

Uncommonly Good

# Teacher Aides

From Bloomsbury and Walker Books for Young Readers

## In Darkness by Nick Lake

Guide written by Pam B. Cole, Professor of English Education & Literacy,  
Kennesaw State University, Kennesaw, GA

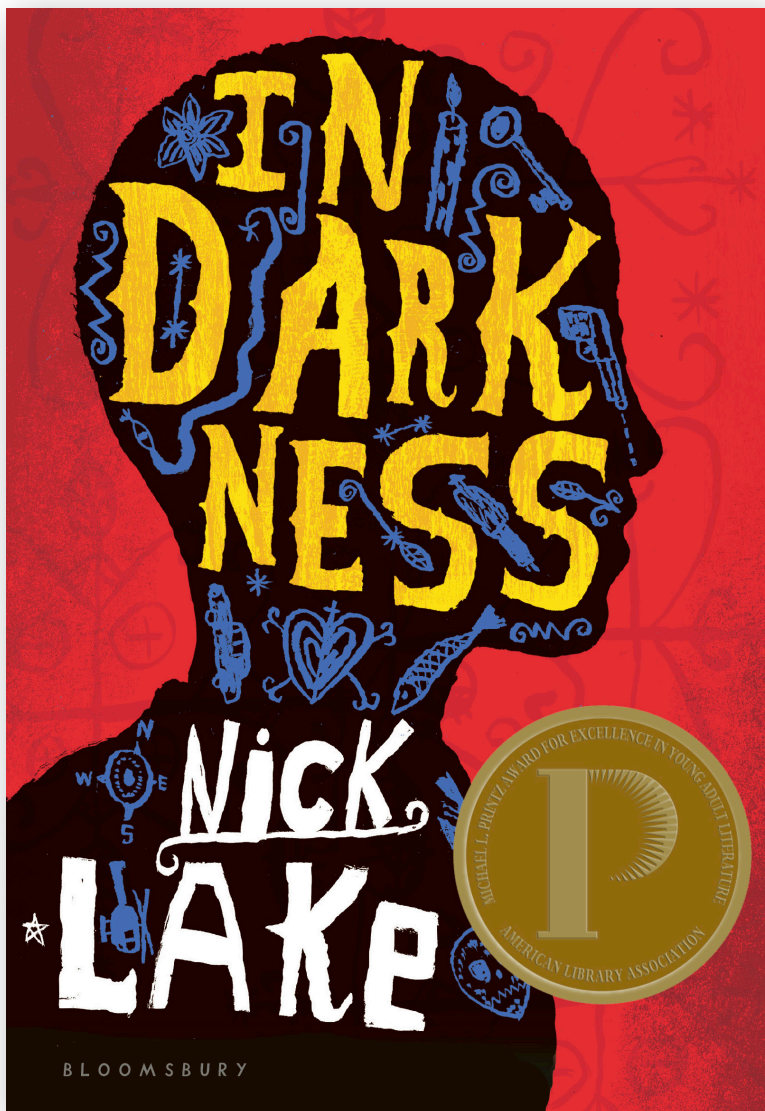
### ***ABOUT THE BOOK:***

Fifteen-year-old Shorty is trapped beneath rubble during the 2010 Haitian earthquake. Alone in the darkness of a collapsed hospital and surrounded by death, Shorty drifts in and out of consciousness and grows weaker from lack of water and food, while holding onto hope that he will be rescued. As his situation worsens, he begins dreaming of a former Haitian slave, Toussaint L'Ouverture, the famous revolutionary leader who led his people to freedom during the Haitian Revolution at the end of the eighteenth century. As Shorty's chances of survival decline, he makes a magical/spiritual connection with the famous leader and the two worlds entwine. Rotating between past and present, the author pens a powerful and disturbing tale of the human instinct for survival and our capacity to hope.

### ***CONNECTIONS WITH THE COMMON CORE:***

Common Core questioning strategies require a shift from questions that ask opinions and personal responses (ex., Which character do you connect with the most and why?) to text-based questions that create deep discussion by requiring readers to grapple with textual

information. The discussion questions in this reading guide do just that. At the end of the guide you will find several specific writing activities aligned to the Common Core Standards and a list of additional texts that will assist teachers in meeting the Common Core emphasis on nonfiction and historical fiction.



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# DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- What can readers infer about what has happened to the narrator in the first section titled Now?
- Shorty, the narrator, recalls his sister, Marguerite. What is unique about his relationship with her? How are the two viewed by others in the community? Take into account the meaning of the word marassa in your response.
- What does Shorty believe has happened to his sister and how does he feel about her? Why does Shorty believe he is half a soul? Support your response with evidence from the text.
- What is Route 9 and Boston? Describe the impact they have on the community.
- How does Manman use Shorty and Marguerite as a means of survival? How does her husband feel about what the children do?
- Describe the life Shorty leads after the loss of his father. Who are his friends and why does he choose this path?
- Characterize Dread Wilmé. How does Manman view him? Does he have the community's interest at heart? Explain.
- Stéphanie hangs out with Biggie. Who is she and why does she hang out with Shorty's friends? How is she able to help them? How does she contrast with other women in the story?
- Shorty saves the life of a young girl. Why does he do so and how is he disappointed afterward?
- How does Biggie trick Shorty into working with him? Once Shorty knows of Biggie's deception, he explains that Biggie isn't completely bad. What examples does Shorty give to show the complexity of Biggie's character?
- Why does Biggie take Shorty to the doctor's house? How does his residence contrast with the world that Shorty knows? What happens there and how does this scene contribute to the character development of Shorty? Of Biggie?
- Why does Shorty's mother keep the truth about Marguerite from Shorty?
- What happens to Shorty at the end of the story? Does his life story end with hope? Does he change? Why or why not? Support your response with evidence from the text.
- Readers are introduced to Toussaint l'Ouverture in the first section titled Then. Who is Toussaint? How does he view slavery? How is his life different from that of most Haitian slaves?
- How does Toussaint view his master? Why does Toussaint's master write a letter freeing Toussaint? Is Toussaint's master a bad man? Explain.
- Why does Toussaint leave the Haitian people through a revolution?
- Toussaint cannot read and sees no purpose in learning early on; however, he later knows how. What happens that enables him to do so? How does this ability assist him later?
- Toussaint was a visionary in real life. The author uses poetic license, better identified as historical license, to give Toussaint the ability to see into the future. Cite examples of Toussaint's awareness of the future and his connection to Shorty. How do these examples parallel with Toussaint's own circumstances?
- Why does Toussaint insist that the rebelling slaves restrain from murdering whites at random? How is he able to convince them to follow his lead?
- Toussaint refuses to sleep in the plantation houses once he and his army take control from the French. Why does he choose to sleep in the tents? Is this a good decision? Explain.
- Toussaint proves to be an ingenious leader. Identify at least one decision Toussaint makes that proves his superior leadership ability.
- Who is Issac and how does he lead to Toussaint's capture? Why does Toussaint trust Issac? What does Toussaint give his son in the end and why?
- Toussaint is offered his freedom if he will divulge the location of his riches. Why does Toussaint refuse? What misconception(s) do his captors have about his intent? About his character?
- Readers are not told much about Toussaint's wife early in the story. What do readers learn about her in the end? Why might the author not attribute much space to her in the story?
- What happens to Toussaint in the end? Has he lived an honorable life? Support your response with examples.

## QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION:

- Define the following terms and explain the meaning they have in the story:

*houngan, lwa, pwen, and maji.*

- The author uses local language. Yet, the reader can understand the narrative. How does the author, for example, use French, but enable a non-French speaking person to follow the narrative? Identify two such examples.
- The reader witnesses disturbing scenes through the eyes of both Shorty and Toussaint. What do these scenes tell readers about the human instinct for survival? For our capacity to hope? The author weaves the present together with the past to tell a seamless story of two Haitian worlds. The author does so by combining the thoughts and experiences of Shorty (the modern world) with those of Toussaint (the past world). What happens to both characters so that each becomes aware of the other's world?
- Compare living conditions for Haitians during both time periods. Has the quality of life improved over time? Support your response with evidence from the text.
- Imagery is a powerful writing technique that appeals to human senses. How does the author use imagery to express the horror and disturbing worlds in which Shorty and Toussaint both live?
- Shorty and Toussaint have similar beliefs about character:

Shorty says,

When you keep hurting someone, you do one of three things. Either you fill them up with hate, and they destroy everything around them. Or you fill them up with sadness, and they destroy themselves. Or you fill them up with justice, and they try to destroy everything that's bad and cruel in the world.

Me, I was the first kind of person (p. 87).

Toussaint thought,

It seemed to him, lying there, that there were three kinds of slaves, three kinds of people. There were those who were so filled with hate by their experience, by their oppression, that they snapped and destroyed property or people. There were those who were so filled with sadness by their experience that they snapped and destroyed themselves; someone would find them hanging in the barn, or lying in the field with slit wrists; Toussaint had been that someone several times, had found them like that. It made him cry, always. The third kind of person, though, was filled by their experience with a fierce longing for justice, a fierce desire to make things right in the world, to redress the balance.

In the darkness, Toussaint fancied that he was the third kind of person . . . (p. 93).

- How do the life experiences of each character support their philosophies? How does Shorty change in the end and why? What occurrence does the author pen to illustrate that Shorty will change?
- Chapters rotate from present to the past and from first-person point of view to third. An event in one time often parallels an event in another. Find two such instances and discuss what they illustrate about each character, each time, and how they contribute to the story as a whole.
- Why does the author detail the scene in which Shorty and his sister Marguerite find the baby in the trash and search for someone who will care for the baby? Could the scene have been left out? If so, explain.
- The lives of Shorty and Toussaint entwine. What parallels, or similarities, exist between the lives of Shorty and Toussaint? In what way are both betrayed?

# COMMON CORE WRITING ACTIVITIES:

## CCSS.ELA-Literacy. (Text Types and Purposes: Grades 6-12)

Write an essay that illustrates the commonalities or differences between Shorty's attitude toward life and Toussaint's. Before beginning your draft, identify sections in the text that support your argument and underline, or otherwise make note of, key words or phrases that support your stance. Think about how you might organize your argument based on the information you have located and then write your initial draft using the strongest information you have found.

## CCSS.ELA-Literacy. (Research to Build and Present Knowledge: Grades 6-12)

Choose a historical topic from *In Darkness* and prepare a media presentation for a small group. For instance, you may research a historical figure (ex., Toussaint L'Ouverture, Napoleon Bonaparte) or the Haitian Rebellion at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and prepare a media presentation to share in small groups. Synthesize information from at least five sources (three of these may be online resources. An online source that is available in both traditional format and online, may count in either category).

## CCSS. ELA-Literacy. (Production and Distribution of Writing: Grades 6-12)

Partner with a classmate and assume the persona of Toussaint and Shorty. Dialogue about Shorty's and Toussaint's beliefs via email about pain and the three kinds of people (Shorty, p. 87 & Toussaint, p. 93). Consider such questions as the following: Why does each believe what he does? What can the younger Shorty learn from the older Toussaint? What advice can Toussaint give Shorty? Share some of your responses in small groups. What similarities exist? What differences?

# ADDITIONAL FICTION AND NONFICTION READINGS:

- *Behind the Mountain* by Edwidge Danticat
- *Breath, Eyes, Memory* (Oprah's Book Club) by Edwidge Danticat
- *Earthquake in Haiti* by Miriam Aronin
- *The Family of Bones* by Edwidge Danticat
- *Fresh Girl* by Jaira Placide
- *Haiti* by Charles F. Gritzner
- *Haiti* by Emily Will
- *Haiti* by Roseline NgCheong-Lum & Leslie Jermyn
- *The Haiti Earthquake* by Diane Andrews Henningfield
- *Haiti in Pictures* by Margaret Goldstein
- *Haiti on My Mind: Stories by Haitian American Teens* by Dana K. Vincent, Keith Hefner, & Laura Longhine
- *Haiti, the Aftershock of History* by Laurent Dubois
- *Hope for Haiti* by Jesse Joshua Watson
- *Krik? Krak!* by Edwidge Danticat
- *The Magic Orange Tree and Other Haitian Folktales* by Diane Wolkstein
- *Painted Dreams* by Karen Lynn Williams and Catherine Stock
- *Taste of Salt* by Frances Temple
- *Toussaint L'Ouverture: The Fight for Haiti's Freedom* by Walter Dean Myers