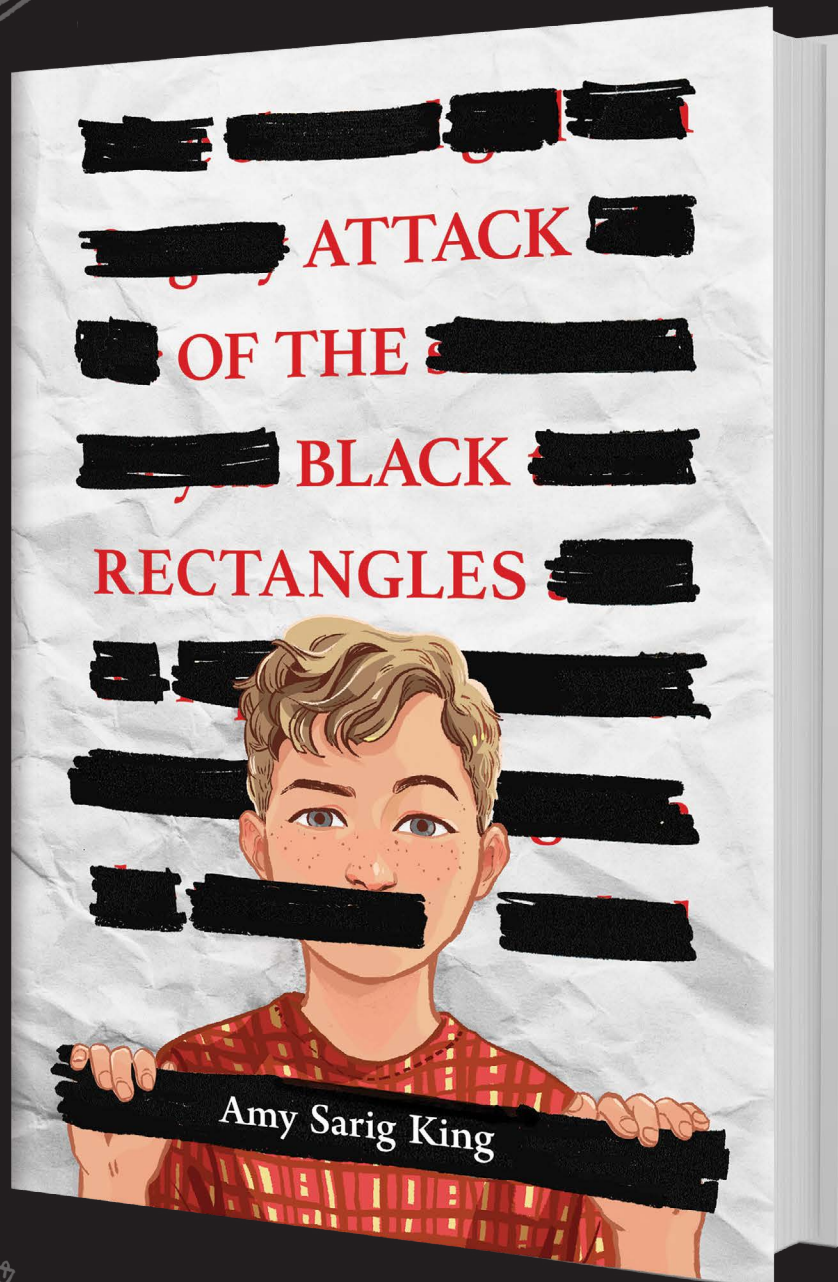


DISCUSSION GUIDE

ATTACK OF THE BLACK RECTANGLES

by Amy Sarig King

AGES 9–12
GRADES 4–7

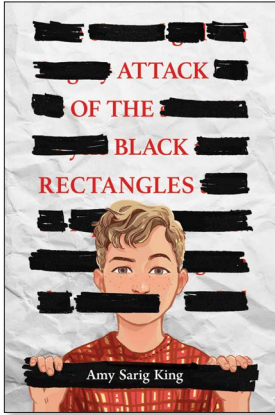


The
Power
of Story

Building Equitable
Bookshelves

 SCHOLASTIC

About the Book



When Mac first opens his classroom copy of Jane Yolen's *The Devil's Arithmetic* and finds some words blacked out, he thinks it must be a mistake. But then when he and his friends discover what the missing words are, he's outraged. Someone in his school is trying to prevent kids from reading the full story. But who? Even though his unreliable dad tells him to not get so emotional about a book (or anything else), Mac has been raised by his mom and grandad to call out things that are wrong. He and his friends head to the principal's office to protest the censorship . . . but her response doesn't take them seriously. So many adults want Mac to keep his words to himself. Mac's about to see the power of letting them out.

Introduction

Readers respond in many ways to what they read, including: making connections to themselves, their communities, and their literacy experiences; pursuing their curiosity through discussion, inquiry, and self-expression; and changing their attitudes and behaviors. This guide provides suggestions and resources for supporting and extending students' understanding and authentic reading responses to *Attack of the Black Rectangles* by Amy Sarig King. Select activities and resources that best meet your instructional needs and students' interests. Provide students with audio and print support as needed to access the book.

Note: *Attack of the Black Rectangles* addresses serious issues, including family violence and divorce. Please collaborate with your school counselor and explore the Child Mind Institute resources listed at the end of this guide to support students and families who may have questions or need help.

Discussion Questions

Use *Attack of the Black Rectangles* as a classroom read-aloud, or use the text as a book club selection with students. As you read, direct students' observations and guide discussions toward the characters' motivations and actions, the cause and effect chain of events, and the book's greater themes.

1. In the prologue, Mac says, "Ms. Sett is also a sixth grade teacher, but the adults around here are her students as much as kids like me" (p. 10). What are some adults learning from Ms. Sett? How does this affect the town?
2. What is censorship? Should some books be restricted? How can young people learn to make responsible book choices for themselves? How do the characters in *Attack of the Black Rectangles* make book choices for themselves?
3. Throughout the story, Mac revisits the concept of grace. What does it mean to give someone grace? Why is grace important? Why might it be difficult to give grace sometimes?
4. Marci announces that she, Mac, and Denis are "best friends," but Mac isn't sure this is true (p. 35). What evidence can you find in the story to confirm that they are best friends? Why might it matter to Mac whether or not he, Denis, and Marci really are best friends?

Discussion Questions (continued)

5. Mac, his mom, and his grandfather are trying to give grace to Mac's dad, who is prone to family violence and manipulation. Mac is afraid that he is going to grow up to be angry and out of control like his dad. How does Mac's grandfather help him face his anger and fear?
6. Mac thinks, "if we want to change the world so it's good for everyone, we have to tell the truth" (p. 52). Why is telling the truth so important to Mac? Does he believe it is ever acceptable to lie? Do you? If yes, under what circumstances?
7. After his father robs their house and leaves town, Mac is angry and depressed. He turns inward instead of talking to his friends or family. Why does Mac struggle to talk about his dad? What are some reasons it can be challenging to ask for help?
8. Although Mac has spoken out against her, Ms. Sett is kind and supportive after he's bullied by Aaron about his dad's disappearance. How does she help Mac feel better? How does this conversation change how he sees her?
9. What do Mac, Marci, and Denis learn from their experiences as protestors over the course of the story? In what ways do you think protests can be an effective method for people to share their concerns? What are the limitations of protests? Why is it important to protect the right to protest?
10. After the emergency school board meeting and the protests about censorship, people become more active in governing the town. How does the community show support for the students and their cause? Ms. Sett still hasn't shown she is going to stop censoring the books. Do you think the student-led protests were successful? Why or why not?

Extension Activities

1. Mac's mom and grandfather share some of the banned books they read with Mac (p. 48). Explore the lists and resources available from the American Library Association's Banned and Challenged Books website (ala.org/advocacy/bbooks). Select several titles of interest to your students from the lists of Frequently Challenged Books. Organize book clubs for students to read and discuss the books. Why have these books been banned, and by whom? Why is it important to read and share these books? Why is it important to think critically about why a book might have been banned, and what does that tell you about the book and the people who want to ban books? Book club resources are listed in the Resources and Further Reading section of this guide.
2. Work with students to locate and examine the book selection policies or guidelines for your school or district libraries and classrooms. Was the policy easy to locate on the district or school website? Was it easy to understand? Are any books excluded or not allowed? If yes, is an explanation given? Who conducts the book selection process? Are students given the opportunity to participate in this process? How can the members of your school community respond to book challenges in your community and show support for books that are challenged?

Extension Activities (continued)

3. When Mac tells his mom and grandfather about the black rectangles, they support him and encourage him when he decides to speak up about the censorship. They show Mac ways to speak up such as making protest signs and writing letters, and Mac and his friends work together to stand up for change. Partner with your librarian to gather resources about young people who have been activists in their communities, such as Greta Thunberg, the Swedish climate change activist, or Marley Dias, who launched #1000BlackGirlBooks when she was in elementary school. Invite students to explore the resources you've gathered to learn more about these young activists. How did these young people become interested in activism? Why is this issue important to them and what is its impact on their community, their country, or the world? What actions have they taken? What support or resources have they used to make their voices heard?
4. Investigate notable protests in history such as the 1963 March on Washington and the 1989 Tiananmen Square protest. How did these protests help raise awareness of social and political issues? What are some examples of the long-term impact of these protests? What commonly-held beliefs, societal norms, organizations, laws, etc. exist today as a result of these protests?
5. Gather an assortment of Jane Yolen's books and poems of interest to your students and invite them to learn more about Ms. Yolen and her work. Create a Jane Yolen display in your classroom or with a digital space such as Padlet. Students can write or record reviews of her books, share their favorite lines, or use her poems as mentor texts to write their own.
6. Ms. Sett writes letters to the local newspaper to express her opinions and suggest changes in the community. While her letters often seek to restrict or limit the rights of people in the town, writing letters to local newspapers and government leaders is one way citizens can speak up and hold leaders accountable. Work with students to identify issues in your school or town that concern them—such as dress code policies, library fine policies, or curfews. Students can work with a partner or group to research this local policy, then write a letter to the school or local newspaper, the school board, or a local government official. Invite community members or local leaders to talk with students about ways in which people of all ages can participate in local government. Contact local agencies or a nearby community college or university for experts who may talk with school groups virtually or in person.
7. While blacking out words and sentences to prevent students from reading them is censorship, blackout poetry is a popular way to recycle old books and increase students' engagement and interest in poetry. Collect some worn paperbacks, magazines, or newspapers and examples of blackout poetry from online sources or books like Austin Kleon's *Newspaper Blackout Poems*. Share examples with students and discuss their observations. What do they notice? How can you find a poem in lines of text? Practice "writing" a poem or two together using a document camera, a black marker, and a book or newspaper page. Give students time to create their own blackout poems. Students can share their poems with partners or a group, then post their blackout poems in the classroom or hallway for others to read.

For **free, printer-friendly activity sheets** for students that address feelings, emotions, and expression inspired by *Attack of the Black Rectangles*, visit as-king.com/resources.

Resources and Further Reading

American Library Association | Office of Intellectual Freedom | ala.org/aboutala/offices/oif

This ALA division offers legal assistance and resources to assist librarians and community advocates who are navigating censorship and book banning complaints.

American Library Association Unite Against Book Bans Toolkit | uniteagainstbookbans.org/#toolkit

This ALA toolkit provides talking points, petitions, and resources for people addressing censorship and book banning in their communities.

Banned Books Week | Resources | bannedbooksweek.org/resources

Established in 1982, Banned Books Week is an annual event celebrating the freedom to read. Their extensive resource list includes book lists, library and educator resources, and student activities.

Breathing New Life Into Book Clubs: A Practical Guide for Teachers

by Sonja Cherry-Paul and Dana Johansen (Heinemann, 2019).

An educator-facing book containing practical suggestions and strategies for designing and implementing book clubs with elementary school students.

Child Mind Institute | childmind.org

The Child Mind Institute is dedicated to transforming the lives of children and families experiencing mental health conditions and learning disorders. They offer articles and guides for parents, caregivers, and educators to support young people.

Every Library | Facing a Book Ban or Censorship Help | everylibrary.org/bannedhelp

This nonprofit political action committee works with local, state, and national policymakers to support libraries and the First Amendment, and offers pro-bono consulting to communities fighting book challenges.

National Coalition Against Censorship | Resources | ncac.org/resources

NCAC provides direct intervention and resources to help activists, educators, students, artists and all citizens promote free expression and challenge censorship.

National Council of Teachers of English | Intellectual Freedom Center | ncte.org/resources/ncte-intellectual-freedom-center

NCTE offers legal and educational resources for educators teaching students about censorship or encountering censorship and book banning complaints.

National Coalition Against Censorship | Book Censorship Toolkit | ncac.org/resource/book-censorship-toolkit

NCAC has been battling censors and book-banning advocates for over 40 years. This toolkit provides resources for students, educators, parents, and authors to effectively fight book challenges in schools.

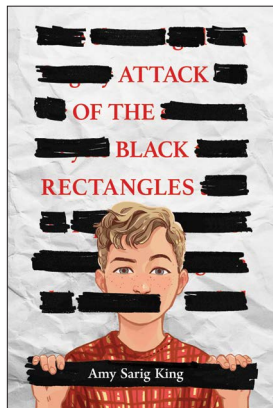
National Coalition for Censorship | Resources for Students | ncac.org/resources-for-students

This student-facing webpage from NCAC provides background information about the history of censorship and resources for resisting censorship.

PEN America | How to Fight Book Bans: A Tip Sheet for Students | pen.org/how-to-fight-book-bans-a-tip-sheet-for-students

Founded in 1922, PEN America aims to protect free expression in the United States and worldwide. This student-facing tip sheet lists resources and action steps for responding to book challenges and bans.

Praise for *Attack of the Black Rectangles*



HC: 9781338680522 • \$18.99
Ages 9–12 • Grades 4–7
Also available in ebook and audio

★“Poignant, humorous, and bright . . . Whip-smart, tuned in to the mind of sixth-graders, and beautifully concluded, the novel takes a bold stand in a time of book bans and rampant censorship . . . Against the backdrop of family issues, first crushes, and the end of elementary school, this is a beacon of hope for middle grades and an object lesson in treating kids like the intelligent readers they are.” —*Booklist*, starred review

★“[Amy Sarig King’s] respect for young people is exemplary, and her characters indelible.” —*Horn Book*, starred review

★“Skillfully encourages keeping open minds and extending grace to the oblivious and hostile alike . . . A searingly relevant opus to intellectual freedom.” —*Kirkus Reviews*, starred review

★“King’s latest novel is so timely and relevant, some readers may feel like the author has been privy to what’s going on in their own schools . . . A striking book on censorship; a must-have in all middle grade classrooms and school libraries.” —*School Library Journal*, starred review

“King empathetically tackles the intersections of multiple sensitive topics . . . patriarchy and sexism, war’s realities, whitewashed history—while educating readers on the power of protest and the benefits of living with grace.” —*Publishers Weekly*

“Young readers don’t often get a voice in book challenges. King makes them an integral part of her story . . . a satisfying read.” —*New York Times Book Review*

“This book is a triumph . . . a moving story of a young teen boy trying to figure out who he is and navigating family, friendship, first crushes, and his own emotions as he transitions into adolescence.” —*Teen Librarian Toolbox*

About the Author



Photo © Amy Sarig King

Amy Sarig King is the author of the middle grade titles *Me and Marvin Gardens*, a *Washington Post* Best Book of the Year, and *The Year We Fell From Space*, an ALSC Notable Children’s Book. She has also published many critically acclaimed young adult novels under the name A.S. King, including *Dig.*, the 2020 Michael L. Printz Award winner, *Please Ignore Vera Dietz*, a Michael L. Printz Honor book, and *Ask the Passengers*, which won the *Los Angeles Times* Book Prize. She is the recipient of the American Library Association’s 2022 Margaret A. Edwards Award for a lasting contribution to children’s literature and lives in Pennsylvania with her epic kid. Visit her website at as-king.com and follow her on Twitter at @AS_King.

About the Writer of this Guide: Donalyn Miller is a leading expert on independent reading and children’s literature, and is the author of *The Joy of Reading*, coauthored with Teri S. Lesesne, and *Game Changer! Book Access for All Kids*, coauthored with Colby Sharp. She is cofounder of The Nerdy Book Club and cohost of the monthly Twitter chat #titledtalk, both with Colby Sharp. Her articles have appeared in *Education Week Teacher*, *The Reading Teacher*, *Educational Leadership*, *The Washington Post*, and other prominent periodicals.



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