Kwame Alexander with Mary Rand Hess

Swing

Educator's Guide

Grade Level: 9 - 12

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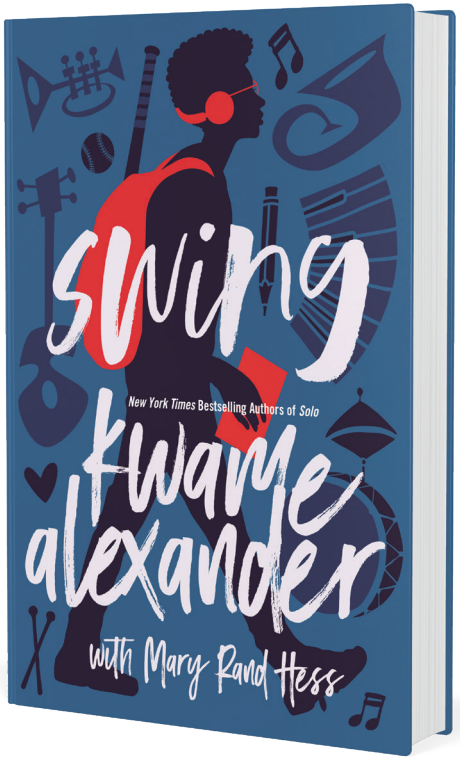

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Section 1: Summary and Introduction

Book Summary

When America is not so beautiful, or right, or just, it can be hard to know what to do. Best friends Walt and Noah decide to use their voices to grow more good in the world, but first they've got to find cool.

Walt is convinced junior year is their year, and he has a plan to help them find the girls of their dreams and become amazing athletes. Never mind that he and Noah failed to make the high school baseball team yet again, and Noah's love interest since third grade, Sam, has him firmly in the friend zone. Noah soon finds himself navigating the worlds of jazz, batting cages, the strange advice of Walt's Dairy Queen-employed cousin, as well as Walt's own perceptions of what is actually cool. Status quo seems inevitable until Noah stumbles on a stash of old love letters. Each page contains the words he's always wanted to say to Sam, and he begins secretly creating artwork using the lines that speak his heart. But when his private artwork becomes public, Noah has a decision to make: continue his life in the dugout and possibly lose the girl forever, or take a swing and make his voice heard?

At the same time, numerous American flags are being left around town. While some think it's a harmless prank and others see it as a form of peaceful protest, Noah can't shake the feeling something bigger is happening to his community. Especially after he witnesses events that hint divides and prejudices run deeper than he realized.

As the personal and social tensions increase around them, Noah and Walt must decide what is really true when it comes to love, friendship, sacrifice, and fate.

In Swing, New York Times bestselling authors Kwame Alexander and Mary Rand Hess (Solo) tell a story about hope, courage, and love that will speak to anyone who's struggled to find their voice.

Introduction to Educator's Guide

In this guide, educators find support in helping students explore the layers of meaning and writing craft in this powerful novel in verse. Many options are presented in each key area, so educators can choose which instructional activities will be most exciting and engaging for their students.

Section 2:
Characters and Characterization

Cast of Characters

- **Noah Wallace:** the narrator
- **Walt (Walt Disney Jones):** also known as Swing; best friend of Noah
- **Moses (Mo):** Walt's older brother, a soldier
- **Sam (Samantha):** Noah's friend and crush
- **Divya:** older teen, thrift store employee, and Walt's love interest
- **Cruz:** Sam's on-again, off-again boyfriend
- **Floyd:** Walt's adult cousin and source of advice
- **Noah's parents;** Walt's mom and stepdad
- **Granny:** Noah's grandmother
- **Robert:** the mysterious jazz musician

(**Note:** If students have read the novel Solo, ask if they recognize a cross-over character from Solo who also appears in Swing.)

Names and Nicknames

Many of the story's characters have nicknames—Walt gives himself his own nickname, "Swing." Noah calls Walt the King of Swing, Sultan of Smooth, and Rambo of Rhythm and Romance. His new nickname could refer to the baseball swing, the swing dance, the swing vote, and more. Occasionally, Sam and Noah insult each other with creative labels like "Sucknerd, Toadlip, Horsehead, and Big butt" (p. 38). And when Noah gets a new car (his grandmother's old truck), he names it "Granny" after her. Talk about how names and nicknames affect our perception of people (and things) and how they may even have multiple meanings. Consider how these complex characters develop through the narrative. What surprises you? What seems to be inevitable? Which poems seem most pivotal in revealing each major character?

Just for fun, challenge students to find out the derivation and story behind their own names or nicknames. Possible sources for examining naming derivations and trends include:

- **BabyNames.com**
- **Parents.com/baby-names/**
- **Babble.com/baby-names/**

A good place to begin in peeling away the layers of a good book is considering the characters whose lives and conflicts drive the story. It can be helpful to identify the main characters of the story and learn their names and nicknames, an important part of this story (and the title of the book). Talk about the names of each of the major characters and speculate about the significance of each, particularly as the story moves along and students learn more about each one.

As students read or listen to this verse novel, encourage them to visualize each of the main characters and talk about what they look like and how they talk and act. Work together to draw character sketches or find magazine or web-based images that students think depict these main characters. Some students may enjoy imagining casting their own movie version of Swing and deciding which actors might play which roles.

Reflecting on Our Personal Histories

Noah's friendships are anchored in third grade. Invite students to reflect and share their own memories of third grade and young childhood.

- What were YOU like in third grade?
- What do you remember about that school year?
- What happened then that might have shaped who you are now?
- Do you still have some of the same friends from elementary school? How have those friendships changed or evolved with time?

Friendship Dynamics

The friendships and relationships are an essential part of this novel in verse and of the evolving plot. Noah and Walt have been longtime best friends. Noah thinks of Sam as a potential love interest, but she views him as a platonic friend. Invite students to think about their own friendships and how good friends share characteristics in common that unite them, but each is still a unique individual. Sometimes these similarities are bonding and sometimes boring. Sometimes conflicts unite us and sometimes they end relationships. How we respond can make the difference, as Noah and Sam reveal. Students can explore these dynamics with a simple Venn diagram showing Noah, Walt, and Sam and their points of connection and difference. Or students may want to explore their own selves and friends—which attributes are unique to each person and which might be shared.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy RL.9-10.3; 11-12.3

Section 3:
Craft and Structure

As we examine this novel in verse closely, it can be helpful to look at how the authors structure the book poem by poem, section by section. This novel in verse is divided into six major sections of varying lengths. Pause at the end of each section to talk about the main characters and what students are learning about Noah, Walt (Swing), and Sam in each section and how the plot is developing.

Prologue

Part 1: Cheesecake

Part 2: I Guess I'll Hang My Tears Out to Dry

Part 3: Second Balcony Jump

Part 4: Love for Sale

Part 5: Where Are You?

Part 6: Three O'clock in the Morning

Epilogue

It is also interesting to note the titles that the authors employ for each section of the book, as well as for each poem. How do these titles signal the focus, theme, mood, or meaning? Note: the authors use the song titles from the jazz album Go! by Dexter Gordon as titles for each section. What might the significance of this album be? If you could pick one album to tell the story of a specific time in your life, what album would you choose?

In addition, sometimes the poem titles are part of the text of the poem too, and not set apart. Why might the writers use this approach in some instances? If you only read the section and poem titles, what do you surmise about the story (before or after reading the book)? Try it! Read the book aloud as a group with the titles ONLY by passing the book around the class. How do the titles alone set the stage, tell the story, or move the narrative along? What do they add to the comedic or tragic effect and overall aesthetic impact?

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.5; 11-12.5

Section 4: Key Ideas and Details

Discussion

As students read Swing themselves or listen to you read the book aloud, invite them to consider the relationships, conflicts, and surprises in the story. Ask open-ended questions that motivate them to dig deep and challenge them to find textual evidence in poems or passages that support their opinions or analysis. Which seem conclusive, which seem tentative, and which may be open-ended or uncertain? Possible discussion questions include:

1. What is the secret to the friendship between Noah and Walt?

2. Why is it so important to Walt (Swing) to be recognized for his baseball playing skill?

3. How do art and music help Noah and Walt cope? How do their interests overlap?

4. What is the role of the random appearance of American flags throughout the story? Underscoring the power of protest? Quiet, symbolic patriotism? Creating mischief and confusion? Unsettling art in the community?

5. Walt explains his new tattoo and philosophy in the poem "Inked" (p. 54): "You must embrace life with a metaphorical hug, and sometimes a literal hug, to really squeeze the life juice, the goodness, out of living" (p. 54). How is this important in the story? What does this mean to you?

6. Walt teaches himself to cook to impress his new girlfriend, Divya. He observes, "Real diversity begins at the dinner table. Our humanity … will rise with our breaking of daily bread" (p. 403). Do you agree? Why or why not?

7. Love relationships are also central to this story: parental love, platonic love, romantic love, etc. What do Noah and Walt learn about love from each other, from other characters, from podcasts, from music, from art?

8. How does baseball act as a metaphor throughout this book?

9. This story is told from the point of view of Noah, yet Walt's story and voice seem equally important. You could argue that either character is the true protagonist of the book. Which one do YOU think is the central focus of this story and why?

10. By the end of the story, we realize that Walt is black and Noah is white based on the poem, "Let's Face the Music and Dance" (p. 411). How does this affect your perception of these characters, the issues raised, and the overall story as it concludes?

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.1; 11-12.1
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1.A; 11-12.1

Section 5: Language

Vocabulary

In any work of literature, we can encounter new vocabulary or familiar words used in new ways. In poetry that uses fewer words, it's doubly important to understand each word and its meaning. Students can log their own list of new words, use context to guess at meaning, and/or consider those on the list below. Which of these words (or phrases) are new to students? Locate them in each poem; talk about these words (and any other new words encountered) and their use in context and possible multiple meanings, and how these word choices impact the tone of the book. Challenge students to use them in the coming days. Possible vocabulary words showcased in the poems throughout the book include:

1. **Copacetic** (p. 10)
2. **Delusional** (p. 21)
3. **Mantra** (p. 24)
4. **Guru** (p. 28)
5. **Whirling dervish** (p. 36)
6. **Upgrade** (p. 49)
7. **Floss** (p. 52)
8. **Cliché** (p. 60)
9. **Absurd** (p. 65)
10. **Perplexing** (p. 65)
11. **Eccentric** (p. 65)
12. **Sarcastic** (p. 65)
13. **Profound** (p. 67)
14. **Ubuntu** (p. 68)
15. **Apocalypse** (p. 68)
16. **Ambrosial** (p. 96)
17. **Mélange** (p. 116)
18. **Ginormous** (p. 119)
19. **Familial** (p. 125)
20. **Shenanigans** (p. 125)
21. **Enstoolment** (p. 125)
22. **Unrequited** (p. 138)
23. **Paradigm-shifting** (p. 140)
24. **Statute of limitations** (p. 158)
25. **Indelible** (p. 159)
26. **Anonymous suitor** (p. 173)
27. **Elucidate** (p. 176)
28. **Modality** (p. 180)
29. **Improvisation** (p. 180)
30. **Dopamine** (p. 186)
31. **Transcendence** (p. 187)
32. **Prerequisite** (p. 203)
33. **Iteration** (p. 205)
34. **Ingenuity** (p. 238)
35. **Execution** (p. 238)
36. **Meditating** (p. 244)
37. **Melancholy** (p. 259)
38. **Imbibes** (p. 275)
39. **Enraptured** (p. 275)
40. **Disequilibrium** (p. 290)
41. **Escalate** (p. 300)
42. **Dumbfounded** (p. 309)
43. **Indubitably** (p. 326)
44. **Disheveled** (p. 344)
45. **Perseverance** (p. 350)
46. **Ecstatic** (p. 384)
47. **Arrogant** (p. 395)

This is also a great opportunity to talk about (print or online) dictionaries and what they offer, providing quick mini-lessons on searching, keywords, etymologies, etc. Two helpful online dictionaries include:

http://www.merriam-webster.com
http://dictionary.reference.com

Ready-made lesson plans are also available from the National Council of Teachers of English at ReadWriteThink.org.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.9-10.4; 11-12.4

Similes and Metaphors

The authors employ figurative language to great effect throughout this novel in verse. In fact, whole poems often serve as metaphors! There are many, many examples of metaphors, similes, and alliteration throughout the poems. Break the class into three groups to hunt for (1) similes, (2) metaphors, and (3) alliteration, challenging students to see how many they can find and identifying poems and page numbers for each. Each group can discuss their findings and select 2–3 favorite examples. Then come together as a class to discuss what these add to the meaning or tone or mood of the poem.

Similes.

"Surprise" (p. 33; "jumbled / like heavy metal"); "Dairy Queen" (p. 55; "as white as the shake"); "This Is What Floyd Knows about Sam" (p. 61; "like a rainbow perched on heaven"); "Inspection" (p. 109; "It smells/ like must/ and nostalgia")

Metaphors.

"Truth" (p.24; "she's my archangel"); "Unlock your Heart" (p. 63; "Do not let your lips become bricks"); "Tonight, after reading the love letters" (p. 114; "the Grand Canyon / of my love"); "Stuck" (p. 161; "the train is rolling, / but I'm not on it."); "The Metaphors" (p. 237); "Reckoning" (p. 283); "After" (p. 425; "to climb / the volcano / of mourning")

Alliteration.

"Stars and Stripes" (p. 42; "Littering or / liberty?"); "Conversation with Walt" (p. 208–209; "the serene sea of soulmates")

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.9-10.4;11-12.4

Section 6: Themes

Quotes and Sayings

Walt, Floyd, and a few other characters are also full of pithy sayings, quotes, and words of wisdom throughout the poems—some original and some borrowed from other sources. They raise important questions related to political, cultural, and gender issues. Challenge students to identify a line, phrase, or passage that is pivotal to the story or especially meaningful to them and talk about why. What is explicitly stated and what is inferred? How might some of these sayings signal the themes of the book? Swing offers an excellent opportunity to target multiple themes and synthesize them in individual ways. Possible examples include:

- **"A setback is a setup waiting for a comeback."** (p. 16)
- **"never give up until you win"** (p. 21)
- **"Don't build more walls to block what's possible."** (p. 23)
- **"If we're gonna learn how women think, we have to listen to women."** (p. 23)
- **"Choose the YES that's best for you."** (p. 38)
- **"If you don't stand for something, you'll fall for everything."** (p. 40).
- **"You either uphold the status quo, or you see what's wrong and try to change it."** (p. 40)
- **"Open your door to your destiny, crash through it."** (p. 63)
- **"Your brain is like a mashup of everything you've ever read or seen or heard."** (p. 67)
- **"you can tell a lot about a man by how he treats his mother"** (p. 94)
- **"When a guy shows you who he is, believe him."** (p. 94)
- **"It's a highway out there, and no one's breaking for ya. You must be ready to put your foot to the metal … give it a little gas and GO!"** (p. 106)
- **"This world is big enough for us all to play in one great orchestra."** (p. 144)
- **"Hate that which is evil, and hold fast to everything that is good and righteous"** (p. 145)
- **"wishing I'd had the courage to own my cool, despite my fury"** (p. 154)
- **"Art can really inspire you to embrace the preciousness of life."** (p. 183)
- **"We are all part of America. United in our values, in our belief that basic respect of life and humanity is a prerequisite for true democracy."** (p. 203)
- **"The window to your happiness is closing."** (p. 203)
- **"Crashing/ through the door of my own destiny."** (p. 205)
- **"a life without the warmth of love is a sunless garden when the flowers are dead"** (p. 221)
- **"What's the point in winning her heart if she can't hold yours in it?"** (p. 239)
- **"It's time to write your own life."** (p. 239)
- **"Love is love is love."** (p. 274)
- **"if tonight will mean anything tomorrow"** (p. 306)
- **"Sometimes, we don't want to see the not-so-good things happening to our loved ones."** (p.321)
- **"All that matters is that we own Venus."** (p. 332)
- **"Life is not easy for any of us. But what of that? We must have perseverance and be arrogant in our self-love."** (p. 395)
- **"Real diversity begins at the dinner table. Our humanity … will rise with our breaking of daily bread"** (p. 403)
- **"Keep the training wheels off … Hug life … Choose yes."** (p. 428)

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.9-10.2; 11-12.2

Foreshadowing

The authors also use the literary device of foreshadowing to hint at major events that unfold in the book, particularly regarding Walt's fate. Walt's obsession with **dead famous** people, especially the dates and how they died, is one element that raises the specter of death throughout the story. The poems "The Last Inning" (pp. 355–356), "Something Is Coming" (p. 370), and "Let's Face the Music and Dance" (p. 411–412), in particular, forecast a sense of dread and impending doom. Revisit those poems and discuss the clues that emerge in these poems (and others). How do these choices create tension, suspense, or surprise?

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.9-10.5; 11-12.5

Section 7: Dramatic Interpretation

Reader's Theater

One distinctive feature of this book is the use of italics within a poem to indicate that someone other than the narrator or protagonist is speaking. This creates dialogue within the poem that can be very effective when reading aloud. For a multi-modal approach, try a reader's theater performance with students volunteering to read "parts" aloud (based on plain text/italics), so that students can get a sense of the characters' voices. Select poems with two parts: plain text and italicized text for two volunteers or two groups to read aloud in turn. Some poems are even "scripted" for three voices or parts. Then talk about how hearing the words read aloud helps us understand the poem, the characters, and the points of view better. Here are ten possible choices for dramatic reading:

1. "Primer One" (pp. 18–19)
2. "Phone Conversation" (pp. 49–50)
3. "Three-way Conversation" (pp. 78–79)
4. "Gift-Giving 101" (p. 94)
5. "Conversation" (pp. 180–181)
6. "What are you doing here?" (pp. 251–253)
7. "The Right Time" (p. 316)
8. "Phone Conversation" (pp. 348–349)
9. "At the Spotlight" (p. 399)
10. "Stranded" (p. 409)

Invite students to choose other poems or excerpts for dramatic reading and perform them for the class. Make a video recording of their performances to revisit and discuss. In the poem "When I get to school" (p. 326), Noah mentions an ASL class where "everybody's signing Bravo and lover boy." Students familiar with ASL might want to try signing this or another favorite poem. Talk about how focusing on just these excerpts and selections can convey key aspects of the story—like a movie trailer does for the entire movie.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L9-10.3; 11-12.3

Podcasts

Another way to incorporate multimedia is with a brief discussion of podcasts and the role they play in this story. These three podcast poems could also be read aloud, recorded, and shared (featuring two female voices to channel the characters of Marj and Jackie):

- "WOOHOO WOMAN Podcast #1: Who's at the Controls?" (pp. 81–82)
- "Woohoo Woman Podcast #3: Training Wheels (pp. 106–107)
- "WOOHOO WOMAN Podcast #6: Outro" (p. 363)

And if students want greater exposure to listening to podcast episodes, they might explore some of these teen favorites:

- TED Talks: https://www.ted.com/about/programs-initiatives/ted-talks/ted-talks-audio
- 411 Teen: http://news.wfsu.org/programs/411-teen-889-wfsu-fm
- Youth Radio: https://youthradio.org
- Nerdette: https://www.npr.org/podcasts/399954056/nerdette-podcast
- How Stuff Works: https://www.stuffmedia.com

Author Kwame Alexander offers his own literary show on YouTube called Bookish (for listening or viewing): https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCr0zZOM9cgu6LEgJQlQ1JjQ

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.5; 11-12.5

Section 8: Writing Poetry

Studying and Writing Poem Forms and Types

There is so much to explore in the craft and structure of this book as poem upon poem is woven together to create a narrative. Since this is a novel in verse, every page of the book is a poem (or part of a poem). Students may be surprised to learn, however, that the poets have used several different forms of poetry throughout the book. Most are non-rhyming free-verse poems, but there is quite a bit of variety within that form too. See if the students can identify any particular forms or types of poetry first and then challenge them to find examples of each of these found in the book. Talk about each type of poem, how each one is composed and arranged, and why the authors might have chosen that particular form or model for that particular moment in the story. Poets also use "poetic license" to use or adapt various forms and types of poems, even making up their own (like a text message poem). Invite students to select their favorite type and work with a partner to create their own original poem example (e.g., turning texts into poems).

Poem forms and types

1. Character sketch poem (e.g., "Swing" pp. 21–22; "Phenomenal" p. 48; "This Is What Floyd Knows About Sam" p. 61; "Suite for Jazz Orchestra No. 2: Scherzo p. 310; "The Flag Bearer" p. 413)
2. Dialogue poem (e.g., pp. 16–17)
3. Epistolary poem (poem written in the form of a letter; e.g., pp. 111, 112, 129, 130, 131)
4. Found poem (p. 404; playlist as poem)
5. List poem (p. 345)
6. One-word-per-line poem (p. 13, 157, 417–419)
7. Parody poem (p. 393, "Walt at Bat" ala "Casey at the Bat")
8. Primer poem (instructional; pp. 18–19, 148, 197, 257)
9. Prose poem (p. 385)
10. Question/answer poem ("Interrogation" p. 423)
11. Text poems (a single text) (e.g., pp. 113, 118, 212, 213, 234, 235, 314, 364, 368, 369, 391) [Some of these are haiku (p. 212, 213); some are tanka (p. 364)]
12. Texting poems (a thread of texts) (e.g., pp. 134–136, 163–164, 268, 269–270, 361–362, 375, 397)
13. Time-based poems (e.g., p. 272, 273, 277, 315, 320)
14. Tribute poem (echoes Langston Hughes's poem "I, Too" in "I, Too?" p. 430 and features two poems in two columns that also act as a total poem)
15. Wreath poem (lines are linked by repeated words, e.g., "Out of nowhere" p. 416; "Says Me" p. 424)

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.9-10.3D; 11-12.3D

More To Unpack

Guide students in reviewing how the authors employ **couplets** (two-line stanzas) and **tercets** (three-line stanzas) in the poems in this book from time to time. Discuss how these forms might suit these particular poems. How does this form affect the rhythm, meaning, tension, or tone?
Couplets (e.g., "Truth" p. 24; "Batter Up" pp. 44–45; "The Loan" p. 98; "Written" p. 156; "My Heart" p. 162; "The week with Sam" p. 329; "Epilogue" p. 431)
Tercets (e.g., "After dessert" p. 100; "The Baddest Girl on Earth" p. 178)

Many of the poems also employ **graphic elements** for a special effect. Work with students to identify the poems that use font size, bold, or italics in distinctive ways. For example, plain text indicates the narrator's point of view or voice; italics are used to indicate other characters' points of view. Font size (small or large) is used for particular emphasis too (e.g., pp. 30, 39, 89, 136, 167, 263, 264, 266, 277, 295, 414, 415, and especially pp. 427–429). The mock handwritten font used for the section page dividers is also visually interesting. What emotion might these choices convey? How might these font differences make you read the poems differently?

Swing is full of **allusions** to other works, particularly musical selections and other works of poetry. These indirect references show how an author can draw from other source material to deepen a story and pay homage to beautiful language from other great works. Guide students in pinpointing some of those allusions and challenge them to reread closely to identify others and then seek out the original sources. There are even allusions embedded within many of the titles of the poems (e.g., "I, Too? on p. 430). How might these allusions support the narrative and enrich the poetry? For example, music is such an important part of this story and excerpts from song lyrics are woven throughout the poems (e.g., "bewitched, / bothered, / and bewildered," p. 339; "let's face the music and dance," p. 411; "strange fruit" p. 431). Challenge students to identify more examples of song lyrics embedded in the poems, find an audio clip of the original song to play, and discuss the role of these lyrics within the story. What do they add to our understanding of the characters? How do these allusions affect the tone or symbolism? In addition to the album GO!, the writers weave many other songs from various jazz artists throughout the story. Pick a title of a jazz song or any song you like, listen to the song, and write a poem. How does music inspire you to write and create?

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.9-10.9; 11-12.9

Section 9:
Connections Across the Curriculum

Artistic Response

Students who think visually may be especially drawn to the ten pages of art sprinkled throughout the book (e.g., p. 25, 86, 153, 195, 204, 228, 286, 347, 367, and the color insert at the end of the text). These collages combine text and image to convey added meaning. Some are examples of found poetry and/or blackout poetry (all words are blackened except those that create the poem) based on the five letters that Noah finds from Corinthian to Annemarie (pp. 153, 195, 204, 228, 286). All of them add to the tone or mood of the story and our understanding of the characters' thoughts and feelings. Put them all together and see what story they tell. Students may enjoy creating their own blackout poems using those same love letters (pp. 111, 112, 129, 130, 131) or using other poems from this book or other sources entirely.

Cross-Genre Connections

Many people from recent history are referenced throughout the poems in this book, particularly famous baseball players and musicians admired by Walt and Noah. To provide additional context, it might be helpful to introduce some of these figures and note their contributions. Set the stage by inviting students to research and share YouTube videos featuring some of the figures mentioned in the novel. The baseball coach or physical education teacher could also be helpful in demonstrating skills in going to bat. Similarly, a music teacher or choir director could be helpful in providing background on these musicians and their works.

- Baseball players (e.g., Hank Aaron, Roberto Clemente, Bryce Harper, Carlos Correa, Willie Mays, Sammy Sosa,
  Moses Fleetwood Walker, Barry Bonds, Satchel Paige, etc.)

- Musicians (e.g., Benny Goodman, Diana Krall, Sarah Vaughn, Charles Mingus, Dexter Gordon, Charlie Parker,
  Duke Ellington, Fats Waller, Wynton Marsalis, Hugh Masekela, Herbie Hancock, John Coltrane, Beyoncé, Billie Holiday, Sir Mix-a-Lot, Bob Marley, Miles Davis, etc.)

- Artists (e.g., Michelangelo, Picasso, Romare Bearden, Walt Disney, etc.)

- Other famous people (e.g., Marie Curie, Langston Hughes, Sigmund Freud, Rimbaud, Ellen Degeneres, Casanova, Harriet Tubman, Martin Luther King Jr., Nelson Mandela, Steve Harvey, Oprah Winfrey, etc.)

Walt is also quite knowledgeable about how many of these individuals died, what they were doing at the time of their death, and the dates on which they died (e.g., p. 58, 95). Students may be intrigued to research more examples of these "famous last words." Or they may enjoy discussing some of the superstitions Walt has as described in "Tattoo" (p. 53), "The Meaning" (p. 67), or "Too Good to Be True" (p. 123). Many athletes and artists have superstitions about what may bring them good luck or bad luck. Students may be curious to know that people throughout history and around the world share superstitious beliefs. This could also be a subject for further research and discussion.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.9-10.2; 11-12.2

Section 9:
Connections Across the Curriculum

For even more poetry to connect with *Swing*, look for these additional novels in verse and poetry picture books suitable for older readers. These recommended titles feature teen characters or sports-related themes or highlight questions of identity and patriotism.

Adoff, Jaime. 2005. *Jimi & Me*. New York: Hyperion.
Adoff, Jaime. 2008. *The Death of Jayson Porter.* New York: Jump at the Sun/Hyperion.
Alexander, Kwame. 2014 (Reprint). *He Said/She Said.* New York: Amistad.
Alexander, Kwame. 2014. *The Crossover.* Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.
Alexander, Kwame. 2016. *Booked.* Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.
Alexander, Kwame. 2017. *Solo.* Grand Rapids, MI: HarperCollins/Blink.
Alexander, Kwame. 2018. *Rebound.* Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.
Applegate, Katherine. 2008. *Home of the Brave.* New York: Square Fish.
Burg, Ann. 2009. *All the Broken Pieces.* New York: Scholastic.
Crisler, Curtis. 2007. *Tough Boy Sonatas.* Honesdale, PA: Wordsong/Boyds Mills.
Frost, Helen. 2003. *Keesha's House.* New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux.
Frost, Helen. 2011. *Hidden.* Farrar, Straus & Giroux.
Grimes, Nikki. 2016 (Reprint.) *A Girl Named Mister.* Grand Rapids, MI: HarperCollins/Blink.
Grimes, Nikki. 2002. *Bronx Masquerade.* New York: Dial.
Grimes, Nikki. 2016 (Reprint.) *Dark Sons.* Grand Rapids, MI: HarperCollins/Blink.
Holt, K. A. 2014. *Rhyme Schemer.* San Francisco: Chronicle.
Koertge, Ron, 2003. *Shakespeare Bats Clean-up.* Somerville, MA: Candlewick.
Koertge, Ron. 2010. *Shakespeare Makes the Playoffs.* Somerville, MA: Candlewick.
McCall, Guadalupe Garcia. 2011. *Under the Mesquite.* Lee & Low.
Myers, Walter Dean. 2011. *We are America; A Tribute from the Heart.* Ill. by Christopher Myers. New York: HarperCollins.
Smith, Charles R. Jr. 2003. *I Am America.* New York: Scholastic.
Smith, Hope Anita. 2003. *The Way a Door Closes.* New York: Henry Holt.
Smith, Hope Anita. 2008. *Keeping the Night Watch.* New York: Henry Holt.
Soto, Gary. 2002. *Fearless Fernie: Hanging Out with Fernie & Me.* New York: Putnam.
Soto, Gary. 2005. *Worlds Apart: Fernie and Me.* New York: Putnam.
Woodson, Jacqueline. 2014. *Brown Girl Dreaming.* New York: Nancy Paulsen Books/Penguin.

Section 10:

Social Context & Contemporary Issues to Explore

Context

No story exists without context. This is true in all of literature. For contemporary young adult literature, this is especially true. Characters written for young adults deal with difficult realities, ideas, actions, and consequences. In a world defined by an overload of media and messaging, these characters serve as guides for their young readers – helping to catalyze the critical thinking and decision making that they will employ for the rest of their lives. This is an essential function of good literature in the 21st century, and *Swing* exemplifies this.

While reading Swing, your students will encounter parts of the text that can generate conversation on:

- Teen Dating & Emotional Health
- Race
- Gender Roles
- Consent
- The Treatment/Repatriation of Veterans
- Police Violence
- Civil Disobedience/Kneeling during the National Anthem
- The Evolving Symbolic Meaning of "America" or of the American Flag to different groups of people.

Kids will bring this up to each other and to you. Do not ignore this. Teens pay attention to what we teach, and they note what we sidestep. Here are a few questions that you can use to generate quiet reflection, independent writing or group discussions on any topics that surface while students are reading this or any other text.

1. Which points of view are represented here? How?
2. Which points of view are not represented?
3. Does this portrayal seem fair?
4. What is the author trying to make me think/feel? What techniques are they using?
5. Do I trust this text? Why?
6. How might affect the way that I think or act?

These questions are not easily answered. Fortunately, the power in them does not live in the answer. These questions are powerful because of the work that kids must do to find answers that work for them. Teachers, remember to allow your students the space to engage with each other in these conversations. Here, the journey matters more than the destination.

Using The Book To Think Specifically About Race, Gender, Class, or Other Issues That Emerge

When kids talk about the issues embedded in this book, their conversations will not be "neutral". Love, gender, music, patriotism, sports, class and race relations are passionately debated in almost all sectors of public life. Your classroom will be no different. You can and should encourage this kind of conversation. The ideal of American democracy rests on the foundation of a well-read and opinionated populace. This starts in your classroom. *Swing* is not just a beautiful story in verse, it is an invitation to recommit to the democratic ideals of reading, thinking, questioning, and principled debate.

Here are some questions that you will want to have ready for when you engage your students or for when these issues surface organically:

1. How did this book/scene/poem make you feel?
2. What do you think about this issue?
3. How did you come to this way of thinking?
4. What parts of the book/scene/poem were in line with your thinking?
5. Were there any parts of the book that challenged your thinking? How?
6. How is your thinking different as a result of this book/scene/poem?

Section 10:
Social Context & Contemporary Issues to Explore

Ideas for Social Action & Engagement Beyond the Book

Letter writing, volunteer service, and informational interviews are great ways for kids to learn more about the issues presented in this book. Young adults don't have to rely on us for everything. There are several local and national organizations that can provide education, experience, or brief insight on a range of issues. You can establish connections with veterans organizations, mental health facilities, relationship experts, therapists, scholars, and social service organizations.

These connections are the ones that kids most often cite when writing college essays or describing their most transformative learning experiences. *Swing* gives you an opportunity to give your students that powerful advantage.

For more information about the authors and their work:

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