

THE BLACK MAGE

Written by DANIEL BARNES and Illustrated by D.J. KIRKLAND

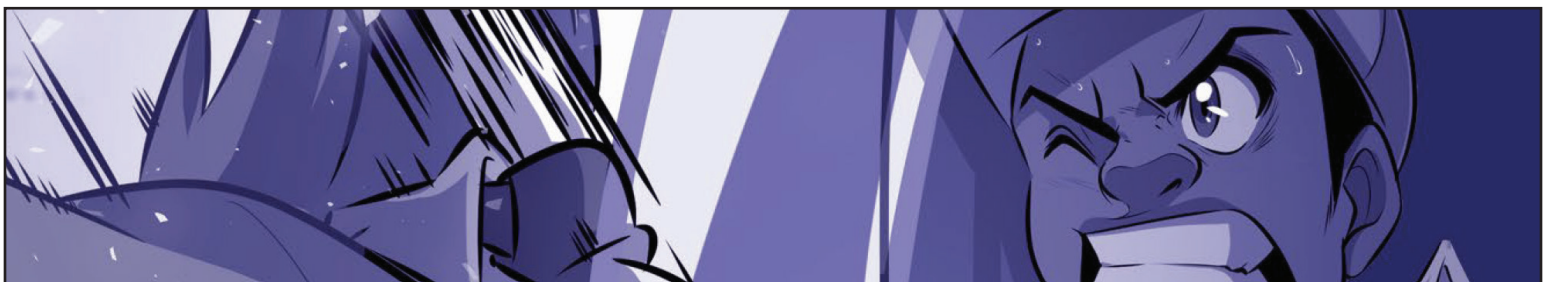
DISCUSSION GUIDE



About the Book

The setting of *The Black Mage* may seem familiar to fans of the fantasy genre, but creators Daniel Barnes and D.J. Kirkland boldly tackle the uncomfortable topic of racism from the opening pages of this fast-paced and vividly drawn graphic novel. Thanks to a “magical minority initiative” that seems to signal a trend toward inclusion, Tom Token is the first Black mage to be admitted to the St. Ivory Academy of Spellcraft and Sorcery, a historically White wizarding school. However, while at least one student is delighted at the prospect of greater diversity, Tom’s presence is generally received with a mix of disdain, suspicion, and outright hostility. Tom soon begins to receive anonymous texts on his phone that lead him and his ally, Lindsay, to uncover a conspiratorial secret dating back to the Civil War that puts Tom’s life—and his very soul—in great peril. Key themes in this novel include racism, prejudice, equality, equity, diversity, and the power of history.

ISBN: 978-1-62010-652-5





Learning Standards:

The Black Mage is a YA novel that can be used to address many of the Reading Literature Common Core standards for grades 7-12: **RL.7.1, RL.7.2, RL.7.3, RL.7.4, RL.7.5, RL.7.6, RL.8.1, RL.8.2, RL.8.3, RL.8.4, RL.8.6, RL.9-12.1, RL.9-12.2, RL.9-12.3, RL.9-12.5, RL.9-12.7**

The novel and activities in this teaching guide may also be used as a springboard for addressing numerous Common Core standards for Writing, Speaking, and additional related ELA-Literacy standards.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

Pre-Reading: *What is diversity? Why is it important? What kinds of diversity exist at your school? Have you ever felt marginalized or misunderstood because of your race, gender, religion, or sexuality? How did that make you feel? Have you ever teased anyone for being different? Why?*

1. The book opens in 1852. What is the significance of that year in U.S. history? Who are Harriet Tubman, Frederick Douglass, and John Henry? What is the Underground Railroad? The Klan?
2. Based on the cover, title, and first few pages of the book, what literature genre do you think the story will be? How do you know? *The Black Mage* is also a parody of the Harry Potter series. Examine pages 11-13. What elements are similar between the two and which are different?
3. On pages 15-16, Tom's new classmates ask him a lot of questions. What do they have in common? What is significant about the location of Tom's seat? Why do you think Black students are generally not allowed to receive magic instruction the same way that White students are?
4. Lindsay is excited about the prospect of more diversity at her school, while Tom just wants to be left alone and get an education. What is at the heart of this difference? What are the challenges of being forced into the role of "ambassador" if you are in a marginalized group?
5. Describe the confrontation between Tom and Bryce in the cafeteria. What stood out to you about the way events unfolded?
6. Page 32 contains a single illustration. In comics and graphic novels, this is called a "splash page." They can be used to introduce or focus special attention on particular places, characters, or events. Why is a splash page used here? Where else are splash pages used? Analyze the other ways the book's illustrations help to convey actions, moods, emotions, and other key components.
7. What additional stereotypes, biased actions, or racial symbolism can you find in the scene in Principal Lynch's office?
8. Explain the mystery surrounding Summer Jackson's student ID card.
9. What is the traditional understanding of the term "White Knight"? How does the author create a "White Knight" parody? What is the historical significance of the "Whites Only" sign? What supernatural event occurs at the end of Chapter 2?

10. What happens on pages 60-61? How is the result of Lindsay's experiment an allusion to the practice of White performers using "blackface"? Why is this practice offensive? What additional negative racial stereotype is reinforced in the last panel on page 62?
11. What do Harriet Tubman and Frederick Douglass reveal to Tom and Lindsay as they are exploring the secret area of the school?
12. Describe the symbolism in the battle between Tom and his allies and Bryce and his forces. How does the fight end?
13. What secrets and clarifications are revealed on pages 92-99?
14. On page 102, Tom has been subdued by the "Enslave" spell. What is the linguistic and historically loaded significance of his "Yes, massa" response to Atticus Lynch on page 103?
15. Examine the artwork showing the confrontation between Lindsay and her teacher on pages 108-114. Analyze how the artist constructs this action scene and others in the book using almost purely visual storytelling. What artistic techniques and devices are used to advance the plot?
16. What broader historical and societal inferences can be drawn from the idea that St. Ivory Academy can only exist at the cost of a Black soul?
17. Explain what is happening in the scene at the beginning of Chapter 5. What roles do Harriet Tubman, Frederick Douglass, Lindsay, John Henry, and Tom all play in the defeat of Atticus Lynch?
18. Compare and contrast the literal and implied meanings of the expulsion letter that Tom receives from the St. Ivory Academy Disciplinary Board.
19. Did you like how the story ended? Speculate about what will happen next to the main characters.
20. Did reading *The Black Mage* make you feel uncomfortable? Why or why not? Is racism only a thing of the past? What progress have we made in the United States in combating racial inequalities? What aspects of racism still exist?



Extension Activities

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

Many of the names in this story are meaningful, symbolic, or even ironic. Ask students to look into the significance of names such as Tom Token (*Uncle Tom's Cabin* and "token" minorities), Jim the Crow (Jim Crow laws), Atticus Lynch (*To Kill a Mockingbird* and a horrible act of terrorism used by the Ku Klux Klan), and St. Ivory School (synonym for "white"). Author Daniel Barnes has stated in interviews that he purposefully chose certain names in order to re-appropriate Black literature stereotypes by applying them to a Black protagonist who drives the plot and possesses his own agency. Was he successful in making that point? Ask students to write a persuasive argument defending their position. (W.7-12.1)

MISSING SCENES

Creative writing based on a particular book or story can help students to demonstrate their understanding of the text, as well as important thematic elements. *The Black Mage* is particularly suitable to creative speculation due to its strong themes, intriguing historical connections, vivid artwork, and interesting characters. Assign individuals, pairs, or small teams of students to think more deeply about *The Black Mage* by inventing prequels, creating missing scenes, retelling parts of the story from another character's perspective, or by positing an alternative ending. These projects may be completed in the form of a traditional text, script, storyboard, or other approved media. (W.7-12.3)

MARKETING CAMPAIGNS

Issues of racial bias and institutional racism, microaggressions, labels, stereotypes, and related topics can and should be the focus of ongoing classroom conversations. One way to initially help students to be more sensitive to bias, racism, sexism, etc. is to examine print advertisements and television commercials (both past and present). Examples are readily available online. As a class, students should discuss whether or not sample ads chosen by the teacher focus on stereotypes of particular groups and how well they include or portray diverse groups of people. Then, individually, in pairs, or in small teams, assign students to choose, analyze, and critique a specified number of ads using available print and electronic resources, and prepare a graphic organizer or infographic to present their results. (W.7-12.9)



DISCUSSION GUIDE AUTHOR: A former K-12 instructor, **Dr. Robyn A. Hill** is a teacher, educator, reading advocate, and lifelong comics fan.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Writer **Daniel Barnes** resides in San Francisco, though he is originally from Fresno, CA. After serving in the Navy for four years, he enrolled in the Academy of Art University to pursue a BFA in Animation Production. He is a huge fan of YA fantasy, anime, manga, and video games and would love to see more Black heroes represented in those genres.

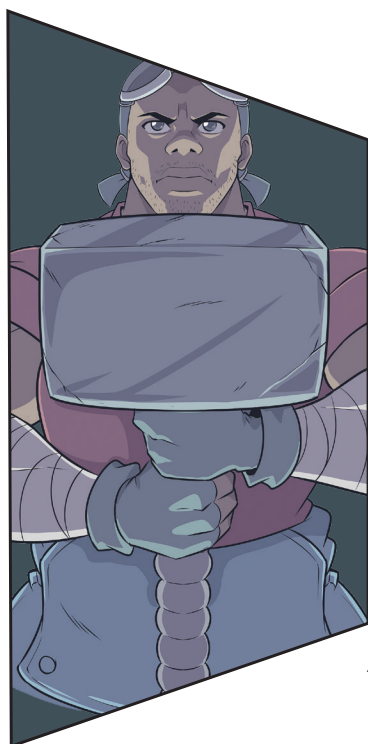
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ABOUT THE ILLUSTRATOR:

Originally from North Carolina, **D.J. Kirkland** earned his BFA in Sequential Art from the Savannah College of Art and Design and now resides in Vallejo, CA. He describes his influences as comic books, anime, and video games. His goal as an artist is to create content inspired by the things that motivated him to become an artist, but with his own personal twist. Kirkland also hopes to encourage other creators of color to share their visions with the world.

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