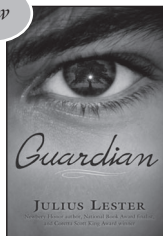


Books by Julius Lester: A Selected Bibliography

New



Guardian

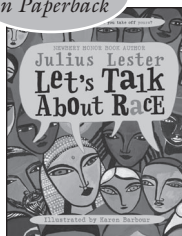
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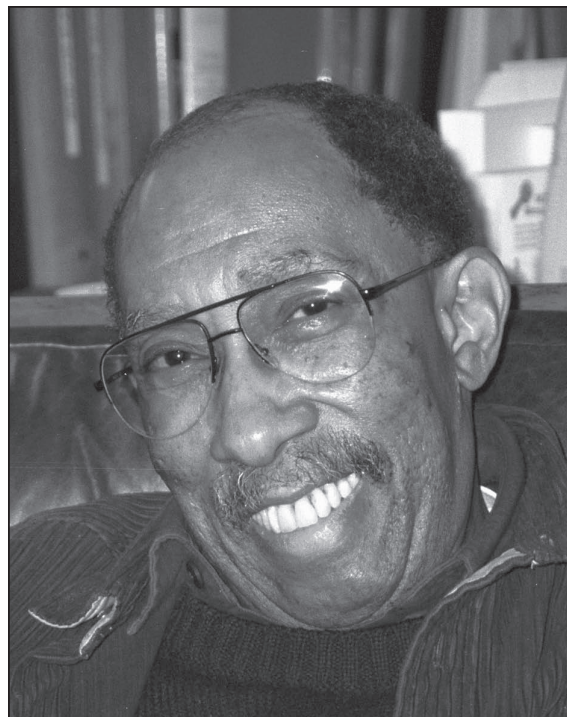


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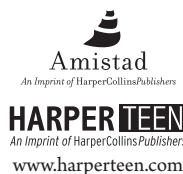
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About the Author

Julius Lester is a Newbery Honor winner, a National Book Award finalist, and a Coretta Scott King Award winner. He has published more than forty books and over two hundred essays and reviews. Additionally, Julius Lester is a civil rights activist, musician, photographer, radio talk show host, and former professor. The proud father of five grown children, he lives with his wife in western Massachusetts.



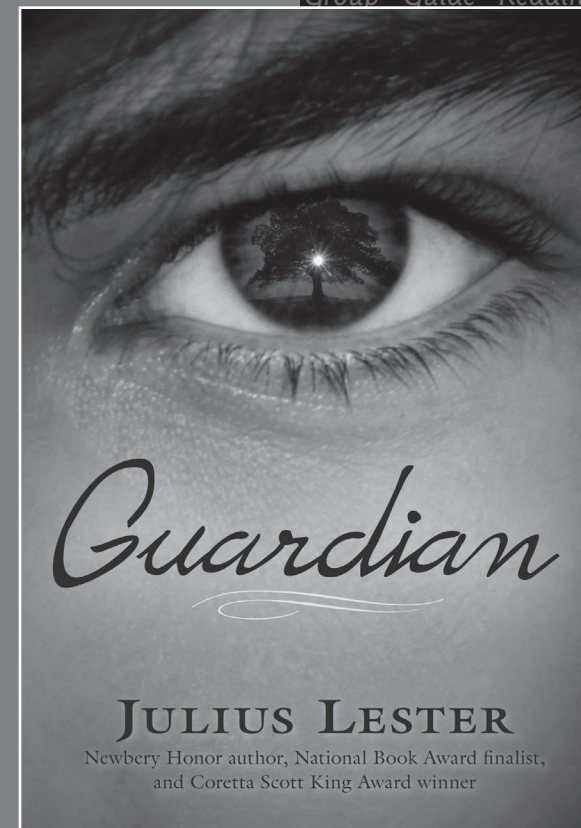
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Guide prepared by Jay Fung, Librarian at Manhattan Country Day School, New York City.

Reading Group Guide



Guardian

JULIUS LESTER

Newbery Honor author, National Book Award finalist,
and Coretta Scott King Award winner

Guardian
By Julius Lester

About the Book

In the middle of the summer heat, an event takes place that forces a boy to ask himself a gut-wrenching question: How do I speak about the unspeakable? It is 1946 in the small southern town of Davis. Two boys are friends—Ansel is white, while Willie is black. When Willie's father is wrongly accused of murdering a white teenage girl, Ansel and his father, who both know the truth, choose to keep silent. After the public lynching of Big Willie, Ansel loses his best friend and endures a lifelong burden of shame, while Ansel's father loses much more. As you navigate the murky travails of a town on the border of civil unrest in *Guardian*, ask the question: Would you have had the courage to speak up?

Discussion Questions

1. Discuss how the tone at the beginning of the narrative makes you feel. Consider such lines as: “They do not speak because they are ashamed” (p. 1); “They pray for the day when a wind will end their suffering” (p. 2); and “Both mother and son are cloaked in melancholy, a sadness arising, perhaps, from the land in which the sorrowing trees spread their roots” (p. 6).
2. Bert calls African-Americans “niggers” because “Everybody would have looked at him suspiciously if he referred to them as ‘colored’ or ‘Negro’” (p. 10). What words are considered to be taboo today? Why? If there are situations in which you shouldn’t use certain words, should you use those words at all?
3. What circumstances leading up to the lynching of Big Willie do people in the town choose to ignore? How do these unspoken issues and events affect the characters and the storyline?
4. If Ansel had been able to articulate his feelings for Mary Susan, do you think that she would have died? Talk about the “what if” of Ansel’s dilemma and how the story could have changed with Ansel’s confession.
5. What do you learn about Zeph’s character from the scene with the frog (pp. 29–32)? Why do you think the author included this scene in the novel?

6. Discuss the feelings of guilt experienced by Ansel, Bert, Maureen, and Mary Susan. How does each character deal with his or her burden of shame?
7. Are there any heroes in *Guardian*? If so, who? What does it mean to be a hero? Does a story have to have a hero? Explain.
8. Have you ever witnessed something that you knew was wrong but chose not to report or to speak out against? Would it have been okay for Ansel to remain silent if the crime had not involved someone getting hurt? Is it ever okay for a witness to stay silent, even if he or she knows something wrong has happened?
9. Do you think Bert gets what he deserves? Do you have any compassion for his choices? Why or why not?
10. Is justice served in *Guardian*? How do you personally define justice? Does Zeph get away with his crime against Mary Susan? Do the people of Davis get away with their crime against Big Willie?
11. Why does Maureen tell Ansel that she can't go away with him (pp. 109–110)? Why do you think Maureen commits suicide? Could she have made a different choice? Explain.
12. Does Ansel find closure in the novel? Do you think that the letter from his mother helps him? Why or why not?
13. How do you feel about Ansel's claim that "being a child of fourteen is no excuse" (p. 118)? Are young people absolved from personal responsibility because of their age? Explain.
14. Why do you think the book is entitled *Guardian*?
15. In his author's note, Julius Lester says that part of his responsibility as a writer is to wonder about certain moments of history, to reimagine things as they "really were" (pp. 123–4, 129). What do you think he means? Do you agree? Should writers and other artists bring attention to the more sordid parts of history? Why or why not?

Extension Activities

Right versus wrong. Have a group discussion about the many meanings of right and wrong. Make two lists, one of things considered “right” and one of things considered “wrong.” What makes an item fit into a particular category? How might something belong in both categories? Who decides what is right or wrong, good or evil? Are some people inherently good and other people inherently evil, or do their choices determine what they are?

A new ending. Take the perspective of one of the characters in *Guardian* and imagine what might have happened if he or she had chosen to act differently. Write an alternative ending to the book based upon your character's altered choice.

Knowledge as power. In the early twentieth century, the NAACP tried to get Congress to make lynching a federal crime, but a law was never passed. In fact, the arrest and prosecution of lynchers rarely happened. Research an instance when someone was actually arrested and/or convicted of the crime of lynching in the United States. Write a newspaper article reporting the who, what, where, when, why, and how of the situation.

The noose in America. Julius Lester says in his author's note, "A hangman's noose cannot be benign" (p. 128). Discuss the symbolism of the noose, both in the novel and within society at large. Is this symbol still as incendiary today as it was in the past? What kinds of emotions does the symbol of the noose evoke in you? Find news articles from the past several years documenting incidents where nooses were used as threats against African Americans. Discuss with your peers how these recent events relate to the fictitious happenings in the town of Davis, more than sixty years ago. How can a symbol be interpreted as a form of terrorism? What other symbols are used to perform hate crimes against various groups of people?