

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for Slam! by Walter Dean Myers

Book Information

Walter Dean Myers, Slam!
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Interest Level: UG

Seventeen-year-old "Slam" Harris is counting on his noteworthy basketball talents to get him out of the inner city and give him a chance to succeed in life, but his coach sees things differently.

Award: ALA Best Book for Young Adults; Coretta Scott King Award/Honors

Topics: Community Life, Prejudice; Community Life, School; English in a Flash Recommended List, Library 3, Chapter 3, 90%; People, African American; READNOW - Demco Media Turtleback Books, Demco Media - Read Now Grades 9+; Recommended Reading, Children's Literature Choice; Recommended Reading, IRA/CBC Choice; Recommended Reading, NY Publ. Library Best Books for the Teen Age; Sports/Recreation, Basketball

Main Characters

Grandma Ellie Slam's grandmother, who is very ill with a tumor

Greg "Slam" Harris the principal character in the story, a seventeen-year-old Harlem boy who has dreams of making it to the NBA

Ice Slam's best friend, who turns out to be dealing in drugs

Moms and Pops Slam's parents; his mother struggles to make Slam see he needs to do well in school, while his father is often unemployed

Mr. Goldstein (Goldy) the assistant basketball coach, who tries to help Slam with his attitude about life

Mr. Nipper the head basketball coach, who does not like Slam's self-centered attitude on the basketball court

Mtisha another good friend of Slam, who is confused as to what kind of relationship she thinks the two should have

Nick, Ducky, Trip, Jimmy players on Latimer's basketball team

Vocabulary

diss to insult or put down a person

magnet school a specialized school that attracts students from a wide area

prima donna a conceited person

the pill a slang term for a basketball

vials small containers, usually with a closure

Synopsis

Seventeen-year-old Greg "Slam" Harris has a passion for basketball and dreams of being in the NBA. He lives in Harlem with his mother, father, and younger brother, Derek. His mother wants Slam to have a bright future and knows the first step is making sure he gets decent grades in school. Slam struggles with math and does not like the idea of being tutored. Slam's father is most often unemployed, which leads to his drinking and mood swings.

Slam is chosen to attend Latimer, a magnet school for visual arts. The principal, Mr. Tate, warns him that if his grades are not good, he will not be able to stay on the basketball team, nor will he be eligible for any basketball scholarships. The head basketball coach, Mr. Nipper, makes it very clear he does not like Slam's "attitude problem" on the court. Slam often sits on the bench during the first half of each game, but when he gets the chance to play, he outplays all of the other players.

Along with his struggles in school and on the basketball team, Slam tries to discover if his friend, Ice, has taken the wrong path and turned to drug dealing. Ice wears flashy clothes and always has a pocket full of money. Slam's awareness of Harlem's horrors is magnified as he videotapes his life and environment for a class project. Everywhere he turns someone is trying to lecture him. His teachers,

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coaches, mother, and Grandma Ellie feel the need to tell him he is doing wrong. Goldy tries to warn Slam that the "only difference between on the court and off the court is that everybody is in the game off the court."

Latimer beats Slam's old school, Carver, to make it to the Tournament of Champions. That night Slam discovers Ice is dealing drugs, when he sees his friend give two vials to a young girl at a party. He realizes he and Ice are playing two different games and wants no part of the path Ice has chosen.

Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

Initial Understanding

Goldy tells Slam, "The only difference between on the court and off the court is that everybody is in the game off the court." What point is he trying to make?

He was trying to make Slam understand he could not just be a bystander in life, but needs to be involved in what happens to him. He needs to take responsibility for his actions, and he should learn to listen to what people tell him, whether he appreciates their words or not.

Literary Analysis

After Slam discovers Ice is dealing drugs, he considers his friend "one of Harlem's dead." He does not actually mean Ice had died. What do you think he means?

Responses should include the idea that Ice was heading toward a life of trouble filled with dead ends, negative changes, jail, violence, etc.

Inferential Comprehension

How realistic are Slam's dreams of making into the NBA?

Students should be aware that the possibility of Slam making it into professional basketball is very low. Only a small percentage of college athletes go on to achieve professional status. Even fewer of these athletes have the ability to remain professional for a long period of time.

Constructing Meaning

Do you think Slam is doing the right thing by deciding to stay away from Ice at the end of the story? Should he try harder to help Ice, or would that just make matters worse?

Answers will vary. Students may say that Slam is doing the right thing by protecting his own future. Some may accuse Slam of turning his back on his best friend, while others may say that Ice will never listen to Slam and the best thing to do is to leave him alone.

Teachable Skills

Recognizing Setting Slam lives in modern day Harlem, New York City. New York City consists of five boroughs. Have students define "borough" and identify the five found in New York City. In which borough can Harlem be found? Students should research Harlem's history. They can also identify current 'notables' about Harlem including schools, landmarks, architecture, and culture.

Understanding Literary Features Hold a class discussion regarding the themes presented in *SLAM!* Brainstorm ideas and write them on the board. Themes might include the negative and positive roles of one's environment while growing up, friendships, self-worth, self-centeredness, the importance of being a team player, competitiveness on and off the basketball court, and hopes and dreams for the future. Have students determine which characters can be identified within each theme.

Understanding Characterization Slam and Ice

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have been best friends for years. They grew up together and attended the same school until Slam moved to Latimer. Have students choose one of these two characters and instruct them to write a few paragraphs about the positive and negative aspects of his personality.

Understanding the Author's Craft The author wrote this story in the first-person perspective. The scenes are told through the eyes of Slam. Working in small groups, have students choose one of Latimer's basketball games to re-write as told by a sports writer for a local newspaper.