



Classroom Guide for
DESHAWN DAYS
Written by **Tony Medina**
Illustrated by **R. Gregory Christie**

Reading Level

*Reading Level: Grades 1-2 (Poetry)
Interest Level: Grades 2-6
Guided Reading Level: M
Accelerated Reader® Level/Points: 4.2/.5
Lexile™ Measure: NP

Themes

Family Love, Growing Up/Self-Esteem, Urban Life, African American Interest

Synopsis

A ten-year-old boy tells about himself in poems that celebrate family, friends, neighbors, and the urban street on which he lives. Through DeShawn's eyes and words, readers get a sense of his life, the good times and the bad. DeShawn's love of his grandmother and his enjoyment of everything from rap to hot chocolate are vividly portrayed. His sadness at the suffering of others and his antipathy toward graffiti reflect the harsher aspects of his life.

Background

Author Tony Medina comes from a world similar to that of his main character DeShawn. As Medina says, "I was a skinny brown boy from the projects with asthma, an active imagination, and a grandmother who was there for me." Medina felt that the available literature for children did not address the kids he grew up with, so he wrote *DeShawn Days* "to promote literacy and solidarity among 'sensitive urban youth'."

BEFORE READING**Prereading Focus Questions**

Before introducing the book, you may wish to have students discuss one or more of the following questions as a motivation for reading.

1. How would you describe your neighborhood? What do you like about it? What don't you like?
2. What is special about your family? How is your family the same as or different from those of your friends?
3. Who comforts you when you are afraid or ill? What does that person do to help you or make you feel better?
4. What do you like about poetry? Do you have a favorite poem? What is it about?

Teaching Tip

Since DESHAWN DAYS is a story told in verse, you may wish to feature this book as part of your celebration of National Poetry Month in April.

Exploring the Book

Display the book cover and discuss the title and jacket illustration with students. Ask them to talk about how they think the boy in the picture feels. Why do they think he feels that way?

Read aloud the author's and illustrator's names. Ask students if they familiar with other works by either person. If so, have volunteers talk about those works.

Review the parts of the book including the title page, dedication, introductory page, poems, and the afterword.

Setting a Purpose for Reading

Have students read to find out what "DeShawn Days" are and what they are like.

VOCABULARY

Write the following words from the book on the chalkboard and ask students what the words have in common. Guide students to recognize that the words are compound words. Have students break each compound into two words. Point out that understanding the smaller words that make up larger compound words is often helpful in determining meaning. Encourage students to use these compound words in original sentences.

cornbread
pacemaker
everybody
grandmother
homework

sandbox
handball
staircase
sometimes
crossword

everything
summertime
baseball
cartwheel
wintertime

Teacher Tip

Tell students that poets often use what is called “poetic license.” Poets may write in dialect or nonstandard English to achieve a certain effect as Medina does in poems such as “My Cousin Tiffany.” Sometimes poets do not use capital letters or standard punctuation. Point out that Medina’s poems are not punctuated, except for the occasional exclamation point.

READING AND RESPONDING**Discussion Questions**

After students have read the book, use these or similar questions to help guide their understanding of the book. Encourage students to refer to passages in the book to support their responses.

1. Who is telling the poems in this book? How do you know this?
2. Who lives in DeShawn’s house? How would you describe each person?
3. What does DeShawn learn from his grandmother? How does she help him? Why is their time together important to him?
4. What is life like in DeShawn’s neighborhood?
5. How do you think DeShawn feels about his cousin Tiffany?
6. Why does DeShawn watch the news on television? How does the news make him feel? What does this tell you about DeShawn?
7. Why does DeShawn enjoy his friendship with Johnny Tse? How are the boys alike? How are they different?
8. Why do you think DeShawn hates graffiti? How does he recover from his bad dream about it?
9. How does rap make DeShawn feel? Why?
10. What do DeShawn and his friends do for fun on their block?
11. Why does DeShawn want to cheer people up?
12. What happens that makes DeShawn say he doesn’t want it to be sunny anymore?
13. What does the Princess story tell you about DeShawn?

Literature Circles

If you use literature circles during reading time, students might find the following suggestions helpful in developing the roles of the circle members.

- The **Questioner** might use questions similar to those in the Discussion Question section of this guide to help group members explore the poems.
- The **Passage Locator** might look for lines that illuminate DeShawn's thoughts and feelings.
- The **Illustrator** might draw scenes of DeShawn's life not shown in the illustrations.
- The **Connector** might find other poems about a young person's feelings to share with the group.
- The **Summarizer** might provide a brief summary of each poem for the group.
- The **Investigator** might find additional poems about urban life.

*There are many resource books available with more information about organizing and implementing literature circles. Three such books you may wish to refer to are: *Getting Started With Literature Circles* by Katherine L. Schlick Noe and Nancy J. Johnson (Christopher-Gordon, 1999), *Literature Circles: Voice And Choice In Book Clubs And Reading Groups* by Harvey Daniels (Stenhouse, 2002), and *Literature Circles Resource Guide* by Bonnie Campbell Hill, Katherine L. Schlick Noe, and Nancy J. Johnson (Christopher-Gordon, 2000).

Reader's Response

Use the following questions or similar ones to help students practice active reading and personalize what they have read. Suggest that students respond in reader's journals or in oral discussion.

1. Which poem did you like best? Why?
2. How do the poems tell the story of DeShawn?
3. Why is the art important to this book? Which illustrations did you like best? Why? How did they help you understand the poems?
4. How are you and DeShawn alike? How are you different?
5. What would you like to ask or tell DeShawn?

Other Writing Activities

You may wish to have students participate in one or more of the following writing activities. Set aside time for them to share and discuss their work.

1. Remind students that April is National Poetry Month. Encourage them to write their own poems about their families, friends, or neighborhoods.
2. Talk about sensory images in poetry. Have students reread "What Is Life Like in the 'Hood.'" Then have them write about the sensory images of sight, sound, taste, smell, and touch that are found in the poem.
3. Ask students to review DeShawn's rap and then write one of their own.

4. Have students pretend they are in DeShawn's class at school. Have them write a letter to cheer up the children in the news.
5. In the poem "My Princess Story," DeShawn is a hero. Ask students to write a paragraph telling what they would do as a hero.

ELL (ESL) Teaching Strategies

These strategies might be helpful to use with students who are learning to speak English as a second language.

1. Preview each poem. Make key words as concrete as possible by linking them to the art, to movements, or to classroom or common objects.
2. Read the poems aloud as students follow along. Invite them to join in on subsequent rereadings when they are ready.
3. Record a reading of the poems on an audiocassette or CD. Allow students to listen to the recording as they follow along in the book.

INTERDISCIPLINARY ACTIVITIES

Social Studies

Remind students that DeShawn watches the news because his teacher requires it so that he and his classmates will know what is going on in the world. DeShawn finds the news upsetting and scary. Point out that although much of the news is about disturbing events, not all news is. Challenge students to find news stories in newspapers or magazines that are upbeat and focus on new or positive things. Ask students to share their news stories with the class, then create a bulletin board titled GOOD NEWS where students can display their stories.

Language Arts

1. The poems in DESHAWN DAYS can be used to teach a variety of poetic devices such as:

- rhyme in "I Love Rap" ("I love rap and I love rhyming and sometimes I be timing")
- simile in "My Grandmother's Legs" (My grandmother's legs are like an elephant's)
- metaphor in "When My Grandmother Died" ("She was the whole world")
- repetition in "In My House" ("My uncle my uncle")
- personification in "I Hate Graffiti" ("and the scary tangly black marker words grabbed me")

2. Point out that like some other poets, Tony Medina does not use punctuation in his poems. However, it is possible to determine where sentences begin and end by identifying complete thoughts. Write a poem such as "My Princess Story" on the chalkboard and challenge students to indicate where they would place periods to show that sentences are ending.

Reading and Art

Read aloud the section from the Afterword in which Tony Medina discusses how "reading was like watching TV" because he used his imagination to make pictures in his mind. Invite students to illustrate a scene they have pictured in their imaginations after reading a passage from a book.

Health and Nutrition

In one of the poems, DeShawn tells readers that his grandmother has health problems from eating too much salt and too much sugar. Explain that many foods contain these ingredients and that too much of them can cause serious problems. Have students write down everything they eat for one day. Then provide government guidelines for healthy eating and have students compare their own diets to a recommended one. Students might work with partners to plan healthy menus for a week. Students can go to <www.mypyramid.gov> for guidance in planning a healthy diet.

Music

Some students might enjoy performing DeShawn's rap for the class. Suggest that they assign roles and spend some time practicing beforehand. Students might also want to perform rap songs they themselves have written.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tony Medina grew up in the projects in the South Bronx of New York City. He says that his childhood world was similar to that of DeShawn. Medina graduated from Baruch College with a B.A. in literature, taught English at Long Island University, and then went on to earn masters and doctorate degrees. Of Black Puerto Rican descent, Medina was chosen by *Writer's Digest* as one of the top ten poets to watch in the new millennium. In addition to *DEshawn Days*, Medina has written *Christmas Makes Me Think* and *Love to Langston*, and contributed to the poetry collection *Love to Mamá: A Tribute to Mothers*. As an advocate for literacy among today's youth, Medina emphasizes not only the importance of being able to read, but of loving to read. Medina has also written extensively for an adult audience including four poetry collections.

ABOUT THE ILLUSTRATOR

R. Gregory Christie is a three-time winner of the Coretta Scott King Illustrator Award Honor for his books *The Palm Of My Heart*, *Only Passing Through*, and *Brothers in Hope*. He was born and raised in New Jersey and received his fine arts degree from the School of Visual Arts in New York City. Christie's artwork has appeared in numerous commercial publications, including *The New York Times*, the *Village Voice*, *The New Yorker*, *Parenting* magazine, and on many CD album covers. Other books he has illustrated for Lee & Low include *Richard Wright and the Library Card* and *Love to Langston*.

Awards & Honors:

- starred review, *School Library Journal*
- Paterson Prize for Books for Young People 2002
- "Choices," Cooperative Children's Book Center (CCBC)
- Children's Media Award, Parent's Guide
- Children's Literature Choice List
- Children's Literature New England Reading List

RESOURCES ON THE WEB

Learn more about *DEshawn Days*:

http://www.leeandlow.com/books/41/hc/deshawn_days

Other books illustrated by R. Gregory Christie:

Brothers in Hope:

http://www.leeandlow.com/books/26/hc/brothers_in_hope_the_story_of_the_lost_boys_of_sudan

Love to Langston

http://www.leeandlow.com/books/81/hc/love_to_langston

The Palm of My Heart

http://www.leeandlow.com/books/88/hc/the_palm_of_my_heart_poetry_by_african_american_children

Richard Wright and the Library Card

http://www.leeandlow.com/books/99/hc/richard_wright_and_the_library_card

BookTalk with R. Gregory Christie about *The Palm of My Heart*:

<http://www.leeandlow.com/p/christie.mhtml>

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Book Information

\$8.95, PAPERBACK

ISBN: 978-1-58430-228-5

\$16.95, HARDCOVER

ISBN 978-1-58430-022-9

32 PAGES, 8-3/8 X 10-1/2

*Reading Level: Grades 1–2 (poetry)

Interest Level: Grades 2–6

Guided Reading Level: M

Accelerated Reader® Level/Points: 4.2/.5

Lexile™ Measure: NP

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