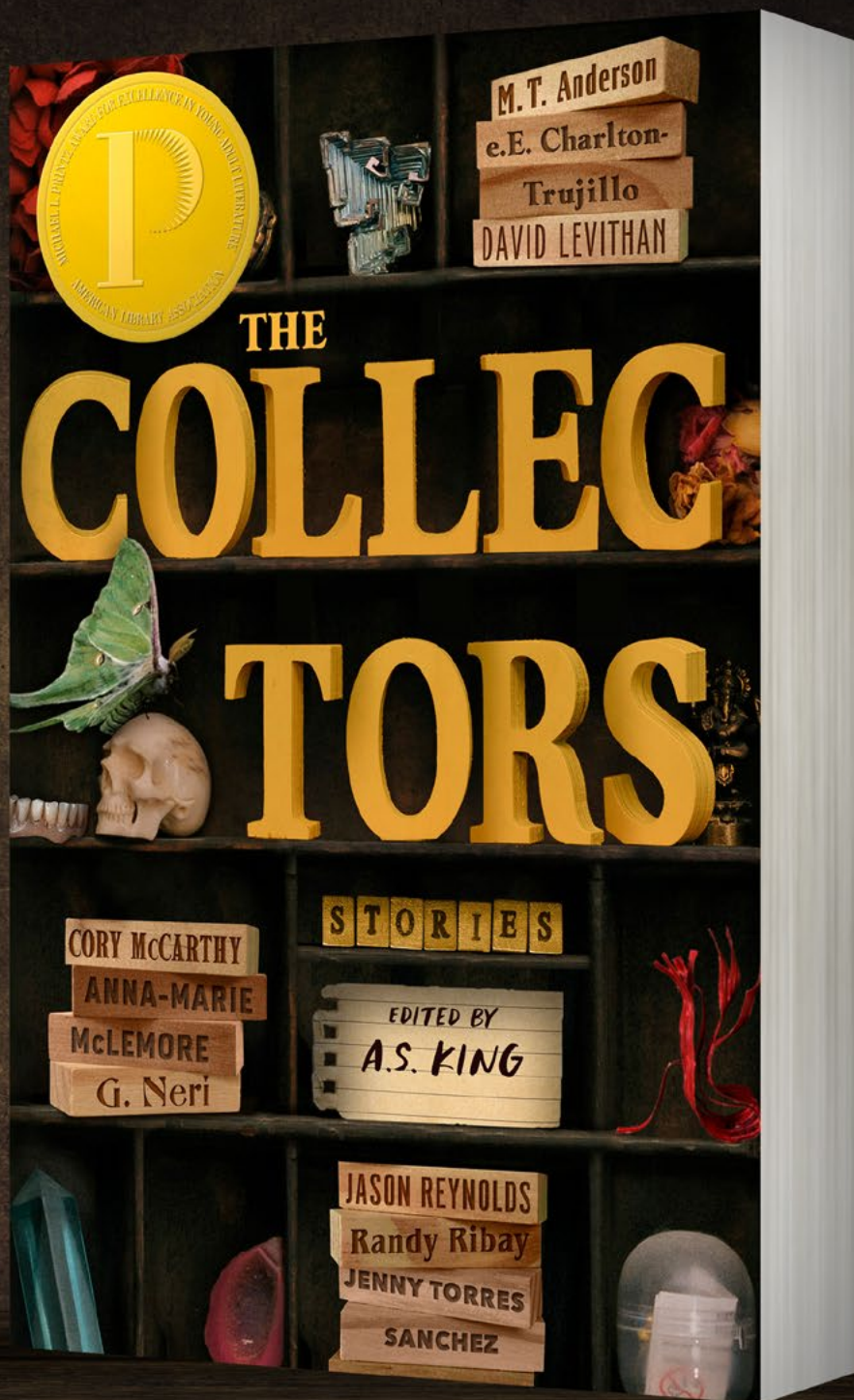


# AN EDUCATOR'S GUIDE TO



WINNER OF THE  
MICHAEL L. PRINTZ AWARD FOR  
EXCELLENCE IN YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE!





**“MASTERFULLY  
COLLECTED.”**

–*SCHOOL LIBRARY JOURNAL*,  
starred review



**“ECLECTIC, POIGNANT,  
AND INTROSPECTIVE.”**

–*KIRKUS REVIEWS*,  
starred review



**“WONDERFULLY  
GENRE-DEFYING.”**

–*BOOKLIST*,  
starred review

## ABOUT THE EDITOR

What is an editor? In this case, an editor is someone who collects stories written by other people. This editor, A.S. King, resides in Pennsylvania, and for *The Collectors* she asked and writers she admires to share their stories about things people like to collect. In this way, King is also the creator of the collection known as *The Collectors* (along with being the writer of one of the stories). *The Collectors* is the recipient of the 2024 Michael L. Printz Award, the first anthology to win this award. King has also won the Michael L. Printz Award in 2020 for her novel, *Dig*, and is the first recipient to win two times.

## ABOUT THE WRITERS

At the end of the collection, King includes brief biographies for the writers of these stories. As you will see, the stories reflect the individual experiences and interests that each writer has had in their lifetime. It is strongly encouraged that, for each of the works that speaks to you, you collect other stories that those writers have created.

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This guide was written by Laura and James Nicosia. They have collected more than sixty years of teaching between them, including children’s and young adult literature courses, where they introduced many of these writers to their students, and, they like to think, to the world. Their collections include (among others) *Notable American Women Writers*, *Encyclopedia of African-American Writing*, and *Notable Writers of the American West and the Native American Experience*. They have taught, individually and collectively, to human beings from the age of three to eighty-four. We thank the graduate students in Laura’s spring 2024 class for their insights (Narges Azami, Domenick Castellano, Leila Chomski, Jade Criso, Daniel Fleming, Jennifer Lyon, Lexi Merring, Cesar Negroni, Grace Pula, Sarah Ramirez).

# PRE- AND POST-READING THINGS TO COLLECT & PONDER

## PRE-READING QUESTIONS

What impact might telling a story using short lines/verse/images have on a reader?

How can we remind people to practice understanding and empathy?

How can you help students discover the connections between themselves and the characters in the stories?

How can you foster the love of language and storytelling using these stories?

How can students use these stories to create their own narratives?



## MOTIFS

First, what is a motif, and how does it differ from a theme? A motif is any recurring element—image, phrase, idea, object—whose reappearance in a work, or multiple works, in this collection, unifies those works in the reader's mind. Pay attention to details as you read, and you will find certain motifs repeating. Discussing how two writers might have the same feelings about an item or idea is one of the more rewarding conversations one can have about stories. It leads us to consider, among other things, if there are certain objects and ideas that have a more universally positive (or negative) connotation for us.

## THEMES

Ask yourself some of the following questions before, during, and after you read each story:

What is this writer trying to teach me?

What ideas are repeated in this story? In multiple stories?

How does this character seem similar to previous ones? How are they different?

Does this writer share the same concerns, values, or attitudes with any of the previous writers?

Do you wonder if any of the writers read any of the other stories, because they seem to be saying similar things using different settings or different characters?

Do you think some writers would disagree with each other regarding the "main idea" of their stories?

In most of the above cases, considering these questions is a matter of "themes." The "overall ideas" or lessons a writer might ask a reader to consider long after they have finished reading their work is what we mean when considering themes. Keep those ideas in mind as you read, and perhaps collect them in notes in the margins of your book (a great place for collecting themes) or in a file, or even on sticky notes (as King does).



## LITERARY TERMINOLOGIES

Why are we discussing various literary terms if you, the reader or teacher, simply want to enjoy the stories collected in *The Collectors*? The fact is, particularly in considering diverse stories created by multiple writers, it is vital to have the foundation of common vocabulary to think about and discuss the stories . . . what makes them similar, what makes them different, what shared ideologies might exist between them, and, among others, what makes each of them fit into the general motif of collecting?

Indeed, some of the writers overtly refer to tangible collections (David Levithan, Jason Reynolds, M.T. Anderson), while others might not seem to refer to collections at all. Having awareness of what differentiates a motif from a symbol, from an image, from a theme, can help readers discuss the nuances of stories in much richer, much more rewarding ways.

# PRE- AND POST-READING THINGS TO COLLECT & PONDER

## SYMBOLS & IMAGERY

While motifs can be any number of (seemingly random) concepts placed in stories, we can never know for certain what writers' intentions are. Seeking answers from motifs instead of from the rich details authors have provided in their stories is ignoring the best evidence. Imagery is any visual element that might be expressed in a story—something that is accessible by the sense of sight. To pass from being a motif to being labeled “imagery” usually requires the image to become a concrete representation of a sense impression, a feeling, or an idea.

The poetic goal in imagery is for the image to have an emotional effect: the image of a spring day with twittering birds might evoke calm and peace. It depends, of course, on the details of the story, but sensitive readers can understand what characters might be thinking when they are gazing out among the greenery of springtime or the bleakness of a winter landscape. If you collect symbols as you read these stories, then perhaps that means you recognize how physical objects can stand for something beyond their literal meanings. You notice how an open door symbolizes something very different from a closed one.

## OTHER QUESTIONS

Name one thing you believe there should be more of in the world.

What one thing do you believe there should be less of in the world?

What do you consider to be your home?

Is there anything or anybody you think would consider you their home?

Have you ever felt pressured, by yourself or others, to do something you didn't want to do?

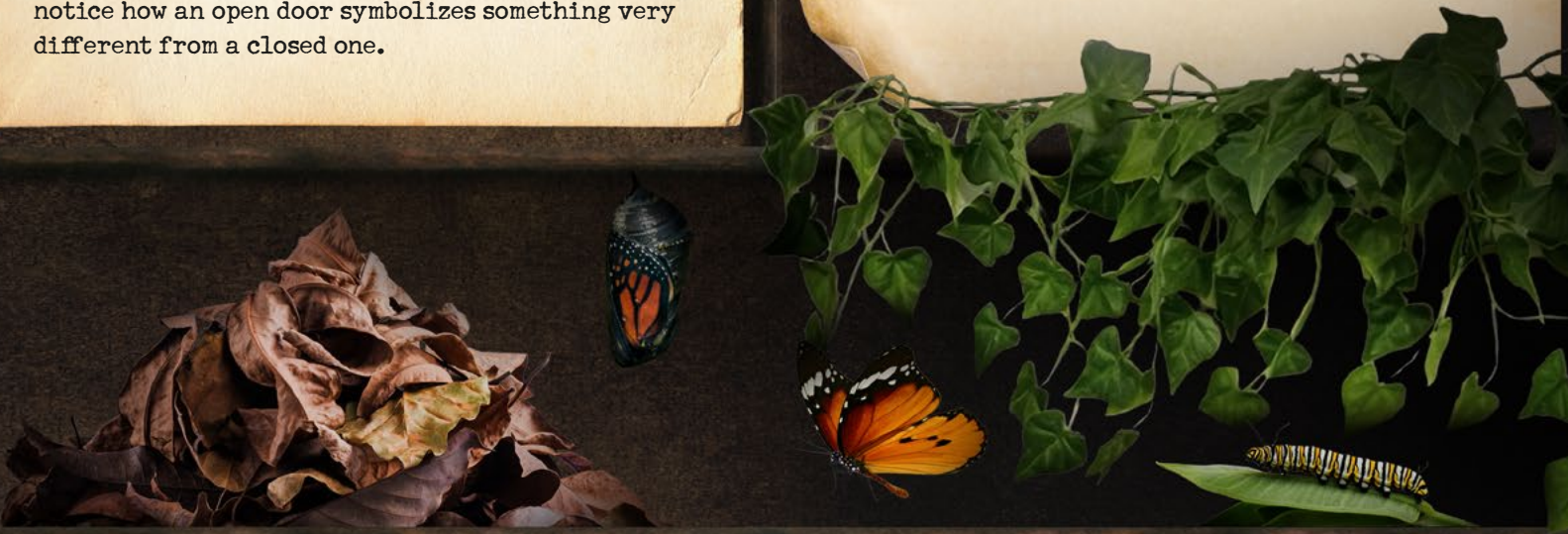
Who or what makes you feel seen?

In school, how important do you think it is to be a member of a friend group, club, team, or community? Do you (or did you ever) resist others within your group to maintain your individual identity, or is/was it frequently more important to conform to the standards and expectations of that group?

Have you ever collected anything? Do you still? If not, why do you think you stopped?

## POST-READING CONSIDERATIONS

A strong way to tie together the thoughts, themes, ideas, and lessons of the stories is to revisit all the pre-reading considerations. We know, it sounds oversimplistic, but pedagogy suggests that the more we reconsider after reading the very things we thought before reading, the more we recognize our own development of ideas and beliefs, and the richer our reading experiences, and living experiences, become.



# A GUIDE FOR “PLAY HOUSE”

## “Play House”



Courtesy Anna-Marie McLemore

Anna-Marie McLemore’s “Play House” concerns Miranda Asturias, a Latina girl with a beautiful mother. The two of them are left to fend for themselves when Miranda’s father gets a job away for the summer. Many men “visit” the home, watching (out for) the beautiful mother, making life difficult for the protagonist. Through considerable imagery and symbolism, the story explores what it means to be watched as a woman, to be put on display, admired, and ogled (a.k.a. “male gaze”). Men, the story asserts, consider their role as “protectors” of women, but they become as threatening as any other perceived danger.

Miranda, the story’s protagonist, collects objects like glass birds and aprons, but, as the story progresses, begins to collect symbols of womanhood like her mother’s clothes, cutlery, and lipstick. She dresses herself up like a doll in imitation of her mother as a symbol of female beauty. In an altercation with one of the men, River, she intuitively rejects this identity (by pushing him) and breaks a collected piece as well as a symbol of River’s masculinity (his arm). She keeps this piece of his arm as a final symbol and stops taking items from her mother.

## PRE-READING QUESTIONS

- When you were little, what toys did you play with?
- Do those toys represent typical toys for your gender at the time, or exceptions? A little of both?
- Have you ever played house? What role did you play in that game?
- What are ways in which you’ve noticed that someone you know performs gender?
- Have you ever wanted to be like your mom? Your dad?

## UNDERSTANDING WHILE READING

- Why, at first, don’t the men leave Miranda’s house?
- Why does Miranda’s mother say she lets them stay?
- Why do you think Miranda’s mother let the visitors stay?
- How will this story affect what will happen to the characters in the future?



## THEMES

- The symbolism of womanhood on display
- Femininity equated with fragility
- The Male Gaze
- Femininity equated with being a watched and admired object
- Toxic Masculinity
- The Patriarchy
- Agency and power in breaking free from gender roles

## BRIEF DISCUSSION TOPICS

- In what ways are the characters confined by gender roles?
- What might you have done if you were Miranda?

## EXTENDED TOPICS

- Make a list of at least five things River says and feels, using quotes from the text.
- Make a list of at least five things Miranda says and feels, using quotes from the text.
- Compare the two lists. Are both characters in touch with what they are really feeling at the time, or are they unaware of deeper feelings/emotions?
- Looking at your lists: What motivates each character? How might you change each of River’s statements from what he thinks to what he might really be thinking/feeling? How might you change what Miranda is thinking into words that she could say to River?



# A GUIDE FOR “THE WHITE SAVIOR DOES NOT SAVE THE DAY”

“The White Savior

Does Not Save the Day”



Randy Ribay’s “The White Savior Does Not Save the Day” might be the most challenging for the reader to locate themselves.

As a futuristic/science-fiction/surrealist screenplay exploration of the nature of conflict, with repeated jabs at postcolonialism, the story undermines each of the genres as it embodies them. Ribay warps the reality around the characters as well as the setting, making the reader pay more attention to the narrative as well. The interplay between third-person narrative and dramatic format fuses the absurd with the plausible, and requires the reader to conceptualize fantasy and reality.

The story concerns, in one narrative, Perdita Padilla, a biracial teenager coping with the long-ago mysterious disappearance of her mother, actress Jennifer De Luca. Perdita has been obsessively collecting memorabilia on her mother’s 1970s-era television show, *The White Savior*. Her father and her stepmother are worried about her fixation, but, like most parents in YA literature, are ineffectual and inconsequential. In a competing narrative, her mother Jennifer/the White Savior engages with her show’s archnemesis, Big Brain, and, in between saving people in Third World nations, argues for her release from the show. Ultimately, Perdita learns the bizarre truth behind the disappearance of her mother, the real meaning of the rivalry between the White Savior and Big Brain, and the intersection of “reality” and “fiction.”

## PRE-READING QUESTIONS

- Have you ever wondered about other universes? What would an alternate version of yourself be like?
- What superheroes or supervillains caught your attention either in the past or present?
- Are superheroes in fiction today heroes at all?
- Is the dualistic idea of good vs. evil still relevant today?
- What is the difference between being a fan and being obsessed?
- Can anything ever be done to help disadvantaged people in developing nations?



## UNDERSTANDING WHILE READING

- What does the interplay of screenplay and prose formats accomplish in the story? How do the formats work together or against each other?
- Why is the television show called *The White Savior*? Why is it that every character in the television show gets coined for their skin color instead of their names?
- Is there significance between the fixation on race in the show and the unimportance of race in the family narrative?
- At the end of the story, Perdita’s mother tells Perdita that being the White Savior is “more of a mindset.” What is that mindset?

## BRIEF DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Why was the show *The White Savior* canceled in Perdita’s reality?
- What was the true reason once Perdita encountered Big Brain?
- Why does Perdita’s father hate his daughter’s obsession with *The White Savior*?
- What are the effects of the ending having Perdita becoming the new “White Savior”?
- What does Ribay’s presentation of the cyclical nature of superheroes and supervillains suggest about the twenty-first century’s celebration of superhero action movies?

## THEMES

- The naïveté of nostalgia
- The ugliness of obsession
- The cyclical nature of good and evil
- Resignation to inequity and injustice
- Nihilism
- Systemic issues of White Supremacy
- What is reality, really?

## EXTENDED TOPICS

- Knowing the truth between the dynamic between good and evil, rich and poor, advantaged and disadvantaged, is there a way out of the cycles?
- Do the ends justify the means for Perdita’s mother?
- Is there any “happy ending” at all in this story, or are we all doomed to a cyclical life of conflict?
- Is nostalgia a productive thing? Do we tend to remember only the extremes of our experiences, but nothing closer to the reality that might lie in the middle?

# A GUIDE FOR “TAKE IT FROM ME”

## “Take It from Me”



Courtesy David Levithan

David Levithan’s first-person narrative, “Take It from Me,” might be the best place to begin any discussion of this collection. It features an accessible narrator and a clearly defined theme of collecting that allow for easy discussions. “Take It from Me” follows an unnamed protagonist from childhood to the beginning of college as they deal with an obsession with stealing from others’ collections. The protagonist steals a spoon from their Aunt Agnes’s apartment, a shell from his cousin, and various trinkets from elementary school friends. Mostly ignoring the moral implications of stealing, the protagonist reveals their individual excitement about stealing until they fall in love with K, a gender-neutral high-school classmate. Suddenly aware of the implications of stealing from someone with whom they are supposed to trust and be trusted, the protagonist tries to resist their compulsion. Told at a narrative distance by the now-adult narrator, the primary conflict may be considered the moral consequences of stealing, but it also might be considered how collecting—and even stealing—might be human nature.

Levithan interrogates the theory of collections—what they are or can be. Items like spoons and scarves can be parts of collections but so can Chiquita banana stickers and inanimate considerations. The seemingly banal items, Levithan suggests, increase in value when emotional weight is placed on them. In one case, K collects their doubts in a box, and the protagonist must confront (and ultimately reject) their own collection.

## PRE-READING ACTIVITY: INTRO QUIZ

QUESTION	ANSWER
Have you ever collected anything?	
What toys or figures were special to you?	
Has anyone ever taken something from you without permission?	
How would you describe your bedroom?	



QUESTION	ANSWER
If so, where have you kept your collection?	
What makes something “valuable” or “special”?	
How did you feel afterward? How do you think they felt once you noticed the item was “missing”?	
How might your bedroom reflect your personality? How might it not?	

“Take It from Me”

Continued

### THEMES

- Betrayals affect relationships
- Stealing affects both the thief and the victim
- Coming of age
- Love and trust



### UNDERSTANDING WHILE READING

- What inherent values do the items have for the original collector? For the protagonist?
- What happens to the relationship between the protagonist and Dylan after the sticker incident?
- Why doesn't the protagonist pick up K's box at the end?
- Is Hannah wrong for stealing the Burberry scarf for the protagonist?
- The story traces the narrator from childhood through graduation. Does the tone shift at any point? How? Why?
- What motivates the protagonist to steal?
- How is the box of doubts different from the Chiquita banana stickers?



### BRIEF DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Who suffers most from stealing, and how does the narrative tell us this?
- How does not knowing the protagonist's name impact the story?
- What would you do if your friend stole something expensive for you?



### EXTENDED TOPICS

- Consider the quote: “I am a reliable narrator, but I shouldn't necessarily be considered a sympathetic one” (65). How does the perspective of the narrator impact how we feel about their victims?
- How does stealing change relationships, and where is this seen in the text?
- Is there any significant difference between the end of the narrator's childhood relationships, and the one with K? What does that say about the nature of stealing? Of collecting?



# A GUIDE FOR “RING OF FIRE”

## “Ring of Fire”



“Ring of Fire” by Jenny Torres Sanchez marries sadness and beauty with large doses of symbolism. It offers a way to deal with childhood trauma. After the death of her mother, teenaged Lucia wants to be free of the monotony of her life. She finds her father to be a distant and cold man who cannot help her heal. Lucia collects objects to help her through her grief over her mother’s loss and the emotional abandonment of her father. Fire, whether literal or symbolic, is the instrument through which Lucia (de)constructs and recreates herself and her memories.

In this story, collecting is both a coping mechanism and an expression of Lucia’s emotional journey. She collects matchbooks, candles, lighters, and Johnny Cash records to make sense of her past, especially memories of her mother. As Lucia collects, she adds pieces to the puzzle of her emotional world. With these symbols, the story explores themes of memory, grief, and finding oneself. Thus, collecting becomes a metaphor for the way people build bridges between the past, present, and future.

### THEMES

- Grief
- Personal discovery
- Self-knowledge
- Rebellion
- Memory
- Family
- Mental health

### UNDERSTANDING WHILE READING

- Why does Lucia wear red lipstick before playing Johnny Cash record?
- Why does Lucia steal the Johnny Cash album from the store?
- Why does Lucia decide to not go to Vinnie’s Vinyl anymore? Why does she change her mind?
- Why does Lucia ask her father about the original fire? Why does he deny it?
- Why does Lucia feel empowered after stealing the album?
- Was the fire a real event? What textual evidence supports your opinion?

### EXTENDED TOPICS

- Pretend you are Lucia and explain how Johnny Cash’s songs connect to your mother.
- Explore how each object Lucia collected serves as a cure to deal with grief and loss.
- Explore the relationship between Lucia and her father. How might they heal their wounds and grow closer together?

### BRIEF DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Analyzing Lucia’s journey: How did you deal with one of the biggest challenges of your life? How might you compare your method to Lucia’s methods of dealing with grief? What were the advantages and disadvantages of each method?
- How might it help to collect and hold things that when you’re grieving?
- Write about a time when you stood up to someone or something that was holding you back. How did you feel afterward? If you have never done that before, perhaps write about how you might want to do so in the future.
- How can you face anxieties and obstacles in ways that are less destructive than Lucia’s methods?

# A GUIDE FOR “MUSEUM OF MISERY”

## “Museum of Misery”



Courtesy Cory McCarthy

“Museum of Misery” by Cory McCarthy is the only illustrated story in the collection and is unique in its storytelling dependence upon the visual nature of black-and-white art. Though it takes up more pages than any other story, as a conceptual piece dependent upon graphics, it also contains the fewest words. Attention to the visual aspects rewards the reader with many open-ended considerations since the story is a provocative narrative about social issues plaguing those in the LGBTQIA+ community. McCarthy takes on the traumas faced by people who simply want to live their lives but who are attacked on all sides by those who are intolerant, bigoted, violent, and fearful.

Each page bombards the reader with aggressive imagery, but not every page contains words. Whether with or without words, the images demand that readers pay particular attention to not only what is immediately seen, but also to those things that are embedded within the pictures. Also, readers must be made aware of several instances of allusions to popular culture icons and references to historic moments.

The seeming simplistic style of the line drawings belie the deep messages of the images. Many young readers will need to be made familiar with references to John Lennon, Freddie Mercury, Black power, stop-and-frisk policies, and religious iconography.

## IMAGERY

- Explore how McCarthy uses varying fonts and font sizes/weights. How do these affect your understanding to the themes?
- Duck, Duck, Goose
- Discuss hidden words in pages 148–149
- How might the key on page 100 align with sections of the human brain?

## UNDERSTANDING WHILE READING

- Why does McCarthy choose to reference “Duck, Duck, Goose” on 10 pages of imagery?
- Explore the tree and branches on pages 148–149. What do you see in those branches? Why is “John Lennon was here” carved into the trunk of the tree?
- Why might McCarthy have chosen to use images and text that require the reader to turn the book 90 or 180 degrees? How does that action affect your responses to the story?
- Why does McCarthy use references to the *Titanic*?
- “Museum of Misery” addresses transphobia, homophobia, Genocide, and other social issues head on. What do you think is at the intersection of these themes and this story?

## THEMES

- Economic and class oppression
- Patriarchy
- Hate culture
- Transphobia
- Genocide
- Violence
- #MeToo



## BRIEF DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Write a prose passage or story to narrate any two pages.
- Photocopy a page/an image and color it in with crayons/markers or on your iPad. Discuss how the image is different in color.
- Explore a map of the sections of the human brain and align it with the key.



## EXTENDED TOPICS

- Draw your own museum with a room for your exhibit. What might you choose to display and how would you want those artifacts curated and displayed?
- Create a musical soundtrack for seven to ten images. Explain how the music you chose supports or develops the themes of the images as used in McCarthy’s story.
- Write a haiku about an image from the story.
- Write an essay or a story about why McCarthy chose to use skeletons to “tell” the story.
- How do the pop culture icons in this story relate to the theme(s)?

# A GUIDE FOR "LA CONCHA"

## "La Concha"



Courtesy e.E. Charlton-Trujillo

"La Concha" is the contribution by e.E. Charlton-Trujillo, Mexican American author, filmmaker, and activist. "La Concha" (which translates into "the shell," "inner ear," and as a reference to the female anatomy) is about a protagonist named Mía who collects various items and puts them into glass jars in her closet. Mía uses these items to preserve memories of her mother, who has failed to protect her from her "Model Citizen" stepfather.

These jars contain things such as dirt, buttons, or glitter, among other items that seem to hold exceptional meaning for her. The reader soon recognizes that the items also become an alternate reality for her, a means of escape from her abusive stepfather and her withdrawn (not traditionally "dead," though Mía calls her so) mother.

Several characters in this story collect items. The narrator's stepbrother became a gravedigger to collect moments of peace and quiet. The Model Citizen collects awards, and the Elote Man collects money and stories from the community.

As the story devolves, Mía withdraws into herself as a form of self-protection. She is essentially abandoned by her mother, and emotionally abused by her stepfather. The narrative also offers snapshots of Mía's superficial relationships with her Grave-Digging (Step)Brother, Elote Man, and The Pen Thief, who each become symbolic characters.

## PRE-READING QUESTIONS

- What is your favorite thing to do at school?
- What is your favorite hobby to do while you're at home?
- If you could save one item in a jar to keep forever, what would it be, and why?
- What do you think the term la concha means?
- What do you expect the story to be about?

## THEMES

- Embracing oneself
- Judging a book by its cover (or a person by their public persona)
- Coping with loss and abandonment
- Non-traditional families
- Abuse

## UNDERSTANDING WHILE READING

- Why is the narrator's stepfather referred to as The Model Citizen?
- What did the narrator's brother give up to become a gravedigger?
- What happens when the narrator "closed the curtains of her mind"?
- Is The Model Citizen alive at the end? Why or why not?
- What is the most important lesson to learn from reading this story?

## BRIEF DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Why do you believe that the author chose to use the title of "La Concha"? What does the title represent as it relates to the story?
- What impact does the setting have on the relationships between these characters?

## EXTENDED TOPICS

- What do you believe is the importance of collecting in the story? What role does collecting play in the lives of each of character?
- Who is the more interesting character, Elote Man or the Grave-Digging (Step) Brother? Write a diary entry or letter from that character to Mía explaining what you see when you look at her at the beginning of the story, or at the end.



# A GUIDE FOR “POOL BANDITS”

## “Pool Bandits”



© Edward Linsmier

G. Neri’s “Pool Bandits” is a first-person narrative about a group of boys in the 1970s who drain neighborhood pools so that they can skateboard in them. The kids collect empty pools and have adventures while seeking these skateboarding sites. Throughout their planning of their schemes, the boys bond, crack jokes, tease each other, and work together to do what they are passionate about—skateboard. Nevertheless, they face the problem of evading the police and finding new pools after their locations have been compromised. When Gio, the narrator, has a skating accident, the group gets caught and a rift forms between the boys. Their criminal activities (trespassing, smoking pot, shoplifting) indicate societal issues that may be detrimental for Gio and his friends.

Collecting in “Pool Bandits” is not an individual task—it is done as a team and bonds the boys. They collaborate to collect pools so that they can empty them and skate in them. As a team, they scope out the neighborhood, identifying ideal pools and discovering when the families will be out of town. Although the pools are physical objects, collecting them is a shared experience. The boys do not own the physical pools being collected; they only “own” the memories associated with them.

## THEMES

- Friendship
- Coming of age
- Humor
- Shoplifting
- Community



## PRE-READING QUESTIONS

- Is borrowing something without asking the same as stealing?
- If you started a collection with a group of your friends, what would you want to be collecting?
- Have you ever collected a certain type of experience rather than a material object?
- Imagine a pool filled with water; what does that make you think/feel? Imagine the same pool, empty; what does that make you think/feel?

## UNDERSTANDING WHILE READING

- Why do Gio and his friends start skateboarding in empty pools?
- Why doesn’t Gio say what he does at the cement drainage?
- Why does Gio stay hidden in the bathroom stall when his friends mention his name?
- What is the effect of not knowing the narrator’s name until eight pages into the story?
- What do the types of skateboards the boys own indicate about their backgrounds?

## BRIEF DISCUSSION TOPICS

- How does Gio’s confidence grow over the course of the story?
- What is the connotation of “pool collectors” versus “pool bandits”? Why is it significant that one name is chosen by them, and one is chosen for them?
- What would you have done if you were Gio’s friend and had witnessed his fall after he finally went vertical?
- “Pool Bandits” uses line breaks ten times throughout the story. Pick one of the line breaks and write a journal-entry in Gio’s perspective explaining what he did during that gap of time.
- Write a journal entry from Skeezer’s, Alex’s, or Bobby’s perspective that explains why they abandoned Gio.

## EXTENDED TOPICS

- What rhetorical devices does Neri use to make his characters likable, and how are they effective?
- Several songs from the 1970s are present in the story. Pick one and analyze the relevance in this story.
- Address the friend groups. What is the impact of focusing on Gio and his friends as the main characters?

# A GUIDE FOR “WE ARE LOOKING FOR HOME”

## “We Are Looking for Home”



Courtesy A.S. King

A.S. King’s “We Are Looking for Home” falls somewhere between the categories of surrealism (where details are highly symbolic rather than literal) and magic realism (where certain elements are highly realistic while others are impossible, though we accept the latter as part of that world). Throughout, the story considers the meaning of home, while examining the themes of growing up, community, mental health, forging an individual identity, and navigating relationships. It focuses on Jasper Miller as he takes on dealing with the collective “we” who tell the story. The first-person plural point of view incorporates a mixture of mystery and fascination as “We Are Looking for Home” poses the question as to who or what the “we” is.

The text states that “humans collect everything.” Among his other qualities, Jasper Miller collects an abundance of anxieties, fears, and pressures that have taken on lives of their own and exist within him. Jasper’s entities have evolved into unique personifications that morph into a talkative cluster of voices (referred to as “we”) that affect, impact, and taint Jasper’s life experiences.

## THEMES

- Mental health issues
- Damaging self-talk
- Identity and self-awareness
- Maturity
- Teenage confidence
- Seeking validation
- Cycles of abuse
- Marginalization
- Hate culture



## UNDERSTANDING WHILE READING

- Why didn’t anybody like Jasper Miller’s photo of cat litter?
- Why couldn’t Jasper simply walk away from or ignore the voices?
- What does Jasper mean when he says Lena’s text could be a clue?
- Why wasn’t hot chocolate and a movie a fair trade?



## BRIEF DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Who do you have more of in your life: the “we” or Jasper Miller?
- What could happen if Jasper doesn’t sever his relationship with the “we?”
- What was one line that stood out to you the most? Why did you pick that line?
- What is significant about the fact that only Jasper Miller and Lena have individual names or identities?
- What details can you find that differentiate the adolescent “we” from adults?



## EXTENDED TOPICS

- Why is “We Are Looking for Home” told through a first-person plural point of view? How would it be different if it were a singular narrator?
- Who are the “we”? Are they real? Whether or not you believe the “we” are real, does it matter either way?
- A) Can you identify several different “we” characters in the story? That is, does one “we” act in a different way toward Jasper and/or Lena, and share a different attitude toward life than the other “we” characters?
- B) Give each “we” a different name that identifies them.
- C) Identify their attitudes in a list.
- D) Find two quotes to support your contentions.

For example:

*We on pages 209–230: “The Haters.” They hate Jasper and Lena. Are jealous of their relationship. They hate parents. They even hate themselves.*

*“We try not to hate . . .” (211)*

*“We hate . . .” (217)*

# A GUIDE FOR “A RECORDING FOR CAROLE BEFORE IT ALL GOES”

## “A Recording for Carole Before It All Goes”



Jason Reynolds’ “A Recording for Carole Before It All Goes” has an evolving theme of collecting stories that comprise a life. Written in second-person point of view that captures its main character, Carroll (whose gender is unstated though it is, historically, a male designated name), recording memories of his grandmother’s (Carole’s) life. Named after her, Carroll is recording this timeline so that the grandmother, who struggles with Alzheimer’s, will have a way of remembering her life when Carroll is not there to remind her. Perhaps there is no more important YA writer today than Reynolds, and his accessibility and understated beauty of language comes to the forefront here, as he deftly communicates love, family, community, struggle, loss, and grief in economical brushstrokes.

The themes are not so much expressed as they are revealed, in the loving language of Carroll’s narration, and the selective detailing of Carole’s life. It is not a coincidence that Carroll plays largely in most of the family stories. The shortest story in the collection, “A Recording for Carole Before It All Goes” uses its concise length to tell a story about running out of time.

Told in Reynolds’s conversational yet sensitive tone, the emotional effect of the brief stories themselves accumulate over time, until ultimately the reader may find themselves heartbroken. The intimacy that Carroll shares with Carole almost never needs to be stated, and when it is, the reader accepts the information not as new insight but as confirmation. We are glad that Carroll recognizes her importance, and while the stories ostensibly may be for his grandmother, they are really for Carroll.

## THEMES

- Alzheimer’s disease
- Grieving
- Family
- Memories
- Intergenerational stories
- Love



## PRE-READING QUESTIONS

- Make a timeline of key events in your grandparents’ lives. What would you put in and what would you leave out?
- Is there a saying or code that your family has told you to live by?
- What code would you want to live by and how would you explain it?
- Travel back ten years from the today. What did you value the most and why back then?
- Are you named for or in honor of anyone in your family? If so, why were you named after that person?

## UNDERSTANDING WHILE READING

- Why does the narrator fully pronounce each name after it is initially introduced?
- Why does Carole love the letter C?
- Why might Carole dislike boxes but like circles?
- How do the italicized lines help to explain the themes of the story?
- Are Carole’s family members handling her condition in a healthy way?
- What are three characteristics you would use to describe Carroll?



## BRIEF DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Carole says: “They either preserve or they imprison, and I want neither. Let me wither away freely.” What might have Carole meant by this and how does it relate to the themes of the story?
- Select and analyze one of Carole’s daily activities and describe a kind of activity you have in your life that is similar. Describe that activity’s importance to you.
- Try writing a passage of this story in third-person point of view. What are the effects on the reader?

## EXTENDED TOPICS

- Carole’s Alzheimer’s diagnosis means handling grief and loss while she is still alive and physically present. How does this affect each person in the story?
- Carroll sings Stevie Wonder music. Why and how do the songs represent Carole and her life?
- Ask two to three members of your family to detail three to five of the most important moments in their lives. Create a timeline for all these moments.

# A GUIDE FOR “SWEET EVERLASTING”

## “Sweet Everlasting”



Courtesy Pantheon

M.T. Anderson’s “Sweet Everlasting,” which ends the collection, might be the most deeply steeped, as it were, in philosophical considerations. As a Dark-Romantic reconsideration of John Keats’s poem “Ode on a Grecian Urn,” the story concerns the supernatural demon-god Flaëlpagor, who randomly grants arbitrary humans their wish: “I wish this moment would last forever.” Whereas in Keats’s poem there is a celebration of moments, including an impending kiss between two lovers, in Anderson’s brief legend the narrator recognizes that his “awful collection . . . show(s) us how precious decay is, and loss, and the end of things sometimes” (256).

In addition to Flaëlpagor’s collection of human lives, the short story is a collection of people from various eras/locations who have been frozen in time. With unlimited time to think, and an inability to change anything about their circumstances, these individuals are forced into the painful realization that any extended moment is excruciating.

Broad conversations about what makes life worth living, and how humans can—or should—make the most out of life’s transience could start and end here, as disturbing as the thought might seem. Like so much of Anderson’s fiction, what we read here might not be what we want to hear, but what we need to hear. Ultimately, the story is not for the faint of heart.

## PRE-READING QUESTIONS

- Have you ever eaten so much of your favorite food that it is no longer your favorite?
- Is there a moment in your life that you wish could last forever?
- Is it possible to have too much of a good thing?
- How do you feel when others succeed when you do not?
- Can you truly love something if there is not a possibility of losing it/them? Explain.

## BRIEF DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Why must all good things come to an end?
- Can too much of a good thing be a bad thing?
- Why would someone hate a different person who never did them any harm?
- Did Flaëlpagor ever really hate humans because they walked on two legs and “for how short their lives were, how quickly they fell to aging and rot” (241)? What was Flaëlpagor’s real reason?

## UNDERSTANDING WHILE READING

- What does Flaëlpagor hate about humans?
- What phrase do humans have to think for Flaëlpagor to freeze them forever?
- How does the reader know when the narrator switches between Flaëlpagor, the humans in his collection, and the unnamed narrator?
- What happens in the page break during the story about Tuqshurmish on page 252?
- What lesson does the reader learn after discovered Flaëlpagor’s hatred of humans?
- How is the title ironic?

## THEMES

- Be careful what you wish for
- Mutability (the fleeting nature of all things)
- Too much of a good thing can be a bad thing
- Appreciating moments

## EXTENDED TOPICS

- Respond to the last line of the short story: “Because you cannot truly love anything you will not someday lose” (256). Do you agree or disagree with this statement? Compare/contrast specific evidence from the text with your own experiences.
- Choose one of the characters from the short story and offer an alternate end to their story:
  - Tell this character’s story in a way that shows what would have happened to them had their lives not been frozen in time, or
  - If they were somehow able to escape the time vacuum that Flaëlpagor put them in, how would they act after? Do not forget that a character like Raff and his girlfriend have been frozen for 575 years when we hear their story. Support your contentions with quotations from the text.