

Olentangy Local School District Literature Selection Review

Teacher: John Chirico

School: OHS

Book Title: We Cast a Shadow

Genre: Literary Fiction/
Dystopian Fiction

Author: Maurice Carlos Ruffin

Pages: 336

Publisher: One World, Penguin
Random House

Copyright: 2019

In a brief rationale, please provide the following information relative to the book you would like added to the school's book collection for classroom use. You may attach additional pages as needed.

Book Summary and summary citation: (suggested resources include book flap summaries, review summaries from publisher, book vendors, etc.)

“You can be beautiful, even more beautiful than before.” This is the seductive promise of Dr. Nzinga’s clinic, where anyone can get their lips thinned, their skin bleached, and their nose narrowed. A complete demelanization will liberate you from the confines of being born in a black body—if you can afford it.

In this near-future Southern city plagued by fenced-in ghettos and police violence, more and more residents are turning to this experimental medical procedure. Like any father, our narrator just wants the best for his son, Nigel, a biracial boy whose black birthmark is getting bigger by the day. The darker Nigel becomes, the more frightened his father feels. But how far will he go to protect his son? And will he destroy his family in the process?

This electrifying, hallucinatory novel is at once a keen satire of surviving racism in America and a profoundly moving family story. At its center is a father who just wants his son to thrive in a broken world. Maurice Carlos Ruffin’s work evokes the clear vision of Ralph Ellison, the dizzying menace of Franz Kafka, and the crackling prose of Vladimir Nabokov. *We Cast a Shadow* fearlessly shines a light on the violence we inherit, and on the desperate things we do for the ones we love.

(Penguin Random House)

Provide an instructional rationale for the use of this title, including specific reference to the OLSD curriculum map(s): (Curriculum maps may be referenced by grade/course and indicator number or curriculum maps with indicators highlighted may be attached to this form)

Using this book to compare/contrast with *To Kill a Mockingbird* on the basis of identity, figurative language and authorial choices, articulating theme, and development of complex characters throughout a story.

CP10 curriculum blueprint, 'Long-term transfer goal': comprehend, analyze, and evaluate complex texts across a range of perspectives, genres, and disciplines to become more critical (engaged, open-minded, and discerning) thinkers and decision-makers.

CP10 curriculum blueprint, 'Essential Questions': What can we learn from differing views and experiences to help inform our understanding of own views and experiences?

CP10 curriculum blueprint, 'Enduring Understandings': effective close reading requires understanding of diction, author intent, and cultural implications.

CP10 curriculum blueprint, 'Enduring Understandings': reserving judgment in both reading and listening engenders greater understanding.

Include two professional reviews of this title: (a suggested list of resources for identifying professional reviews is shown below. Reviews may be "cut and pasted" (with citation) into the form or printed reviews may be attached to the form)

Review #1

We Cast a Shadow asks some of the most important questions fiction can ask, and it does so with energetic and acrobatic prose, hilarious wordplay and great heart. . . . Love is at the core of this funny, beautiful novel At any moment, Ruffin can summon the kind of magic that makes you want to slow down, reread and experience the pleasure of him crystallizing an image again. . . . Read this book." (Adjei-Brenyah, Nana Kwame. "In This Ingenious Satire, a Father Goes to Extremes to Protect His Son From Racism." *The New York Times*, 13 Feb. 2019, www.nytimes.com/2019/02/13/books/review/maurice-carlos-ruffin-we-cast-shadow.html.)

Review #2

The unnamed narrator of Maurice Carlos Ruffin's *We Cast a Shadow* has two great loves. The first is wife, Penny, with whom he enjoys a playful, passionate relationship. The other is their young son, Nigel, a sensitive, intelligent 11-year-old boy with a sweet nature and a childlike sense of curiosity. Nigel, the narrator thinks, is perfect.

Well, almost perfect. Nigel's father can't stand the dark birthmark on his son's face — he's afraid that it will betray the young man's biracial heritage, a thought the narrator, an African American man, can't abide. "A dark-skinned child can expect a life of diminished light," he thinks. "This is truth anywhere in the world and throughout most of history." The birthmark becomes an obsession for the narrator, and his desire to have it removed takes him to some unbelievably dark places.

That's the setup for *We Cast a Shadow*, the stunning and audacious debut novel from New Orleans author Ruffin. It's at once a pitch-black comedy, a chilling horror story and an endlessly perceptive novel about the possible future of race in America.

Set sometime in the not-too-distant future, Ruffin's novel takes place in an unnamed city in the American South. Race relations have deteriorated steadily: Surveillance vans monitor black neighborhoods, African Americans convicted of certain crimes face deportation to an African country, and a "Dreadlock Ordinance" allows police officers to cut the hair of black detainees.

The narrator is one of a few black employees of a corporate law firm, and he's ecstatic when he's given a promotion and a shot at a hefty bonus. With the money, he'll be able to afford a "demelanization" surgery for his son, erasing any trace of his African American heritage. The narrator thinks it's Nigel's one chance at a happy life. "It wasn't just that Nigel would make an appetizing target from some zombie with a badge and a gun," he thinks. "It was all the little things that were so obvious to me. The woman switching from one side of the street to the other. The store owner following him around. ... All the things that would eat away at his soul and make him wonder why we ever brought him into this world. All of the things that would make him me."

His wife Penny isn't a fan of the idea, and balks when the narrator is put in charge of his firm's diversity initiative. But the narrator is unswayed, and works hard to land an account that his boss covets. In an effort to prove that his firm is committed to diversity, the narrator joins a milquetoast civil rights group whose leaders include a clueless, dashiki-clad white man who proclaims, "We've got to ignore race to transcend it!"

Complicating the narrator's quest to get money for his son's surgery are a tragic car accident that threatens to derail his life, and a terrorist attack that leads to a police crackdown on civil rights. But the narrator will stop at nothing to get his bonus, and his single-mindedness threatens to destroy his life.

There's a lot going on in *We Cast a Shadow*, but Ruffin proves to be a master at juggling the numerous characters and storylines. It's a fast-paced and intricately plotted book, but not one that's solely reliant on its many plot twists — the real draw of the novel is Ruffin's gift at creating unforgettable characters, from the narrator's conniving boss, Octavia, to his sketchy drug dealer, Jo Jo.

Perhaps Ruffin's greatest accomplishment is the world he's built in his novel — one that's alarmingly close to the America of today.

Satirical novels can suffer when authors overplay their hands, but this is never a problem for Ruffin. He writes with a straight face, never in love with his own cleverness — there are echoes of Ralph Ellison's intelligent, unshowy prose throughout the book. Ruffin also knows when to deploy his markedly dark sense of humor, which he uses as an effective tool at several points in the novel. ("I liked my java so black, the police planted evidence on it," the narrator proclaims early in the book.)

Perhaps Ruffin's greatest accomplishment is the world he's built in his novel — one that's alarmingly close to the America of today. The jail where the narrator's father is imprisoned is staffed by sadists who give the inmates humiliating nicknames and uniforms (former Maricopa County, Ariz. sheriff Joe Arpaio would be proud), and the children of felons, who are disproportionately African American, need vouchers from law-abiding citizens in order to vote. It's a sad testament to our country's treatment of people of color that such developments don't seem all that implausible.

There's no doubt that *We Cast a Shadow*, with its sobering look at race in America, can be difficult to read, but it's more than worth it. It's a razor-sharp debut from an urgent new voice in fiction, and a warning about what the future could hold for America and for the world. "The world is a centrifuge that patiently waits to separate my Nigel from his basic human dignity," the narrator observes at one point. "I don't have to tell you that this is an unjust planet."

(Schaub, Michael. "In 'We Cast A Shadow,' The Horrors Are Close To Home." NPR. 30 January 2019.

<https://www.npr.org/2019/01/30/689747338/in-we-cast-a-shadow-the-horrors-are-close-to-home>)

What alternate text(s) could also fulfill the instructional requirements?

<u>Title:</u>	Native Son	<u>Author:</u>	Richard Wright
<u>Title:</u>	The Invisible Man	<u>Author:</u>	Ralph Ellison
<u>Title:</u>		<u>Author:</u>	
<u>Title:</u>	A Raisin in the Sun	<u>Author:</u>	Lorraine Hansberry
<u>Title:</u>	The Intuitionist	<u>Author:</u>	Colson Whitehead
<u>Title:</u>		<u>Author:</u>	

Document any potentially controversial content:

Race

Keeping in mind the age, academic level, and maturity of the intended reader, what is the suggested classroom use: (check all that apply)

Gifted/Accelerated Regular At Risk

GRADE LEVEL(S): 6 7 8 9 10 11 12

Reading level of this title (if applicable):

10th-12th grade

Date Submitted to Department Chair:

10/13/21

Suggested Professional Literary Review Sources:

School Library Journal

Horn Book

Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books

VOYA (Voice of Youth Advocates)

Library Journal

Book Links

Publisher's Weekly

Booklist

Kirkus Review

Wilson Library Catalog

English Journal (and other resources of the National Council of Teachers of English)

The Reading Teacher (International Reading Association)


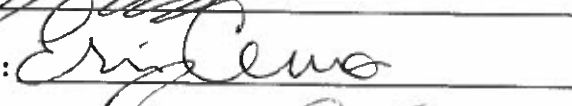

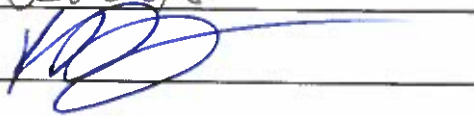
Literature for Today's Young Adults

GRADE LEVEL(S): 6 7 8 9 10 11 12
Reading Level of this Title (if applicable):

Suggested Professional Literacy Review Sources:

- School Library Journal
- Horn Book
- Bulletin of the Center for Children’s Books
- VOYA (Voice of Youth Advocates)
- Library Journal
- Book Links
- Publisher’s Weekly
- Booklist
- Kirkus Review
- Wilson Library Catalog
- English Journal (and other resources of the National Council of Teachers of English)
- The Reading Teacher (International Reading Association)
- Literature for Today’s Young Adults

Signatures:

Teacher:		Date:	<u>10/13/21</u>
Department Head:		Date:	<u>10/14/21</u>
Building Administrator:		Date:	<u>10/14/21</u>
Curriculum Supervisor:		Date:	<u>11/19/21</u>