

BECK

MAL PEET WITH MEG ROSOFF

ABOUT THE BOOK

Born of a brief encounter between a Liverpool prostitute and an African soldier in 1907, Beck finds himself orphaned as a young boy and sent overseas to the Catholic Brothers in Canada. At age fifteen he is sent to work on a farm, from which he eventually escapes. Finally in charge of his own destiny, Beck starts westward, crossing the border into America and back, all while the Great Depression rages on. Enduring much abuse and many hardships, Beck also has times of comfort and encouragement, eventually finding Grace, the woman with whom he can finally forge his life and shape his destiny. What will it take for Beck to understand the agonies of his childhood and realize that love is possible?

Common Core Connections

This discussion guide can be used with large or small groups and will help students meet several of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) for English Language Arts. These include the reading literature standards for key ideas and details (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL) as well as the speaking and listening standards (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL). Questions can be used for group discussion and as writing prompts for independent work.



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Also available as an e-book • Age 16 and up

★ “Heartbreaking, hopeful, and inspired.”

— *Kirkus Reviews* (starred review)

★ “A heartbreaking, painful work that gives hope to the restorative power of true human connection.”

— *School Library Journal* (starred review)

★ “A gritty and inspiring survival story.”

— *Publishers Weekly* (starred review)



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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Due to the circumstances of his birth, Beck does not quite know his age throughout the novel. Create your own time line of the story that includes Beck's age and significant events. How many years does it take for the novel to progress from beginning to end? What important events happen during each year of Beck's life? How does each event contribute to the development of his character?
2. When Beck first leaves the Sisters of Mercy orphanage, he is amazed at the world outside its doors. What things does he notice? What do the discoveries suggest about his upbringing with his mom and in the orphanage?
3. In chapters two and three, the authors include distinct pauses during the Lord's Prayer while Beck is embarking on his journey. First, prior to his boarding the ship, they state, "At the foot of it, Sister Thomas led the boys in a recitation of the Lord's Prayer. At the words 'those who trespass against us,' a hard rain began to fall" (page 10). During the burial of the two boys at sea as the prayer is being said, "the words choked in Beck's throat long before the tricky part about trespasses" (page 15). What might these moments in the text suggest or foreshadow? Use evidence from the novel to support your answer.
4. When Beck first arrives at Braemar, he has a moment in the garden when he discusses paradise with Brother Michaelis. How does Braemar mirror paradise? How is it starkly different? Provide examples from the text in your response.
5. When Beck is brutally attacked by Brother Robert, he is given both physical and emotional scars. How do those scars impact the development of the novel, Beck's journey, and his interactions with others? (CCSS: Reading: Literature: Key Ideas and Details: RL.11–12.3)
6. In Part 4: Fire, Beck hears the voices of the priests several times. Why do you think the authors include these memories? How might remembering the past impact his future?
7. Beck is described as mixed race in the novel. How do others perceive Beck's racial identity? In your opinion, why do people focus only on his black identity without acknowledging his white ancestry? Throughout his journey, do the perceptions of Beck change based on the location and/or race of the individuals he is meeting? Think about each geographical location he travels to. How were people of African descent treated in those locations during the early 1900s?
- 7a. How does Beck feel about being biracial throughout the story? Think about how each event shapes his perceptions and explain how it relates to his self-identity.
8. Beck learns things very slowly on the Giggses' farm, but picks up skills quickly later in the novel. For example, he swiftly learns how to use a Smith & Wesson and how to care for horses. Why do you think there is a difference in the amount of time it takes him to learn skills?
- 8a. Beck often talks negatively about himself. Do you believe that Beck is a talented and/or intelligent individual? Why or why not?

9. Beck escapes from homes rooted in religion to a place where bootlegging is taking place. Are his homes aligned with Christian values? Why or why not? How do the settings and people differ? Do you believe that he has run away to a better place? What does Beck learn from Bone and Irma? How does his encounter with Bone and Irma impact his perceptions of the world?
10. How does Beck's treatment of Lonnie compare to the burial at sea of the boys in chapter three? Are both wrong? Why or why not?
11. When Beck is left by Bone and Irma, the authors write, "A determination formed in his head right then not to fall for the ruse of kindness again. It led to nothing but pain" (page 145). Do you agree? Based on Beck's background, does it make sense that Beck feels this way?
12. A burning tree is highly symbolic in the Bible. Does the burning tree have similar significance to Beck and Grace? What does it represent for each individual? Support your answer with details from the text.
13. How are Grace's and Beck's family histories similar? How are they different? Think about the following quote: "She cared little for the opinion of society, but understood that the affliction of mixed blood meant she was barely tolerated by those possessed of racial purity" (page 158). What does this quote tell us about Grace? What experiences might Grace and Beck have in common as biracial individuals? Provide examples from the novel as you respond. (CCSS: Reading: Literature: Key Ideas and Details: RL.11–12.1)
14. By the time Beck arrives at Grace's home, he speaks very little. Why does he adopt this approach when encountering new people? How has he changed since the beginning of the story?
15. Grace shares wisdom with Beck by stating, "Nah-ah says that if you lose your own people you need to gather new ones around you; otherwise you turn ghost" (page 174). Is Beck a ghost? Has he found new people? Why or why not?
16. As you read, consider moments when Beck experiences happiness. Do you believe that it is true happiness? Why or why not?
- 16a. Beck also experiences love in many moments as the text develops. Later in the novel, how do these moments make him feel uncomfortable? How can he move past his discomfort and/or pain? Do you agree with Beck's view that people always want something for their kindness? Give examples from the story as you respond.
17. Throughout the story the terms *baptism* and *rebirth* are mentioned. What do these terms mean to Beck? Are the concepts of baptism and rebirth positive or negative for him? Why? Is there any portion of the story where you believe that Beck is reborn?
18. Why are Grace and Beck struggling with their feelings for each other? What issues are they experiencing? What are Beck's perceptions of relationships, sex, and women?

19. In your opinion, what causes Beck to tell Lester his story after so many years of silence? Consider whether you agree with Lester when he says the following: “Your life don’t get bigger on the road. It shrinks and shrinks till it’s so small all you can see is that little square ahead of you and that bottle beside you on the seat. It turns you old and sick and lonely, and then the day you realize the road’s the only thing on earth you love and it ain’t never gonna love you back, it’s too late ‘cause you’re just about finished” (page 238). Is it too late for Beck? Why or why not? What does Beck begin to miss on the road?
20. Fire is a recurring theme in Part 4: Fire. What message is the burning man sending Beck and Grace? What is the meaning of “I will not be consumed” (page 244) to Beck and Grace? Provide examples to support your response.
21. What is the central theme or idea of the story? How is it developed? How does the final sun dance ceremony relate to the central theme and/or idea? ([CCSS: Reading: Literature: Key Ideas and Details: RL.11–12.2](#))
22. Read the author’s note from Meg Rosoff and the afterword written by Elspeth Graham-Peet. What do they tell you about Mal Peet and Meg Rosoff? If you’ve read another Mal Peet text, how in your opinion is the writing in this novel similar? How does it differ?
23. Mal Peet once said, “I see genres as generating sets of rules or conventions that are only interesting when they are subverted or used to disguise the author’s intent. My own way of doing this is to attempt a sort of whimsical alchemy, whereby seemingly incompatible genres are brought into unlikely partnerships.” In your opinion, which genres are involved with this novel?

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



Mal Peet (1947–2015) is the acclaimed author of the Carnegie Medal–winning novel *Tamar*, as well as the *Boston Globe–Horn Book* Honor Winner *Life: An Exploded Diagram*; three Paul Faustino novels: *Keeper*, *The Penalty*, and *Exposure*, a winner of the *Guardian* Children’s Fiction Prize; and *The Murdstone Trilogy*. He is also the co-author of *Cloud Tea Monkeys*, *Mysterious Traveler*, and *Night Sky Dragons*, all of which he wrote with his wife, Elspeth Graham.



Meg Rosoff grew up in a suburb of Boston and moved to London in 1989. She spent fifteen years working in advertising before writing her first novel, *How I Live Now*, which has sold over one million copies in thirty-six territories. It won the *Guardian* Children’s Fiction Prize and the Michael L. Printz Award and was made into a film. Her subsequent six novels have been awarded or short-listed for, among others, the Carnegie Medal and the National Book Award. Meg Rosoff is also the recipient of the 2016 Astrid Lindgren Memorial Award. Meg Rosoff completed Mal Peet’s unfinished novel, a promise she made him before he died. She lives in London with her husband, their daughter, and their dogs.

ABOUT THE GUIDE WRITER

Dawn Jacobs Martin has spent her career supporting students through various roles as a practitioner, researcher, and special education director. Currently, she is an assistant professor who works to improve academic student outcomes through teacher development, instructional design, and research in the areas of response to intervention, social support, and parent involvement.

