

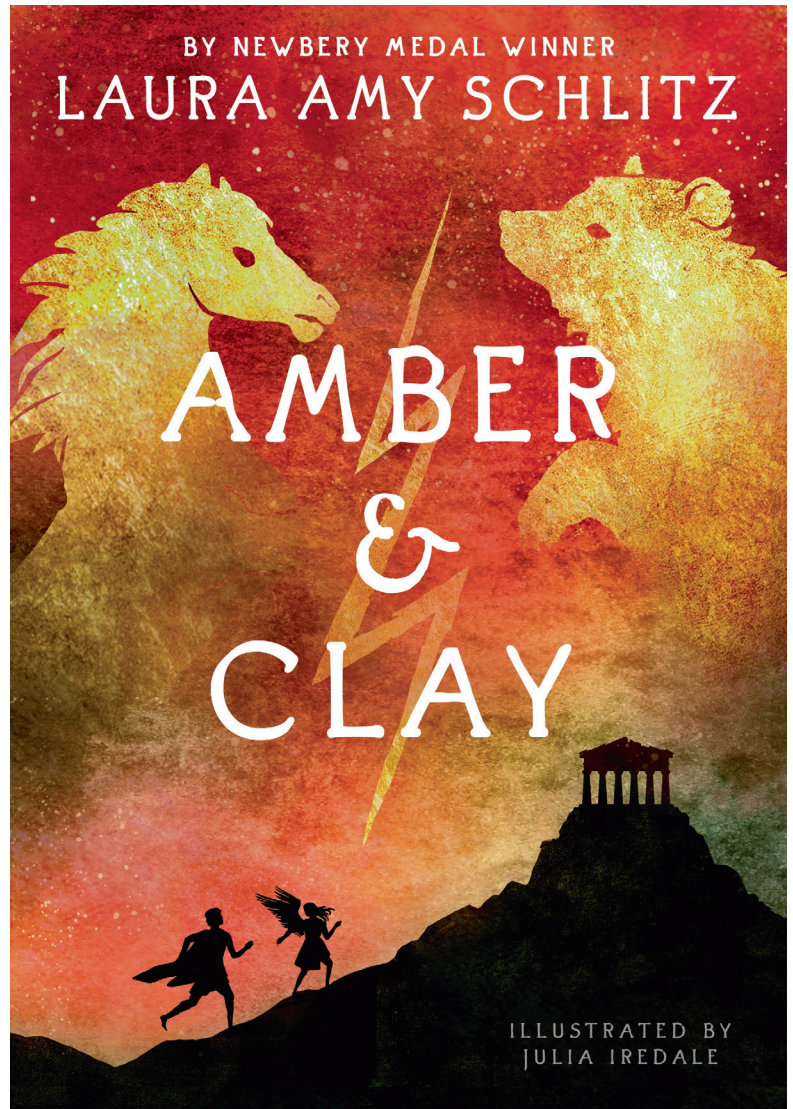
# AMBER & CLAY

BY LAURA AMY SCHLITZ

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## ABOUT THE BOOK

A variety of voices tell the tale of Rhaskos and Melisto, a boy and girl who live in warlike Greece and meet only after one of them becomes a ghost. Rhaskos, a Thracian boy enslaved in a Greek household, is as common as clay, a stable boy worth less than a donkey, much less than the horses he adores. Torn when young from his mother, he secretly nurtures his passions for art and philosophy, encouraged by the philosopher Sokrates. Melisto is a privileged aristocrat, cherished by her father but willful and wild. She's expected to marry and be tamed—the fate of all highborn girls—but first she can revel in her wildness for a season in service to Artemis, goddess of the hunt. Different as they are, Rhaskos and Melisto find their destinies entwined in surprising ways as gods and goddesses, enslaved people and those who enslave them, and mothers and philosophers shape their stories in this glorious tour de force from Newbery Medalist Laura Amy Schlitz.



HC: 978-1-5362-0122-2 • Also available as an e-book

## Common Core Connections

This guide, which can be used with large or small groups, will help students meet several of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) for English Language Arts. These include the reading literature standards for key ideas and details, craft and structure, and integration of knowledge and ideas (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL), as well as the speaking and listening standards for comprehension and collaboration and for presentation of knowledge and ideas (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL). Questions can also be used in writing prompts for independent work.



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## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Talk about Hermes and the role he plays in the book, which he describes as “guiding you through this story” (page 107). Describe his voice and give examples of his sense of humor. What important parts of the plot does he disclose in the first few pages, and why?
2. What does Hermes foreshadow about Rhaskos in the first chapter? What does Rhaskos tell you about himself in the first chapter he narrates? Describe his personality and his strengths, what he loves, and what he longs for. What are obstacles that he faces, and how does he deal with them?
3. What is Melisto like? Describe her relationship with her mother and explain why they clash. How does she interact with her father? What makes her a vivid character? Contrast her life at home with her life at Brauron, and explain why Brauron suits her so well. Discuss Rhaskos’s description to Melisto’s father of what she loved: “the bear cub, my mother, freedom, and you” (page 508).
4. How do the lives of Rhaskos and Melisto intersect, even before they meet each other? What is his role in her life before she dies? What is her role in his life after she dies? Describe their journey to Brauron. Why does Rhaskos say of Melisto, “She was more like me than anyone I ever knew” (page 484)?
5. How does the fact that he’s enslaved affect Rhaskos’s life in Thessaly and in Athens? How does slavery affect his mother? How does Menon treat Rhaskos, and why does Menon treat him this way? How does Phaistus treat him? What was Phaistus’s experience as an enslaved person and how does it give Rhaskos hope? Describe Zosima’s feelings toward Rhaskos. Does her attitude surprise you? Why do his feelings toward her change? Discuss the author’s note about slavery in Athens (pages 523–524).
6. What is life like for women and girls in this society? What work do they do? How are the lives of even well-to-do women and girls constricted? Give examples from the portraits of Lysandra and Melisto. What is Zosima’s life like? Why is it so important to her to have a child? How are the lives of enslaved women like Thratta even worse than those of free women?
7. Sokrates is one of the most famous philosophers of all time. How does the author portray him? What does Sokrates like to do? What does he value? Why is he so friendly to Rhaskos? What topics does he explore with the boy? Describe his trial and why he was found guilty. How did his values clash with those of some powerful citizens in Athens? Discuss Sokrates’s belief that the unexamined life is not worth living.
8. Who is Hephaistos and why does he look favorably on Rhaskos? At what point in the story do you know that Rhaskos could be an artist? What traits and actions make you think that? Which of the illustrated exhibits might be attributed to him? Why does Rhaskos associate Athens with being a creator, declaring, “I was Athenian, a maker” (page 400)?
9. Describe the different voices in the story and why the author included so many. Why do you think the chapters about Melisto are in prose and from a third-person point of view, whereas those about Rhaskos are first-person verse? Read the author’s note labeled “Greek Verse” (pages 519–521) and relate it to specific examples in the novel. Talk about the book’s title and why the author might have chosen it.
10. Review the illustrations labeled “exhibits.” What do the pictures and explanations add to the story? Choose a few of them and draw specific connections between the exhibit and the following chapter.

## CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

### *Turn and Counterturn*

Have students review the chapters that are labeled “Turn and Counterturn” and read the author’s note on “Greek Verse” (pages 519–521). Then ask them to work in pairs and write short poems with this technique, choosing two characters from this novel or another one. The students can then perform their pieces in two voices for their fellow students. CCSS.ELA-Literacy.R.5; CCSS.ELA-Literacy.R.6; CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.3

### *The Greek Gods Expo!*

If the Greek gods were around today, they might well be celebrities who appear in front of large crowds. Ask students to choose one of the Greek gods or goddesses, research him or her, and create a poster advertising an event featuring that deity. The poster should use text to highlight the deity’s main traits and accomplishments; it should also include illustrations that add information and would help attract an audience. CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.7

### *The Glory That Was Greece*

*Amber and Clay* is full of references to ancient Greek art, food, religion, people (such as Sokrates), and places (such as the Parthenon). Have students choose a narrow topic related to ancient Greece, research it, and prepare a multimedia presentation. The presentation should include images and text and may incorporate other elements, such as music. Reserve time for questions and answers after students present their findings. CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.7; CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.5

### *Exhibit Inspiration*

The novel’s exhibits illustrate and describe artifacts that are related to the following chapter. Have students draw and describe an artifact from reality or their imagination. They should then write a short story that involves the artifact in some way, modeled after the novel. The artifact could be an object from the past, present, or future or from a fantasy world. CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.3

### *The Socratic Method*

The author refers in a note to Sokrates’s “search for truth” and writes, “I tried to make Sokrates’s imaginary dialogues with Rhaskos a showcase for his ideas” (page 522). Have students gather in small groups and hold discussions about some of Sokrates’s ideas as found in the novel. As a class, discuss the Socratic method and what makes it different from other ways of teaching and learning. CCSS.ELA-Literacy.R.1; CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.1



**Laura Amy Schlitz** is the author of the Newbery Medal winner *Good Masters! Sweet Ladies! Voices from a Medieval Village*, the Newbery Honor Book and *New York Times* bestseller *Splendors and Glooms*, and several other books for young readers. She has spent most of her life working as a librarian and professional storyteller as well as a writer. She also toured for a few years with a children’s theater. She lives in Maryland.



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This guide was prepared by Kathleen Odean, a school librarian for more than fifteen years who now gives professional development workshops for educators about new books for children and teens. She chaired the 2002 Newbery Award Committee and served on earlier Caldecott and Newbery Award Committees.