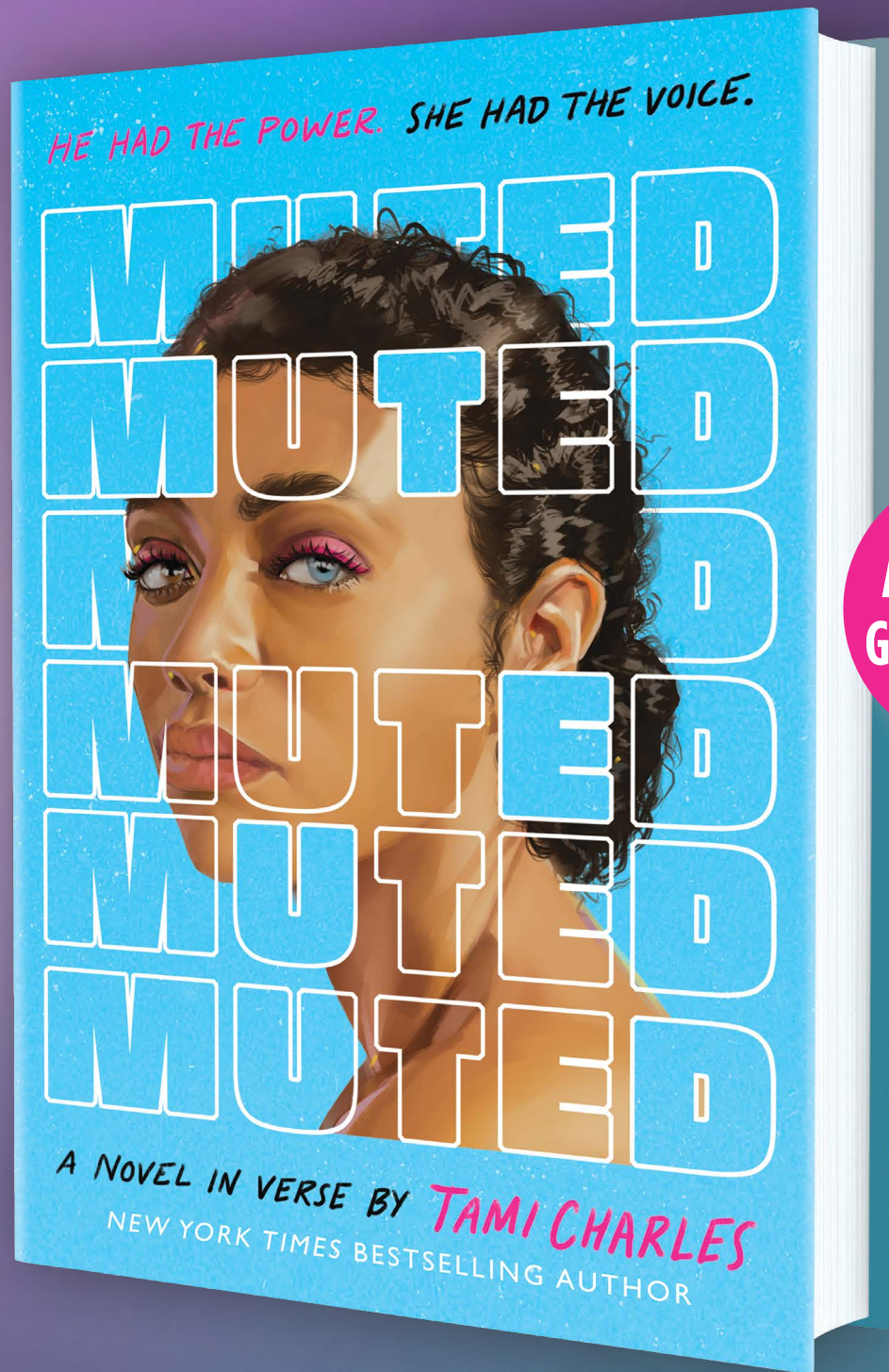
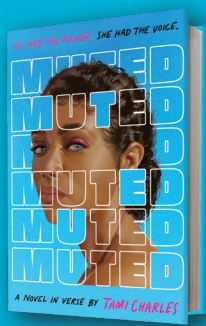


Discussion Guide

Reclaiming the Narrative in *Muted* by Tami Charles



AGES 12-18
GRADES 7-12



About the Book: Seventeen-year-old Denver’s whole life is music. And she hopes it’s her future, too: along with her bffs Dali and Shak, Denver is determined to write and sing her way to a better life. So when the girls find their way into the sights of R&B legend Sean “Mercury” Jones, a man with the power to make that dream come true—and then some—Denver doesn’t think twice, or look back. Merc offers them everything, but everything comes with a price. Parties, perks, wild nights—they’re going to live and look like stars. And it’s all worth it, even the pain and the lies. It’s all part of the game. Until it’s not. Based on the author’s own experiences and further inspired by victim accounts from the current music industry, *Muted* is an insightful look at the ongoing abuse of young women of color in entertainment, as well as a moving portrayal of how easily a girl’s dreams can be used against her—and what it takes to fight back.

Educator Considerations and Resources

Please be aware that this book includes the following trigger warning: Readers should be aware that this book explores issues including abuse, eating disorders, divorce, manipulation, and rape.

ACES (Adverse Childhood Experiences), according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, are defined as “potentially traumatic experiences that occur in childhood (0-17 years).” Divorce, loss of an attachment figure, emotional, and sexual abuse are just a few of these. The characters in *Muted* experience traumatic events during their teen and early adult years. Educators should exercise discretion when bringing these topics and this title into an educational setting with opportunities for students to select an alternative title if they are not comfortable with the subject matter. Learn more: cdc.gov/violenceprevention/aces/index.html

Trauma-informed educational practices include social and emotional support, as well as the adoption of classroom and whole-school models that support those who may have experienced trauma directly, or indirectly. Considerations should also be made for educators who may experience secondary trauma as the result of bearing witness to another’s direct experience with a traumatic event or a series of traumatic occurrences. Learn more: edutopia.org/article/how-and-why-trauma-informed-teaching

Additional Resources:

RAINN | The nation’s largest anti-sexual violence organization

rainn.org

Artists Rights 101

arsny.com/artists-rights-101

Missing and Exploited Children | Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention

ojjdp.ojp.gov/programs/missing-and-exploited-children

Women Against Abuse - Resources for Teens

womenagainstabuse.org/get-help/resources/resources-for-teens

CDC - Intimate Partner Violence

cdc.gov/violenceprevention/intimatepartnerviolence/teendatingviolence/fastfact.html

ANAD | Free Eating Disorder Support Groups & Services

anad.org

Substance Use Resources for Adolescents and Young Adults – SAHM

adolescenthealth.org/Resources/Clinical-Care-Resources/Substance-Use/Substance-Use-Resources-For-Adolesc.aspx

GLAAD’s Amplify Your Voice Resource Kit

glaad.org/resources/amplifyyourvoice/resourcekit

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Essential Questions and Thematic Connections

The prompts below are meant to increase engagement with the topics at the core of *Muted*. Consider and respond to the essential questions with examples or evidence from the text of *Muted* or from your own knowledge and experience. Use these prompts to begin discussion and delve deeper into these themes.

Family

Denver, Dalisay, and Shak form a sort of family unit, though they each have distinct relationships with the families they are born into as well. Consider family relationships we create, as well as the families in which we are raised, and the impact all families have on the ways young people relate to the world around them.

Essential Question: How do our families or chosen families impact us as we grow from childhood into teen years and beyond?

Music and Creativity

Music is an outlet for creativity that many young people discover as a way to connect with others and as a form of self-expression. In *Muted*, Denver, Dali, and Shak feel like their dreams are coming true when someone from the wider music world “discovers” them and wants to bring their talents to the wider world.

Essential Question: What are some ways that music brings people together?

Friendship

Throughout the novel, Denver, Dalisay, and Shak’s bonds of friendship are tested. They discover the true meaning of friendship and the tensions that arise when it seems like one friend is on the brink of realizing all of their biggest, boldest dreams, while those around them may not be having the same experience. Consider the friendships you have now and those you have had throughout your life.

Essential Questions: How do the friends we make influence the people we become? What sorts of experiences challenge the bonds of friendship?

Independence

At different times, Denver, Dali, and Shak are given independence, or have to wrestle with the feelings that arise when their independence is taken away. Consider what it means to be independent at different ages.

Essential Question: At what age is a young person considered mature enough to independently make decisions about work, places to live, choosing healthy partnerships, etc.?

Fame and Notoriety

As *Muted* progresses, each of the main characters wrestles with what it means to seek, and find, fame or notoriety. They discover the power and powerlessness that can accompany the achievement of great fame at a relatively young age.

Essential Questions: What is today’s definition of “fame”? Who gives it? Who can take it away? How can fame be both an empowering and a corrupting influence?

Self-Expression

Perhaps the most important theme in *Muted* is self-expression and the amplification or silencing of the voices that belong to those whom society might deem less powerful or more vulnerable to corruption or exploitation. Consider the ethnic, racial, and gender identities of each of the characters and how these impact their willingness and ability to express themselves, to speak out, or not.

Essential Questions: How does music allow for self-expression in ways that ordinary speech cannot? What forces in society suppress self-expression for certain groups of people in society? Consider how colorism, racism, sexism, and other biases play into that dynamic.

Truth and Lies

At various times throughout the novel, Denver questions herself and her perception of events and people. Sometimes this is due to experiences she had while under the influence. Sometimes this is due to her age and relative inexperience with people like the ones she comes to meet in the entertainment industry, and sometimes it’s due to the situations she finds herself in.

Essential Questions: What are ways in which people validate or verify their perceptions of others or events? What are examples of trusted sources? What kind of information can change people’s perceptions? When is it important for people to trust their own instincts or first impressions?

Discussion Questions

PART ONE: CHECK-IN

1. Who are some of Denver's musical influences? What do each of the musical artists or groups have in common? What sets them apart from music produced now?
2. Have you ever been to a concert? What did it feel like? Compare singing together with others to singing when you are alone. How does each make you feel?
3. What were some of the dreams the girls hoped to realize through singing and possibly becoming famous?
4. What were some of the promises Merc made the girls? Did you believe those things would happen? Why or why not?
5. What is one early warning sign that Merc may be deceptive about his intentions?
6. At the end of Part One, what are the different possible futures for each of the girls?
7. What does Denver experience that gives her hope? What, if anything, does she experience that leaves her with questions or suspicion?

PART TWO: SECURITY

1. How do the girls' families react to the offer Merc extends? What role should families play in making decisions about where young people work and who they spend time with?
2. What are some scenarios in which someone might be asked to make a commitment before knowing completely what they were agreeing to? What recourse might someone have after becoming aware of the significance and extent of the commitment?
3. How does the separation and divorce within Denver's family impact her? **Educators, please see the information in this guide about ACES and divorce.*
4. What do you think of Merc telling the girls to "Do what [he says] and trust [his] intentions"? Do they have any reasons not to? What reasons does he give them that they should?
5. What were some of the perks or benefits of doing what Merc told them to, and agreeing to record with him? What do athletes, musicians, and other artists receive in exchange for their art? What are some costs that may come from having to rely on someone else for support or promotion?
6. Do you think the girls need Merc to promote them? What does he do that shows he plans to take advantage of their youth and inexperience?
7. What advantages does Merc have that allow him to emotionally manipulate the girls into submission and silence?

PART THREE: TAKEOFF

1. What tensions begin to show up between the girls? What do you think is the cause of them?
2. How does the media complicate Denver's view of the situation she is in? How does the media shape public perception of young people who are thrust into the limelight?
3. What truth does Denver uncover about her interactions with Merc that happened when she was under the influence of substances? How does Merc use emotional manipulation and substances to alter Denver's perceptions of who he is and the types of interactions he has had with the girls? **Educators, please see the information and resources in this guide about rape, substance abuse, emotional abuse, and ACES.*
4. What tactics does Merc use to try to control the girls? Why is he successful with some and not with others?
5. Do you think it's true that "success comes with sacrifice"? Why do you suppose Merc tells the girls that?
6. What makes Denver—in particular—more susceptible to emotional manipulation?
7. What was unique about Denver and Dali's relationship? How did their relationship serve as a source of strength and a threat to Merc's control over them?
8. What secret did Denver uncover after finding recorded evidence of her encounters with Merc? How did this change her view of everything that happened since? **Educators, please see information and resources in this guide about rape, substance abuse, emotional abuse, and ACES.*

PART FOUR: LANDING

1. Denver and her friends are "muted" in various ways in their journey to becoming professional singers. In what ways does Denver unmute herself? In what ways does she mute the antagonist of the story, Sean Mercury Ellis? Cite examples from the text.

Journal Prompts

Educators, please consider journaling as a way for students to explore the more mature themes in the novel without being required to discuss them in a class setting. Consider options for students to provide evidence of journaling that do not require entries to be read and/or evaluated. Remind students of the legal requirement that all educators are mandatory reporters obligated to report any abuse or anything else concerning that might be shared through student artifacts.

1. What are your dreams for yourself when you reach adulthood? What are you doing now to help you achieve those dreams? Who are your allies/accomplices? What challenges do you think you may face, and how might you overcome them?
2. What are your opinions about young people and fame? What would you do if you were to achieve lots of fame within a short period of time at a young age? How would you use your fame to make a difference in the world?
3. What are some experiences you've had that have caused tension between you and your friends? How did you resolve them?
4. Who in your life is a trusted adult? Why do you trust them?
5. What is your chosen form of self-expression? Include some thoughts about any topic of importance in a form that works for you. Consider drawing, writing song lyrics, or making a short video or photo collage.

Activities

1. *Muted* is a novel in verse, which is fitting because Denver's chosen form of self-expression is singing and through the lyrics she writes. Choose any three poems from each section of the story that you feel capture emotionally resonant moments in the plot. Annotate the poem by typing it into a document and adding comments for the lines that stick out to you, or hand-write and take pictures with notes about specific lines or words that are meaningful. Consider the following elements for a thorough analysis:
 - T** (Title) What might the title be trying to tell you? Make a guess before analyzing the poem.
 - P** (Paraphrase) Paraphrase what the poem is about in your own words.
 - F** (Figurative language) Are there instances of figurative language, i.e. metaphors or similes? Identify them and state their significance.
 - A** (Attitude) Analyze diction, tone, images, or any other details to reveal the speaker's attitude about the subject of the poem.
 - S** (Shifts) Are there any changes in style or form on the page? If so, what do they mean?
 - T** (Title) What does the title mean now that you've analyzed the poem? Are there any changes to your initial thoughts?
2. Write a story about a time when you felt powerless to speak up about an injustice that happened to you or someone you care about. If the experience is close to your heart, it may be easier to fictionalize it and create characters that experience events, rather than writing about them in the first person. For an added challenge, use non-traditional storytelling to modify the format of your story. This may include: text messages, writing a narrative story in verse, or non-linear storytelling with flashbacks.
3. Create a playlist of songs for one or more of the characters in *Muted*. Include notes about each song and why they connect to a particular scene or time period from the novel. Share your playlist with others, if you like, in a platform that allows people to make comments about how the songs resonate with them.

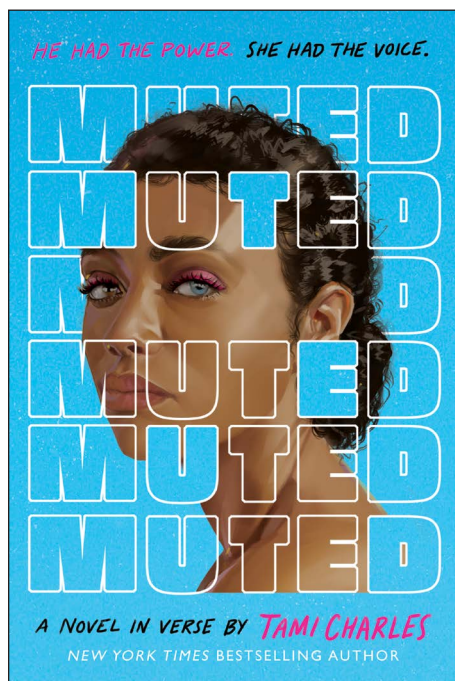
Activities (Cont.)

4. Many young girls and women are missing, raped, abducted, and exploited around the globe, every year. Research statistics about these topics that are specific to where you live using one of the websites referenced in this guide, or another of your choosing. Create a presentation for those in your community, educating them about how they can take action. Remember, activism can involve many different elements, including petitions, boycotting a particular organization or fundraising for one, creating a public awareness campaign, or getting the press involved about a particular issue. **Educators, please see the information and resources in this guide about rape, substance abuse, emotional abuse, and ACES.*
Additional Resource: 10 Ways Youth Can Engage in Activism
adl.org/education/resources/tools-and-strategies/10-ways-youth-can-engage-in-activism
5. Musicians are some of the most economically vulnerable creative people in the world. Research organizations that support intellectual property rights for musicians and create a social media campaign or public service announcement to educate others on musicians' rights, and those of underage artists within the entertainment industry. Consider researching one artist you know of that achieved fame as a young person and any articles or interviews they have given that reveal what their experience has been. Share your findings with those in your community with a blog post, vlog, or article in your school's newspaper.
6. In Part One, Denver recalls the moment when her father taught her Prelude in E Minor by Frédéric Chopin (p. 69). Make a list of the parallels she draws between Chopin's inspiration for writing this song and her own goals at this point in the story. Then, research and listen to a recording of Prelude in E Minor (op. 28, no. 4). What parallels can you find between Chopin's intentions for this song and Denver's question to her father in Part Four (p. 378)?
7. The author breaks the novel into four sections: check-in, security, takeoff, and landing. On its surface, these are the components of air travel, yet there is a deeper metaphor here. How does each "part" align with the plot? Consider organizing your thoughts in the chart (next page).

Narrative Structure Activity Reproducible

Air travel components	What parts of Denver's story reflect this? Cite examples from the text.
<i>Check-in:</i> the traveler establishes they are “here.”	
<i>Security:</i> TSA makes sure the traveler is safe and cleared to board the plane.	
<i>Takeoff:</i> the traveler is on their way!	
<i>Landing:</i> the traveler arrives at their destination.	

Praise for *Muted*



HC: 9781338673524 • \$18.99
Also available as an ebook and audiobook
Ages 12–18 • Grades 7–12

★ “Heart-racing . . . [a] taut and gritty read.”
—*Booklist*, starred review

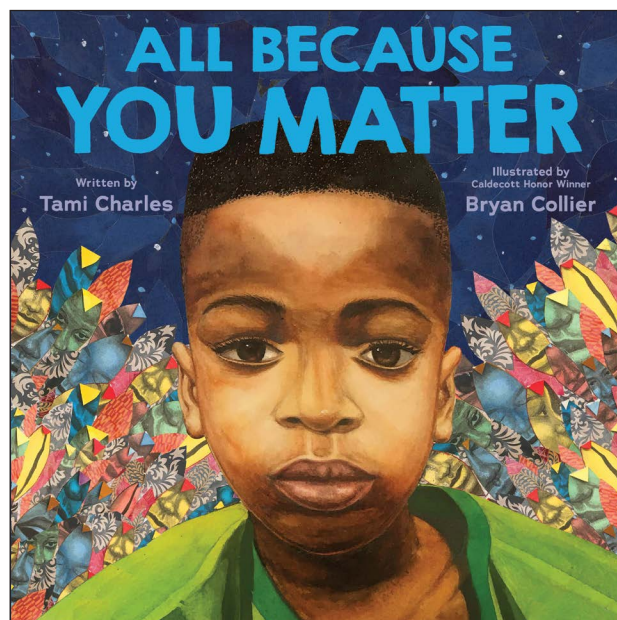
★ “Charles’s heartbreaking novel in verse shows the harsh realities of the music industry.”
—*School Library Journal*, starred review

“Catapults [readers] toward a breathless, satisfying conclusion.”
—*The Horn Book*

“Highly-anticipated . . . Groundbreaking.”
—*Entertainment Weekly*

“One of those books that when you finish, you stare at it for a little bit and need a moment before you can do other things—it is that good.”
—Buzzfeed

Also by Tami Charles



HC: 9781338574852 • \$17.99
Also available as an ebook and audiobook
Ages 4–8 • Grades P–3

★ “Stunning. Powerful. Timely.”
—*The Horn Book*, starred review

★ “The journey from beginning to end of the book sends a message that is nurturing, nourishing, loving, and reassuring, expanding and deepening the words of the movement it echoes.”
—*Kirkus Reviews*, starred review

★ “Universal declarations are often illustrated with images of many children; this book’s focus on a single child brings his experience and life—and the ways they matter—right up close.”
—*Publishers Weekly*, starred review



Photo: Krisann Binetti

About the Author

Tami Charles is the *New York Times* bestselling author of *All Because You Matter*, and numerous books for children and young adults. Her middle grade debut, *Like Vanessa*, earned Top 10 spots on the Indies Introduce and Spring Kids’ Next lists, three starred reviews, and a Junior Library Guild selection. Her latest titles include YA novel-in-verse, *Muted*, and the lyrical picture book, *My Day with the Panya*. When Tami isn’t writing, she can be found presenting at schools both stateside and abroad.

About the Writer of This Guide:

Julia E. Torres is a nationally recognized veteran language arts teacher-librarian in Denver, Colorado. Julia facilitates teacher development workshops rooted in the areas of anti-racist education, equity and access in literacy and librarianship, and education as a practice of liberation. Her work has been featured on NPR, AlJazeera’s *The Stream*, PBS Education, KQED’s *MindShift*, *Rethinking Schools*, *Learning for Justice Magazine*, and many more. She is a current Amelia Elizabeth Walden Book Award committee member, a member of the ALAN board of directors, and a co-founder of *DisruptTexts*.