

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for Who Killed Mr. Chippendale? A Mystery in Poems by Mel Glenn

Book Information

Mel Glenn, Who Killed Mr. Chippendale? A Mystery in Poems

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98 Pages

Book Level: 5.0

Interest Level: UG

Free-verse poems describe the reactions of students, colleagues, and others when a high school teacher is shot to death as the school day begins.

Award: ALA Notable/Best Books; State Award; YALSA Top Ten

Topics: Community Life, School; Family Life, Death; Mysteries, Murder; Mysteries, Who-dun-it; Recommended Reading, IRA/CBC Choice; Recommended Reading, YALSA Popular Paperbacks

Main Characters

Celia Campbell student who writes a poem for the memorial service

Claire D'Angeles student who writes a song for the memorial service

Darren Reese student who is obsessed with guns and is presented as a possible suspect

Delia Campbell Celia's twin who claims Mr. Chippendale ridiculed her and made her feel stupid

Eduardo Gomez student who informs Ms. Falcone that Leah is a skilled liar

Harry Balinger police detective assigned to the case

John Bellerus student whom the author presents as a possible suspect in the murder

Leah Talbot student who alleges she had an affair with Mr. Chippendale

Mike Curry a.k.a. the Red-Hooded Sweatshirt Student at Tower High and the killer of Mr. Chippendale

Mr. Robert Chippendale the principal character in the story, a teacher at Tower High, shot to death by student Mike Curry

Ms. Angela Falcone guidance counselor who had an affair with Robert and is now dedicated to keeping the memory of Robert alive

Vocabulary

amorphous shapeless

cynicism attributing all actions to selfish motives; skepticism

euphemism substitution of a pleasant expression for an unpleasant one

genocide systematic destruction of a racial or cultural group

integration the bringing together of racial or ethnic groups

stereotypes something conforming to a general pattern

Synopsis

This is a story in free-verse poems, each composed by different people in the principal character's life. Through accounts and recollections of the characters, a conflicting portrait of Mr. Robert Chippendale is painted.

Robert Chippendale is only a living character for the first five pages of the book. He is presented as a dedicated English teacher at an inner-city school and as a dedicated runner who likens his life and his teaching career to the track.

While he is retying his shoes, someone in a red-hooded sweatshirt breezes by, intentionally running into him. Mr. Chippendale goes about his business, pausing to hear popping sounds. Seconds later he is shot in the head, dying instantly.

Mike Curry is introduced as a student who jokes about Chippendale's death. He is immediately suspect upon reading his words, "Hey, maybe I'll make the ten o'clock news. Cool!" Throughout the story, conflicting images of Mr. Chippendale are given. Celia Campbell is indebted to him for fostering her poetic talents; her twin sister despises him for thrashing her abilities. He is presented, almost simultaneously as caring and cruel. Angela

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Falcone alludes to the fact that she and Robert were romantically involved in the past. It seems the school staff wants to sweep Chippendale's murder under the rug. Meanwhile, more students give accounts of Mr. Chippendale as well as their opinion of school.

Angela Falcone has a dream in which she recalls a past day spent with Robert. Suddenly, he appears in her dream to ask her to solve his murder. She knows then that she can not let his death be forgotten, so she urges students to come to talk with her about their thoughts or grief.

Ms. Falcone receives the first note in which the killer compares killing to an arcade game. He also advises that she leave Mr. Chippendale alone and let him be forgotten. He confesses that he is the important one, not the dead teacher.

In a second note to Ms. Falcone, the killer claims to need "the bright lights of fame." She then decides she must lure him out of hiding at a public function--Mr. Chippendale's memorial service. Mike Curry appears in Ms. Falcone's office afterward and it is apparent that he is the killer.

Open-Ended Questions

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

Initial Understanding

Many of the students expressed being afraid. What where they afraid of and why?

The answer will reflect something about the subculture of violence in either the schools or in America.

Literary Analysis

Why do you think the author chose to write this book in free-verse poetry instead of in traditional prose?

Poetry evokes the strongest possible feelings in a reader, especially about such a tragic subject as murder and violence.

Inferential Comprehension

Mike Curry decided to reveal himself to Ms. Falcone. Why did he choose to go to her?

Answer should reflect that she tried to keep Mr. Chippendale's memory alive. Also, at the ceremony, she told the killer that he would never be famous. Mike Curry had to prove Ms. Falcone wrong.

Constructing Meaning

What type of person do you believe Mr. Chippendale was?

The answer would be that he was either a caring person, a shady or mean person, or a bit of both. It will depend on which excerpts the student chooses as evidence as well as how the student interprets the accounts of Mr. Chippendale's life.

Teachable Skills

Understanding Literary Features There is a clear commentary in this story about the corrupt nature of the media. The killer is fascinated by it, and Ying Li also says that American TV has killed "all the beautiful words." Students might research how and why newspapers and news shows print and show the stories they do. Explore the seeming lack of uplifting and positive stories that seem to be replaced or overshadowed with stories of death and violence. The paparazzi's role in all of this could even be explored. Ask the question: Who is responsible? Society for wanting to see this news, or the media for giving it to us?

Understanding Characterization

Mr. Chippendale is presented in contrasting views, depending on whom you listen to. He is an encouraging teacher who changed lives. Alternately, he is alleged to have had an affair with a student, used drugs, and was connected with gambling or loan sharks. Ask students to write a profile of Mr. Chippendale using everything they know from the story. Ask them to back up their claims with textual evidence. Was he a good man, a bad man, or both?

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Understanding the Author's Craft This story is told in the first person by numerous individuals writing free-verse poems. Sometimes the accounts read like straight-forward letters, and at other times they are symbolic and metaphorical. For a creative writing exercise, have students take all of one of the characters' poems, and re-write them in the third person with an all-knowing narrator.

Recognizing Cause and Effect Mike Curry makes reference to the film NATURAL BORN KILLERS. He says he needs "the bright lights of fame." He even mentions being on Geraldo. In NATURAL BORN KILLERS, Mickey and Mallory go on a vicious killing spree, gaining more fame with each murder. For a project, have students research the actual effect violence in movies, music and books has on influencing or creating violence in the real world. It is a controversial subject. Allow students to choose a position and support it.