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Literature Teaching Unit

Chapter-by-Chapter Study Guide



Scorpions

by Walter Dean Myers

- Learning objectives
- Study Guide with short-answer questions
- Background information
- Vocabulary in context
- Multiple-choice test
- Essay questions
- Literary terms



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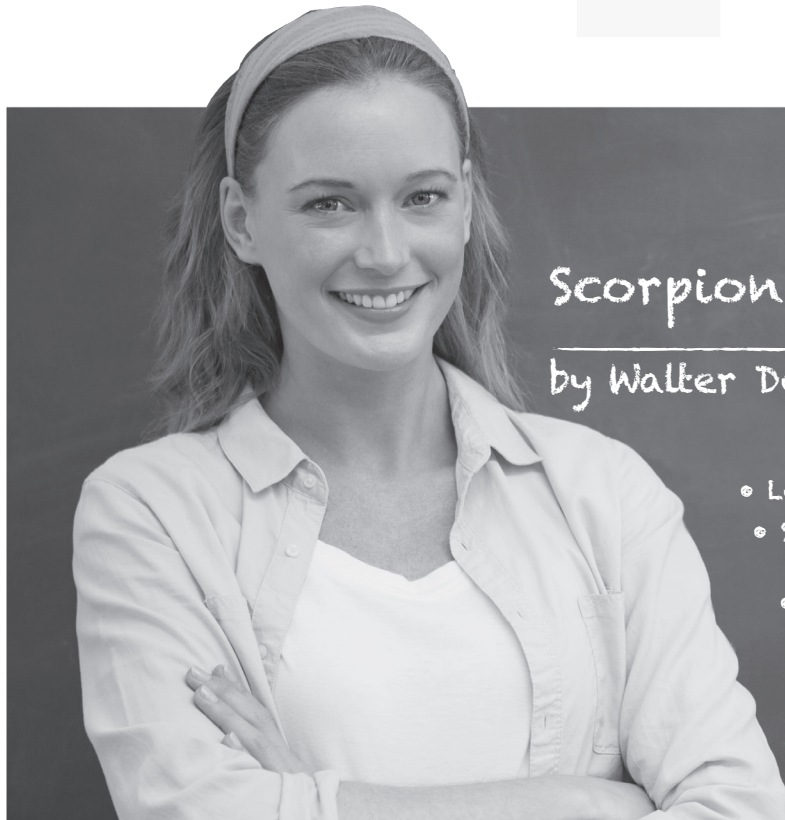
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 **Prestwick House**

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The School for Scandal

Note to the Teacher

Seventh-grader Jamal Hicks bears his burdens of poverty and prejudice with as much dignity and strength as he can muster. His mother works long hours to make ends meet, but they never do. Big brother Randy is in prison for murder, and wants the family to raise money to get him out. Little sister Sassy depends on Jamal as much as she torments him, and his father visits only occasionally, just to remind Jamal of his inadequacies. To make matters worse, the school principal and Jamal's teachers fail to understand him. In fact, they label him a troublemaker. There seems to be only one way for Jamal to assert himself: He will have to become the leader of his brother's gang, the Scorpions.

The starkly realistic story makes excellent use of urban dialogue and slang. The author has managed to avoid the use of foul language, despite the inner city setting. Although the book depicts fighting (the protagonist is being bullied) and culminates in a scene of gun violence, both elements are necessary to the plot and not gratuitous. Additionally, there are references (not graphic) to marijuana, wine, and crack cocaine. Students should be able to discuss Jamal's motive for bringing a gun to school; and teachers may use this to encourage students to talk about coping strategies in the face of violence. For example, how do they respond to bullies?

Scorpions, a Newbery Medal winner, offers readers a glimpse into the minds and hearts of young boys growing up in Harlem. Author Walter Dean Myers, has won the Coretta Scott King Award four times for his literary efforts detailing the African-American struggle for freedom. He is also the 1994 winner of the American Library Association's Margaret A. Edwards Award for his lifetime achievement in writing books for young adults. Myers has a firm grasp on what can happen to bright children who fall through the cracks, both in their family structures and in the public education system.

Scorpions

Objectives

By the end of this Unit, the student will be able to:

1. discuss the roles that power and powerlessness play in *Scorpions*.
2. discuss the ways in which pressure to “be a man” affects Jamal and his decision-making ability.
3. define foreshadowing, narrative, plot, point of view, simile, realism, and protagonist, and find examples of each in *Scorpions*.
4. write detailed character sketches of Jamal and Tito, including information on how each suffers a loss of innocence over the course of the novel.
5. discuss Myers’ use of slang and informal dialogue and what it adds to *Scorpions*.
6. identify the ways in which Principal Davidson and Jamal’s teachers fail Jamal, and discuss whether or not a school’s staff has the right to determine that a child should be on medication or sent to a school for “problem kids.”
7. discuss the significance of having Tito, the most peace-loving and gentle character in the book, end up shooting someone.
8. discuss what we learn about Jamal’s character through his friendship with Tito and his job at Mr. Gonzalez’s store.
9. discuss the power dynamics within the Scorpions and what function (aside from providing drug runners) the gang seems to serve.
10. discuss the ways in which Sassy is both like and unlike an average 8-year-old girl and what her differences suggest about the environment in which she has grown up.
11. discuss the concepts of making generalizations and having preconceived notions as they apply to *Scorpions*, particularly in regards to race and age.
12. evaluate the choices Jamal makes throughout the novel and whether he had other options.
13. discuss the ending of the novel and what it may imply about Jamal’s future and the future of the neighborhood.

Scorpions

Questions for Essay and Discussion

1. Do you think that Jamal needs to be on medication or transferred to a school for “problem kids”? Back up your answer with details from the text.
2. What does Myers’ use of slang and informal dialogue add to the novel? How would the novel change if formal dialogue were used instead?
3. Describe the interaction, throughout the book, between Sassy, Mama, and Jamal. Is it predominately positive or negative? Support your answer with details from the text.
4. Why does Jamal keep all of his troubles to himself? How may things have turned out differently if Jamal had confided in someone?
5. In what ways does Principal Davidson fail Jamal?
6. In your opinion, does *Scorpions* end on an optimistic or a pessimistic note? What can we expect about Jamal’s future?
7. Discuss the power dynamics within the Scorpions. How does one win or lose power? How closely-knit is the gang?
8. Tito and Jamal each experience a loss of innocence. Describe how each is at the beginning of the novel, what happens to change them, and the result.
12. Discuss the concept of making generalizations as it applies to *Scorpions*. What generalizations do some characters make about Puerto Ricans? What generalizations do some make about African-Americans? What generalizations do some make about young people?
13. Discuss the ways in which Sassy is both like and unlike an average 8-year-old girl. What makes her different and how do you think she got that way?
14. Aside from providing drug runners, what function does the gang serve?

Note: All page references are from the First Harper Trophy edition of *Scorpions*, copyright 1990.

Scorpions

Chapter 1

VOCABULARY

appeal – new trial

1. From what point of view does the author tell this story?

2. Who is the protagonist in this story?

What does this tell the reader about Jamal and the neighborhood in which his family lives?

4. Why are Jamal and his little sister Sassy home alone?

3. What does Jamal do at the park?

4. What is the author alluding to in the following passage?

“The thin man put his hand on his back pocket and left it there. The teenager looked at him sullenly, then walked slowly on.”

5. What sort of business is carried out in the boarded-up store where Jamal looks for Mack?

6. Who actually murdered the deli owner?

7. Why is Jamal unable to visit Randy at the prison?

8. Why is Jamal angry with Randy?

2. Who fires the gun in the park downtown, and who witnesses the firing?

3. Once at home, what does Jamal fear? Of what does this remind him?

4. According to Jamal, what can anyone who lives on his block eventually expect to have happen?

5. What is the significance of the fact that, when the cops took Randy away, he only had one shoe on and was not fully dressed?

6. What new element of fear plagues Jamal in relation to Dwayne?
