

A DISCUSSION GUIDE TO

J.D. AND THE GREAT
BARBER BATTLE

J. DILLARD

illustrated by AKEEM S. ROBERTS



ABOUT THE BOOK

J.D. HAS A BIG PROBLEM—it's the night before the start of third grade and his mom has just given him his first and worst home haircut. When the steady stream of insults from the entire student body of Douglass Elementary becomes too much for J.D., he takes matters into his own hands and discovers that, unlike his mom, he's a genius with the clippers. His work makes him the talk of the town and brings him enough hair business to open a barbershop in his bedroom. But when Henry Jr., the owner of the only official local barbershop, realizes he's losing clients to J.D., he tries to shut him down for good. How do you find out who's the best barber in all of Meridian, Mississippi? With a **GREAT BARBER BATTLE!**



PRAISE FOR **J.D. AND THE GREAT BARBER BATTLE** **A 2022-2023 TEXAS BLUEBONNET AWARD SELECTION**

★**"A SUREFIRE WIN OF
A READ EXPRESSLY MADE
FOR YOUNG BLACK BOYS
TO CHERISH."**

—KIRKUS REVIEWS, STARRED REVIEW

**"HONESTLY FUN, FUNNY, AND IT COMES UP
WITH SOME ORIGINAL STORYTELLING THAT'S
JUST A DELIGHT...THIS IS A BOOK WORTH
PUTTING IN EVERY LIBRARY AND SCHOOL."**

— BETSY BIRD, SCHOOL LIBRARY JOURNAL'S FUSE EIGHT

This guide was written by **Lorena Germán**. Lorena is a Dominican American educator based in Tampa, Florida. A two-time nationally awarded educator, she works with middle and high school students, using an anti-bias and antiracist approach to teaching. She's a co-founder of Multicultural Classroom, through which she supports teachers and schools, and is chair of NCTE's Committee Against Racism & Bias in the Teaching of English, in addition to being a writer (Heinemann 2021), speaker, and professional development provider.

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PRE-READING PREPARATION FOR EDUCATORS

AS YOU PREPARE to read this book to first-through third-grade students, there is some context that needs to be explored. In this story, the main character, J.D., experiences economic hardships, and his father is absent from his life. While these do not deter from his ingenuity and brilliance, they offer an opportunity for important conversations.

Throughout the story, and what initially leads J.D. to cut his own hair, is the reality that his mother struggles financially and can't afford a haircut at the local barbershop. J. Dillard introduces this idea into the plot seamlessly, and it isn't something negatively dwelled on. It's objective and simply part of J.D.'s impetus for solving his own problems. This is a good opportunity to talk to students about the realities of financial hardships and welcome conversations about it. You can do this through questions, written reflection, partner work, and general discussions. While avoiding asking them about their personal and family finances, you can talk about general ideas and perceptions about financial hardships.



J.D. lives with his sister, his mother, and her parents. His grandparents and his mother are the caregivers in his life. Although the author presents us with a joyful family, students might rest in their bias and make their own conclusions about this family structure. You might hear the bias in comments about the family. This is a powerful moment to welcome them to interrogate those ideas. You can do so by asking them:

- **What do you think about this family structure?**
- **How is it different from your own family and from what you believe a family should be?**
- **What words would you use to describe this family?**





The father in this story is largely absent and rarely mentioned. While J. Dillard doesn't vilify him or offer us any negative ideas about him, this can affirm a stereotype about Black fathers that exist in our society. It can be beneficial to talk to students about that stereotype and clarify that although in this story the father is absent, that is not always the case in Black families. In fact, many families have extra support due to strong relationships with extended relatives. Consider [this article](#) as support for exploring this topic. Indeed, although J.D.'s father is absent, he has the support of his sister, his mother, and his grandparents. The author presents us with a joyful and tight-knit family. Students may ask questions about where his father is and possibly questions about multi-generational households. In response to these questions, you can engage students in a conversation by prompting them with:

- **How is J.D.'s family structure different from yours?**
- **What does family mean to you?**
- **Does it seem like J.D. is very sad or troubled by the absence of his dad?**

These questions will help students relate to J.D., normalize this family structure, and see J.D. in the way the author intended: a happy, loved Black boy.

Lastly, this book is also about Black hair, haircuts, and community. Walking into this story, you may want to explore and consider your own bias against Black hair and its styles. There is a long history that presents **Black hair and hairstyles as unprofessional, ugly, and more**. That anti-Blackness is embedded in our cultural beauty standards, and it's very possible that both you and some of your students hold those biases coming into a unit where you study this book. To address this, be encouraged to ask yourself:

- **What biases against Black hair do I hold, if any?**
- **What messages have I learned about Black beauty?**
- **What do I need to unlearn in order to truly celebrate the characters in this book and present them as whole and beautiful?**

Through the inclusion of this book in your curriculum, you can support students by not reinforcing those unfortunate biases. They will watch a Black boy enjoy Black hair and express his talent. The Black hair is the site of art, beauty, and dynamic creativity in this book. Having students experience this is in and of itself important work!

[Here's another resource](#) to help you learn more about hair discrimination.



IDEAS TO EXPLORE

THE POWER of *J.D. and the Great Barber Battle* is the portrayal of a creative and driven young Black boy and the support system that surrounds him. There are many great ways to incorporate this book into your curriculum, and below are three ideas you can explore.



FAMILY J.D. has a great family support system. Invite students into a study about what family means, who gets to be family, the role of family in the individual's life, and more. They can explore their own families as well as famous historical families that you select for them.

STARTING A BUSINESS In the book, J.D. starts his own business. This is a fun chance to talk to students about hobbies and starting a business with a purpose. You can lead them to study different business models, young entrepreneurs, and help them design their own business ideas.

BEING AN UPSTANDER In the first couple of chapters, J.D. experiences teasing due to his haircut. You can use this book as an opportunity to spend time talking about teasing, bullying, being a bystander vs an upstander, and more. Walk through scenarios with them, including the one in the book, and invite them to practice what they would do in those situations so they can take action when it's their turn.

UNDERSTANDING CRAFT

J.D. and the Great Barber Battle presents us with a good opportunity to study characterization, conflict, and plot structure and development. These are key literary concepts that students can begin to grasp in these grades and will build their foundation for deeper literary analysis later. Consider the following activities to study these three ideas through the story.

CHARACTERIZATION We learn so much about J.D. as the story begins as well as when it progresses through the various events he faces. Invite students to create a timeline of J.D.'s life based on the events of the story. In the end, have students write or speak a summary of how these events tell us about who and how he is. *Materials needed: the following worksheet or a large paper displaying this template*

CHARACTERIZATION WORKSHEET

EVENT 1

EVENT 2

EVENT 3

EVENT 4

EVENT 5

EVENT 6

WHAT DO THESE EVENTS TELL US ABOUT J.D.? _____

UNDERSTANDING CRAFT (CONT.)

CONFLICT In the story, J.D. faces several conflicts and moments of tension with others. These conflicts are directly related to the plot and also tell us about J.D.'s character. After defining the word *conflict* and offering them a literary understanding of the word, engage students in a study of conflict as it shows up in the book. Use the graphic organizer below with students to track and discuss the conflicts J.D. faces. Under the graphic organizer are discussion questions you can use to prompt students for discussion. *Materials needed: this document and writing utensils*

CONFLICT DESCRIPTION

CONFLICT DESCRIPTION



ROLE IN THE PLOT

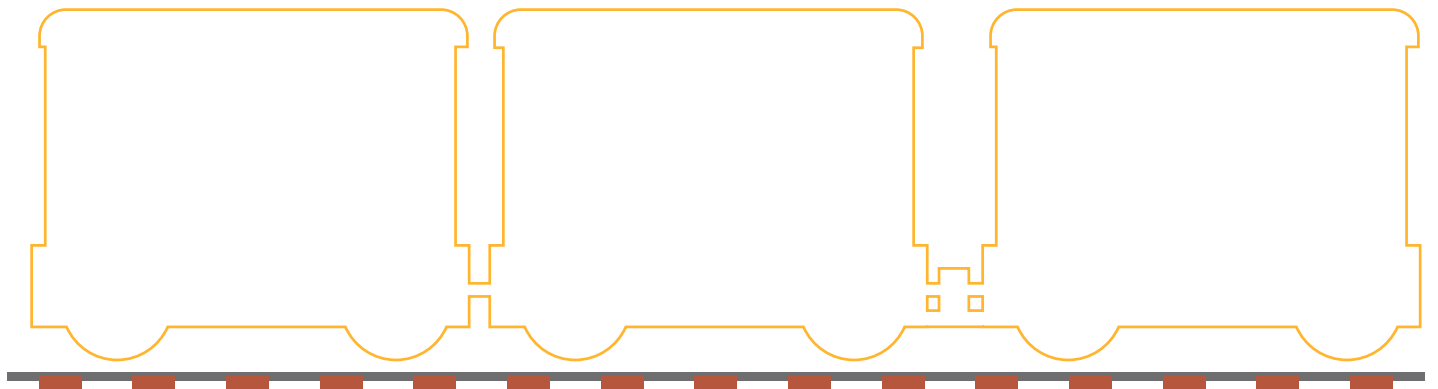
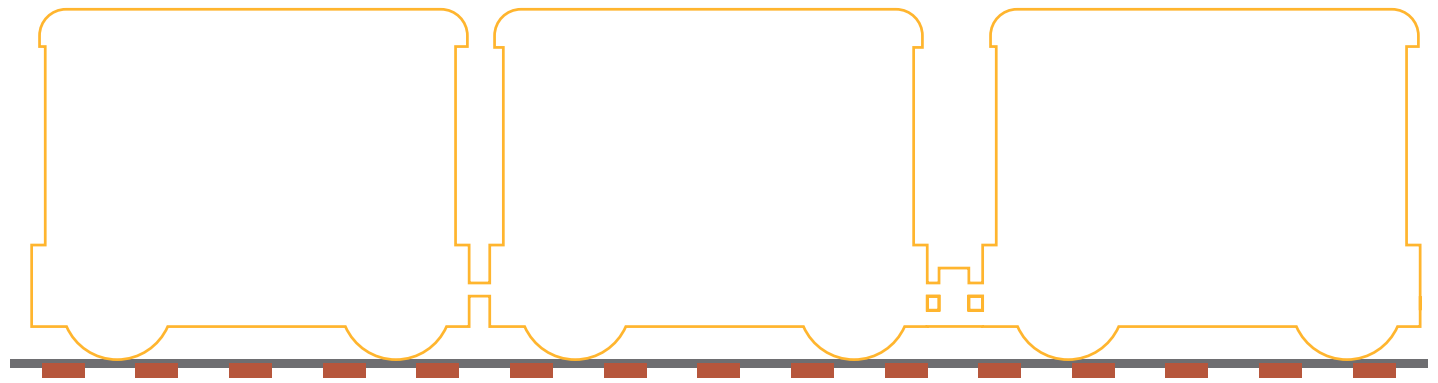
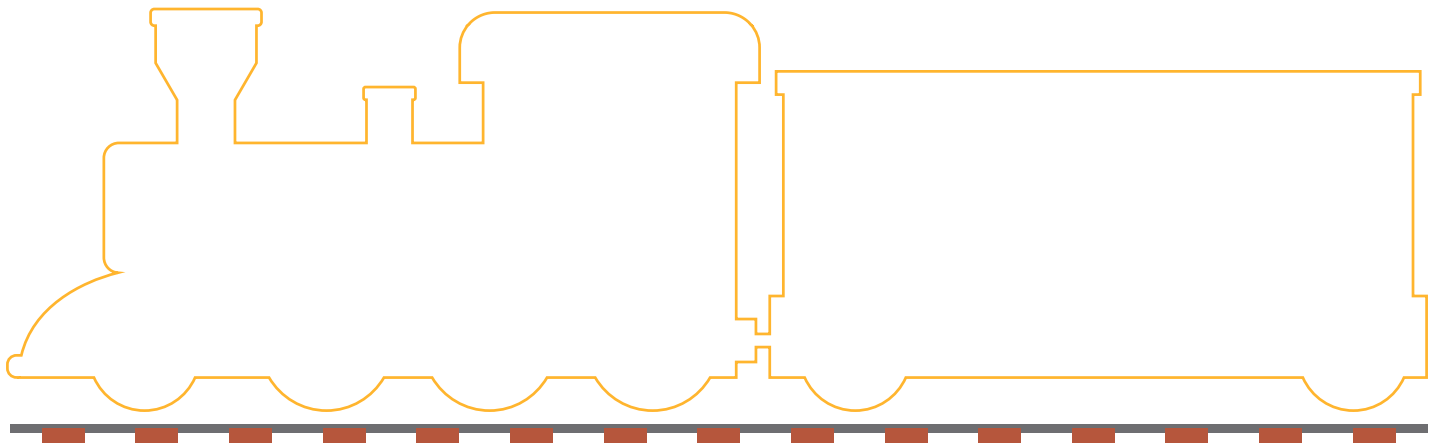
ROLE IN THE PLOT

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. How did you feel as these conflicts were taking place?
2. What do these conflicts show about J.D.'s personality?
3. If you were in a conflict or difficult situation like J.D., what would you do?
How would you have handled that?

UNDERSTANDING CRAFT (CONT.)

PLOT STRUCTURE & DEVELOPMENT The story has surprises as well as expected outcomes. Keep track of the events and invite students to notice the way J. Dillard develops the plot. This helps you assess their reading comprehension. You can do this work through a chart like the one below. As events take place, you can add them to the “story train.” This document would ideally be printed or recreated in a large paper to be visible by the whole class and kept in the classroom for all students to see.
Materials needed: this document and writing utensils



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS & WRITING PROMPTS

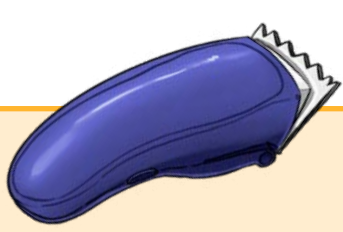
The next series of questions can be used for discussion or reflective writing. Students can use these to express their comprehension of the story as well as basic literary analysis. You can do a question per day, or offer students a choice from this list to respond to.

1. Based on the cover of the book, what do you think will take place in the story?
2. What happens to J.D.'s hair in the first chapter and how does he feel about it?
3. What is J.D.'s first day of school like and what happens?
4. When J.D. cuts his own hair, what happens? How does he react? What about his friends?
5. Did you expect J.D. to turn out to be a great barber? What did you think was going to happen?
6. J.D. starts to have several worries. What are they? What is he concerned about?
7. What happens when Henry Hart Jr. finds out about J.D.'s new business? What does J.D. need to do next?
8. What does The Challenge consist of? What is going to happen?
9. In the end, who were J.D.'s supporters? How do you know?
10. Describe J.D.'s relationship with his family. What words can you use to describe the family?



INTERDISCIPLINARY ACTIVITIES

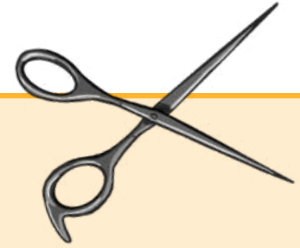
The following activities can be a one-day or several-day set of activities. They are interdisciplinary and require a little bit of planning on your part.



MATH Throughout the book, J.D. spends time doing a lot of math. He plans costs, manages money, and thinks about how to maximize his earnings. Have students do the math J.D. is working on. Additionally, regardless of the mathematical concepts you are teaching students, consider using J.D.'s story and incorporate it.



SCIENCE This book offers a great opportunity to study hair and hair cutting. You can begin by leading students to study different types of hair and the history of famous hairstyles. You can include a trip to a local barbershop where a barber can explain how they go about their work each day. Students can then write a reflection where they summarize their learning or do presentations where they talk about their research.



ARTS Encourage students to think: What are some other haircuts that J.D. could have designed? Offering students an outline of a head on a sheet of paper, invite them to design a new haircut. They can use inspiration from J.D.'s designs as well as images provided from a Google search. Once their design is ready, they can present it to the class and describe their artistic choices.

PAIRED READINGS Below are picture books teachers can pair alongside *J.D. and the Great Barber Battle*:

Cool Cuts by Mechal Renee Roe

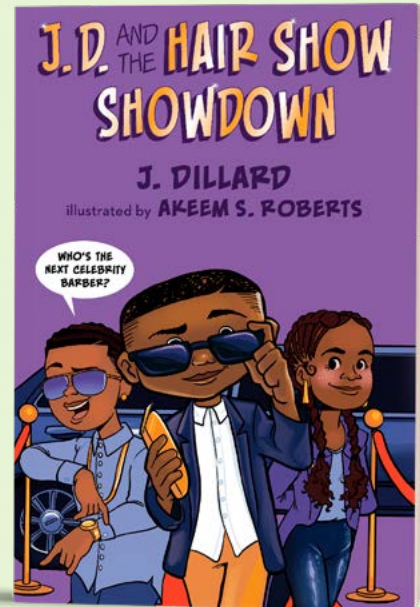
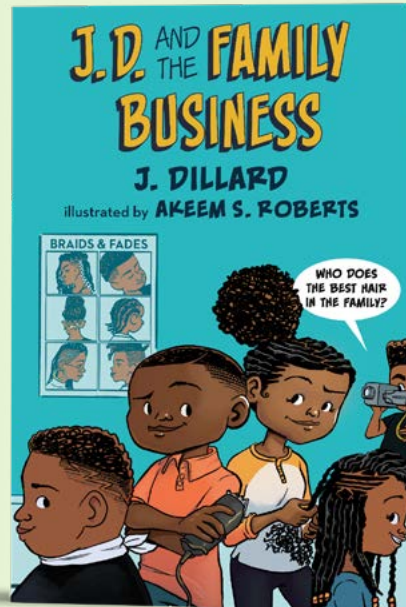
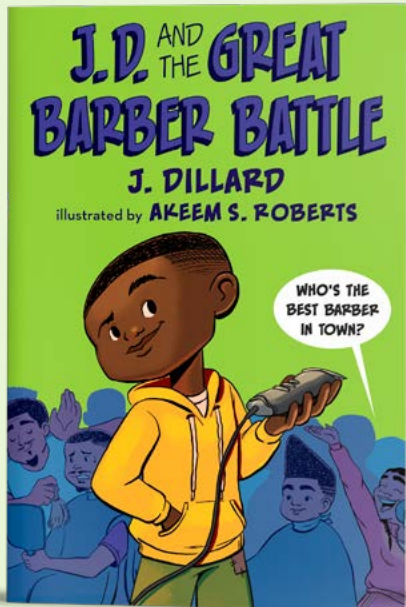
Crown: An Ode to the Fresh Cut
by Derrick Barnes, illustrated by Gordon C. James

Bippity Bop Barbershop
by Natasha Anastasia Tarpley, illustrated by E. B. Lewis

Hair Love
by Matthew Cherry, illustrated by Vashti Harrison



READ THEM ALL!



ABOUT THE CREATORS

J. DILLARD (known as the Barberpreneur) is a former managing partner for ConAllegiance, a consulting firm based out of Atlanta, Georgia. He is a master barber, a certified consultant, and an industry leader who started cutting his own hair at the age of ten. After many trials and tribulations, he began cutting hair professionally in 1999 and became a shop owner while attending college at Tuskegee University in Alabama. He travels the country with his clients as a personal barber and calls Atlanta home. This is his first book series for children.

AKEEM S. ROBERTS is an illustrator based in Brooklyn. He works as an in-house animator for Holler Studios and regularly contributes cartoons to *The New Yorker*. He is a graduate of the University of South Carolina. When Akeem is not working, he likes to eat food (who doesn't?), drink coffee, and post comics about his day-to-day life on Instagram.

