

# Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

## Scorpions

by

### Walter Dean Myers

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### Book Information

Walter Dean Myers, Scorpions  
Quiz Number: 386  
HarperTrophy, 1988  
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216 Pages  
Book Level: 3.7  
Interest Level: MG+

After reluctantly taking on the leadership of the Harlem gang, the Scorpions, Jamal finds that his enemies treat him with respect when he acquires a gun--until a tragedy occurs. The plot contains violence.

**Award:** Margaret A. Edwards Award; Newbery Honor

**Topics:** Community Life, Neighborhood; Countries/Regions, Puerto Rico; People, African American; Read Now Power Up Recommended Lists, Take a Stand: Leadership; READNOW - Demco Media Turtleback Books, Demco Media - Read Now Grades 1-3; READNOW - Renaissance Learning, RLI - Grades 6-8 (Theme: Surviving); Social Issues, Violence

### Main Characters

Abuela Tito's grandmother

Dwayne older boy at Jamal's school who continually harasses Jamal and challenges him to fights

Jamal twelve-year-old boy who lives in the inner city and becomes involved with a gang called the Scorpions

Mack member of the Scorpions, and Randy's back-up man

Mama mother of Sassy, Jamal and Randy

Mr. Davidson principal at Jamal's school

Mr. Gonzalez owner of a bodega who hires Jamal to deliver packages and help out around the store

Randy older brother of Jamal and Sassy, former leader of the Scorpions, who is serving time in prison

Sassy eight-year-old sister of Jamal

Tito Jamal's best friend

### Vocabulary

**bodega** Spanish word for small store

**dope** illegal drugs

**punk out** refuse to fight because of fear

### Synopsis

Jamal Hicks is a twelve-year-old boy from the inner city. Living with his mother and younger sister, Jamal finds himself struggling with school, his family and the Scorpions. Jamal's father is an alcoholic and no longer lives with them. His older brother, Randy, is serving time in prison for armed robbery and murder. Jamal feels responsible for the care of his mother and sister and wants to raise money for his brother's appeal. At the same time, Jamal wants to be a little boy with dreams for the future.

Before being sent to prison, Randy was the leader of the Scorpions. Through Mack, Randy's back-up man, Randy has asked Jamal to take over leadership of the gang. The other gang members do not like this idea because Jamal is so young. Jamal is not sure whether or not he is willing to become involved with the gang. He struggles with his sense of right and wrong and tries to reconcile these feelings with his need for acceptance, money and power.

The one person who understands Jamal is his best friend, Tito. The two boys share their dreams, fears and accomplishments. Tito faithfully stands by Jamal even when Jamal makes some decisions and engages in behavior that is dangerous for both the boys and their families. While trying to protect Jamal, Tito shoots two gang members and thereafter is consumed with guilt. He eventually confesses to his Abuela, and she decides it would be best to take him away from the bad environment to Puerto Rico. Jamal then has to face the consequence of his actions and live without his best friend.

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### Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

#### Initial Understanding

How does Mr. Davidson's attitude toward Jamal affect the choices that Jamal makes?

*The correct response should reflect the idea that Mr. Davidson is determined to see Jamal fail. Mr. Davidson shows no interest in the person Jamal really is and does not offer Jamal any help in sorting out his feelings. Mr. Davidson expects Jamal to make poor choices, which makes Jamal angry. Jamal's anger and feelings of weakness result in Jamal making decisions that get him into even more trouble.*

#### Initial Understanding

What did Jamal mean by the following statement? "The thing was that it was hard to be strong. It was really hard."

*Jamal and his family had just been told his brother Randy had been stabbed while in prison. Jamal was hiding a gun he didn't want, and his mother had not been able to get the money for Randy's appeal. Mama had told Jamal she wouldn't be able to stand it if Jamal was weak. Jamal was trying very hard to be strong for his mother's sake when he actually felt confused, scared and very small.*

#### Initial Understanding

Why do you think someone would want to join a gang?

*People join gangs because they think belonging will bring them security and safety. Running with a gang gives a person a sense of family and support that they may not have at home. Gangs offer the dreams of money and power to young people who feel hopeless and powerless.*

#### Initial Understanding

What might be some of the consequences of joining a gang?

*Answers to this question should fall into several categories. These may include criminal activities, loss of family and friends, threat to health and safety of self and family and the inability to be successful in school.*

### Teachable Skills

**Understanding Characterization** Jamal's interest in art probably helped him express himself, but Mr. Davidson, the principal, and Miss Brown, the grammar teacher, did not see Jamal as he really was. The students could do a role-playing activity in which Miss Brown and Mr. Davidson treat Jamal differently than they do in the story. Jamal's attitude toward school (and life in general) would probably be very different if the teachers treated him with kindness and compassion instead of dismissing him as if he were just like his brother Randy.

**Understanding Characterization** Jamal's brother Randy caused problems for the family even after he was in jail. As a writing activity, the students could add a chapter or two to the story describing Mama's effort to obtain the money for a lawyer to have her son released from jail, Randy's eventual return to the family and the effect he would have on Jamal, Mama, and Sassy.

**Understanding Hist/Cultural Factors** The Scorpions of this story live in the ghetto of New York City, but gangs exist all across the United States. Students might find it interesting to research gangs in other cities, such as Chicago, Los Angeles, or Miami and compare and contrast the groups. Discussion could include the existence of gangs in their own community, the reasons kids join gangs, and what, if anything, can be done to stop gang activity.

**Recognizing Cause and Effect** Because of his age, Tito did not go to trial for shooting Angel and Indian; he was charged with juvenile delinquency. Students could pretend Tito was eighteen when

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the shooting took place and stage a mock trial to determine his guilt or innocence and what would happen to him in either case.