

Title: Cane Warriors

Author: Alex Wheatle

LIKES

Characters:

- Some liked the strong narrative voice and felt it helped them get immediately into Moa's head
- Some liked Moa's overall personality and how he stood up for what was right with passion and conviction- an important lesson for young people to learn
- Some loved that there were positive black and male role models and that there was a sense of triumph in what they achieved
- Some liked the positive male relationships which were tough but also tender particularly between Moa and Keverton

Setting:

- Some appreciated the richness of the setting and the cultural references to Akan traditions, gods, songs etc.
- Some loved the atmosphere and how the author built tension- it engulfed the reader
- Some felt that everyone could draw something from the story that they related to even if they weren't of Jamaican heritage

Structure and style:

- Some loved the use of dialect and the musicality of the language especially the repetition
- Some found it cinematic- they could see the story very visually
- Some felt that even without any detailed context, the story was accessible
- Some liked that the author didn't 'baby-fy' the harsh realities of the story and didn't shy away from anger but still kept it accessible for younger pupils and reiterated the strength of the characters
- Some felt it gripped you into the drama really quickly
- Some loved the structure of the story and the emotional breathers in between the battles
- Some loved the optimistic ending which felt right for the age of the target audience
- Some liked the short chapters that helped build momentum

Themes:

- Some found it made them more curious about the real-life history of Tacky
- Some liked that it was based on real events- it made the story hit harder
- Some valued the relationships between Moa and each of his parents and the presentation of a concept children might not understand e.g. families being deliberately kept apart, people not knowing who their family is
- Some liked the ‘found family’ theme and the sense of community between the brothers
- Some appreciated that it was telling a story about a time when a lot of black history has been erased- we need more stories like this
- Some liked that it was endorsed by Amnesty International- could research the charity and their work etc.

DISLIKES

- Some found it hard to get into the story
- The violence and constant struggle was hard to read
- Some disliked the cover art
- Some felt it lacked character development and that they didn’t know the characters well enough to root for them
- Some disliked the ‘weak’ female characters who were ‘only there as plot devices’
- Some disliked the repetition of everyone remarking on how young Moa was
- Dialect was mostly used for conversation but occasionally in the narrative which some people found confusing
- Some felt the final battle was anti-climatic
- Some disliked that we never found out how Keverton’s father was
- Some found it too hard to stomach given Moa’s age and would have preferred he was 15/16- but also recognised the truth and necessity of him only being 14
- Some struggled to pinpoint what year group it would work for as year 7s maybe too young for violence but year 9s too old for story
- Some found the dialect jarring to begin with- worried about ‘mimicing’ the accent
- Some felt the writing style would put off reluctant readers especially boys

PUZZLES

- Unresolved nature of Moa and his father's relationship
- What was the author's intention? To raise awareness about a period of history or the challenges of coming of age?
- Continuity between Keverton not showing interest in girls but then wants two women and lots of children?
- What happens in the end? Do Moa and Hamaya make it somewhere better? Do they survive?
- What's on the other side of the mountain?
- Will Moa become like Pappa – or carry on as a Warrior?

PATTERNS (Within this book and links to other books and real-life experiences)**Within the novel**

- Dreamland- rabbits in Of Mice and Men
- Positive male relationships- empowering male role models who are tough but also tender
- The comfort of food
- Sense of community- I am because you are and you are because I am
- Repetition of 'de blood remembers'
- Spirituality and connection to ancestors
- Contrast between violence and silence
- Water- life-giving, drinking it, buried by it, cave by the sea, watching the water, ancestors who were 'lost souls at sea'
- Moa sleeping after battles- highlights his youth compared to others
- Keverton looks after Moa then after he is gone, Moa is going to look after Hamaya
- Fluctuation between English and "mother-tongue" throughout the book
- Italic sections highlighting Moa's internal thoughts

Real life links

- It is an ‘untold’ story from history, based on true events.
- Real-life connection to author and his own history
- References to Anancy and other culturally significant stories
- Counteracting toxic masculinity

Links to other books / film

- The theme of the difficulty of coming of age relates to Purple Hibiscus, Great Expectations and Oliver Twist
- Another novel written in dialect is Trainspotting
- Catherine Johnson’s Sawbones and Freedom are both about slavery
- Maggot Moon by Sally Gardner is also about an adolescent trying to survive under a brutal regime- though 1950’s dystopia very different
- ‘Do they bleed the same?’ reminded some of Merchant of Venice ‘If you prick us, do we not bleed?’ and the idea of common humanity under race divisions.
- 12 years a slave by Steve McQueen
- Blood and Sugar by Laura Shepherd Robinson- 1780s docklands, abolitionism etc.
- Non-fiction texts like Black and British by David Olusoga and Black Skins White Masks by Frantz Fanon
- Queen of Freedom by Catherine Johnson – suitable for younger year groups – focuses on “Queen Nanny” who is mentioned in CW

HOOKS

- Focus on the language as it will be challenging for some to understand
- Focus on reluctant or low-ability readers, particularly boys, as it is accessible

READING ALOUD, HAVING IGNITED THEIR CURIOSITY

- Some teachers expressed discomfort about reading it aloud themselves because of the dialect and many suggested using an audio book instead read by somebody of Jamaican heritage for authenticity.

OUTPUTS FOLLOWING READING (ORAL AND WRITTEN)

- Add to a reading list in the History department for when they are teaching about slavery
- Researching female slave leaders such as Queen Akua, 'the Queen of Kingston' who led a rebellion after Tacky
- A discussion around the moral complexities of the books e.g. the killing of the slave owner's children
- Use with Ghost Boys by Jewell Parker Rhodes as a comparison around historical and contemporary racial injustice
- Use specific extracts in a topic around journeys, particularly journeys from other cultures
- Use extracts in conjunction with Words that Burn- for those who take part in this project
- Use for speaking aloud practice with specific individuals of the same cultural heritage
- Alex Wheatle is now one school's Author of the Month
- Year 9 read Crongton Knights by Alex Wheatle in Year 9 – now continuing with Year 10 reading Cane Warriors
- Will use it as a tutor read in Years 7/8 or 9 or an intervention book in Autumn Term
- Asked library to order copies
- Developed lesson plans and sent to whole department to deliver to all classes, including questions on slides on key topics (will share with group)
- Year 10 workshop as part of Literature Festival in school
- Look at poems in this dialect, especially power and conflict
- Research lost/hidden histories of the revolution
- One school is holding a Literature Festival in December 2021 – developing a workshop on Cane Warriors – will focus on toxic masculinity with combined vulnerabilities eg feelings the night before the battle

RESOURCES

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OTHER

- Reading the book will build self-esteem, especially amongst Black Afro-Caribbean pupils
- Using Cane Warriors as part of programme to promote diversity in the curriculum, with Alex Wheatle as author of the month. Learning about slavery through literature – liaising with history department, too.