in a controversy to remove the school’s Confederate flag symbol.

Elliott, L. M. *Annie, Between the States*. Harper Collins, 2004

As Virginia shuttles between Union and Confederate control, Annie witnesses “revolting horrors” in her own backyard. Initially convinced that her side of the battle is the right one—Virginia fights for states’ rights, not for slavery—her certainty deteriorates as the war divides her family both physically and ideologically.

Lester, Julius. *Day of Tears: A Novel in Dialogue*. Hyperion, 2005

Lester draws upon historical sources to fictionalize a real event: the biggest slave auction in American history, which took place in Savannah, Georgia, in 1859. He imagines the individual voices of many who were there, adults and children, including several slaves up for sale, the auctioneer, and the white masters and their families buying and selling the valuable merchandise.

Myers, Walter Dean. *Riot*. Egmont, 2009

Told in screenplay format, Myers tells the story of the New York Draft Riots of 1863, when struggling Irish immigrants protested being called up by Lincoln to “die for the darkies” in the Civil War. The story focuses on fifteen-year-old Claire, the biracial daughter of a black man and a white Irishwoman, but there are diverse voices from all sides—black, white, and mixed race; soldier and policeman; racist, looter, and victim.

Thomas, Rob. *Slave Day*. Simon & Schuster, 1997

Students, teachers, and community members are prompted to rethink their approaches to life when a Southern high school holds a “Slave Day” auction as a fundraiser.

NONFICTION

Lester, Julius. *To Be a Slave*. Illus. Tom Feelings. Dial, 1968

The words of black men and women who had been slaves, along with Lester’s historical commentary and Feelings’ illustrations, demonstrate how it felt to be a slave.

McKissack, Patricia and Frederick L. McKissack. *Days of Jubilee: The End of Slavery in the United States*. Scholastic, 2003

The authors show that there was no single day when slavery ended in the United States, but a series of dates when groups and individual slaves celebrated their own “days of Jubilee.”

Osborne, Linda Barrett. *Traveling the Freedom Road: From Slavery and the Civil War through Reconstruction*. Abrams, 2009

Published in association with the Library of Congress, where Osborne is a senior writer and editor, this fascinating, well-designed volume offers an essential introduction to the experiences of African Americans between 1800 and 1877.

Warren, Andrea. *Under Siege! Three Children at the Civil War Battle for Vicksburg*. Farrar Straus Giroux, 2009

The pivotal forty-seven day siege is told through the eyes of three young people who lived through it: 10-year-old Lucy McRae and 11-year-old Willie Lord, both Vicksburg residents, and 12-year-old Frederick Grant, General Grant’s son.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Walter Dean Myers is the critically acclaimed *New York Times* bestselling author of more than eighty books for children and young adults. His award-winning body of work includes *Sunrise Over Fallujah*, *Fallen Angels*, *Monster*, *Somewhere in the Darkness*, *Slam!*, *Jazz*, and *Harlem*. Mr. Myers has received two Newbery Honors and five Coretta Scott King Awards. In addition, he is the winner of the first Michael L. Printz Award and the first recipient of the Coretta Scott King-Virginia Hamilton Award for Lifetime Achievement. Mr. Myers lives in Jersey City, New Jersey.



The Cruisers by Walter Dean Myers

(Ages 9-12, 112 pages, 978-0-439-91626-4, \$15.99)

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