



A Teaching Guide for  
**AIN'T BURNED ALL THE BRIGHT**  
By Jason Reynolds  
Artwork by Jason Griffin

**About This Book**

Through richly allusive and connotative language and evocative art, Jason Reynolds and Jason Griffin have created a text that powerfully engages with issues that impact students: COVID-19, the effects of climate change, and racial injustice. The result is *Ain't Burned All the Bright*, a text that acknowledges the ways that the world is broken, validating the anxiety of a generation of young adults finding it hard to breathe in a world that seems to be literally and metaphorically on fire.. At the same time, without minimizing the problems we all are facing, Reynolds and

Griffin offer a message of hope: a way to “hide thunder under thankful” and find oxygen in connecting with the people and objects that surround us.

### **Guided Reading Questions**

1. The book begins mid-sentence: “And I’m sitting here wondering why my mother won’t change the channel”. What effect does Reynolds create by starting his prose poem in medias res or in the middle of the narrative?

2. Think about ways the text invites you to consider deleted words—whether through scribbled out, whited out, visibly erased, or crossed out words. Pay attention to instances where entire pages are blacked out. What words do you think have been removed or covered up? How do the different methods used to remove or hide text relate to the reasons for deleting the words? What does this suggest about unspoken words and the reasons we choose to stay silent?

3. One of the recurrent images in Jason Griffin’s artwork is water, in particular images that suggest flooding or drowning. What makes these images especially resonant in the context of the text? What allusions to historical or current events do specific images bring to mind?

4. Another recurrent image in Jason Griffin’s artwork is fire, in particular images that suggest violence. What makes these images particularly resonant in the context of the text? What allusions to historical or current events do specific images suggest?

5. Analyze the artwork depicting the speaker's brother's video game and the juxtaposition of these images with the artwork depicting the speaker's surroundings. What does this suggest about the brother's reason for letting the game absorb his time and attention? Do you think this is a healthy escape for him? Explain your answer.

6. Consider Reynolds's line that the television news reflects "The high-definition glare of a low-definition life". What do you think this line means? Why does he characterize the life depicted on-screen as "low-definition"?

7. In the artwork accompanying the lines, "My sister talks to her homegirl / through the screen of her phone / like it's the screen of the front door," the sister is shown looking down at a small house she is cradling in her hands. Explain what makes this an effective simile. How are screens on our phones like screens on a front door?

8. In the first section, the book references the "this and that" of protests in response to incidents of racial injustice. Explain the contrast between the verses associated with "this" and those associated with "that." What is Reynolds suggesting by following the lines "this fight for freedom / ain't nothing but a first with a face / that looks like mine / swinging at the wind" with "or swinging on a swing / pulling back and pushing forward / and back and back / and forward and forward / and back and back and back / and forward and forward and forward." How does the artwork accompanying these lines help develop their meaning? How do these verses relate to Martin Luther King Jr's observation: "the

arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.” Do you agree with this statement?

9. Explain the significance of being able to breathe as it relates to the book. What makes this idea so evocative? Explain the ways that you can interpret this phrase both literally and metaphorically.

10. What makes the speaker remark about his father: “the fever / ain’t burned / all his bright up yet.” Consider what “the bright” symbolizes by looking at the text and artwork associated with this section of the book. Pay attention to the contrast between the darker black, gray, and red pages and those that feature additional colors. How does the shift in color and style connect to the observation that the effort his father makes to keep from coughing is “like trying to hide thunder / under thankful”?

11. Choose lines from the text that develop the relationship between the father and his son. What lines reveal the son’s admiration and respect for his father? What lines reveal the father’s love for his son?

12. In the book’s third section, the speaker observes: “my mother / has been known to keep / every little thing / and my father / has been known to throw / nothing away”. What do you think the speaker means when he remarks, “even though those two things seem like they’re the same thing they’re not.” What is different about those two things?

13. What does the speaker say “was like feeding me a teaspoon of we ~~might should will/~~ can be ~~all-right~~ okay.” By crossing out words but keeping them visible, Reynolds asks the reader to think about the words he considered but chose not to include. How is the phrase “we can be okay” different from the other possibilities he considered? How does the artwork on this page add to your understanding of the author’s choice of words here?

14. During the text’s third section, the speaker begins searching for an oxygen mask and discovers things that are symbolic oxygen masks. Explain what he finds. What do the things he calls oxygen masks have in common?

15. While *Ain’t Burned All the Bright* is a collaboration between Jason Reynolds and Jason Griffin, each has collaborated with others on previous projects. Why do you think Reynolds and Griffin embrace opportunities for creative collaboration? How does their artistic collaboration enrich this text?

16. Each one of the members of the speaker’s family responds to the crises of the news in different ways. The constant barrage of information immobilizes the mother, the brother escapes through video games, the sister gets involved in a protest, the father tries to minimize his suffering to protect others, and the speaker worries. What are the pros and cons of each way of responding? Which one of these responses is the closest to how you react to stressful situations?

17. What message does the book have about how to keep the darkness of injustice, suffering, fear, loss, pain, worry, and hopelessness from overwhelming the “bright” inside of you?

18. The three crises alluded to in the text are racial injustice, the COVID-19 pandemic, and environmental disasters (flooding, wildfires, pollution, tornados). How have these crises impacted the speaker of the text? Can you relate to his experience? Have you been personally affected by any of them? If not, how has reading a different perspective from your own changed your understanding of these crises?

### **Extension Activities**

1. In the three sections of the text, the book alludes to three crises—racial injustice, the COVID-19 pandemic, and climate change—that are grounded in the summer of 2020 but resonate with previous episodes in American history: the “every-hour rerun / about how we won’t change the world / or the way we treat the world / or the way we treat each other”. Choose one of these three themes and examine how the allusions and imagery in Jason Reynolds’s verse and Jason Griffin’s artwork develop this theme.

2. Examine the recurring quilt motif in Jason Griffin’s artwork by researching the tradition and history of African American quilts and quilting, and use your research to analyze how this motif is developed in *Ain’t Burned All the Bright*. Why does Griffin

include this motif? What lines of the verse does it accompany? How does this motif help develop the theme of family?

3. Through all three sections of the book, the speaker longs to “change the channel” on the television, because the constant barrage of hopelessness he sees on the twenty-four-hour news channel makes him feel as if he is drowning or suffocating. It’s easy to become trapped by activities or media that demand our attention but leave us feeling defeated, depressed, angry, or hopeless. Reflect on your own life, and write a personal essay that addresses the following questions: What channels do you need to change? What oxygen masks renew your spirit and empower you to keep going?

4. Each section of *Ain’t Burned All the Bright* ends with the verse: “In through the nose / out through the mouth,” accompanied by art that depicts someone smelling a flower and blowing out a birthday candle. These pages illustrate a practice called *mindful breathing*. Research the role that breathing exercises play in mindfulness. How can practicing mindfulness help protect or improve a person’s mental health?

5. Consider the construction of the text. What materials did Griffin use to create the art in the book? Why do you think he chose to use lined paper instead of blank paper as the background? Research the work of one of the following artists: Romare Bearden, Jacob Lawrence, Jean-Michel Basquiat. How is Griffin’s art in dialogue with their work? As a further extension activity, create artwork to accompany a personal narrative in a journal inspired by Jason Griffin’s art.

6. All three sections of the book contain the refrain, “I’m sitting here and wondering why / my mother won’t change the channel”. There is a constant tension between the need to be aware of the world’s problems and the danger of becoming overwhelmed and immobilized by them. What does the text suggest about how to resolve this tension? How can a person remain engaged with the world and keep themselves from losing hope? Analyze the way the text answers these questions.

7. The text of *Ain’t Burned All the Bright* is an example of prose poetry. You can learn more about prose poetry through the Poetry Foundation’s website:

<https://tinyurl.com/y5dsj2vj> Looking at the text of the book as a prose poem, complete one or more of the following extension activities (Note: It may help to write each section out as a single stanza.):

- Memorize the poem and perform a dramatic interpretation in the style of Poetry Out Loud ([poetryoutloud.org](http://poetryoutloud.org)) or Reader’s Theater.
- Compare the poem to other examples of prose poetry (these can be found via the Poetry Foundation link).
- Explicate the poem, analyzing how syntax, figurative language, and sound devices create meaning.
- Write a prose poem inspired by *Ain’t Burned All the Bright*.

8. Like other respiratory illnesses (tuberculosis, asthma, COPD, black lung), COVID-19 has disproportionately impacted people with lower incomes. Using at least two peer-reviewed sources, research one of these illnesses and identify at least one reason for this disparity. Based on your research, what could we do to address this disparity?\_Why is it essential for a community to work together to protect public health?

*Guide prepared by Amy Jurskis, English Department Chair at Oxbridge Academy in Florida.*

*This guide has been provided by Simon & Schuster for classroom, library, and reading group use. It may be reproduced in its entirety or excerpted for these purposes.*