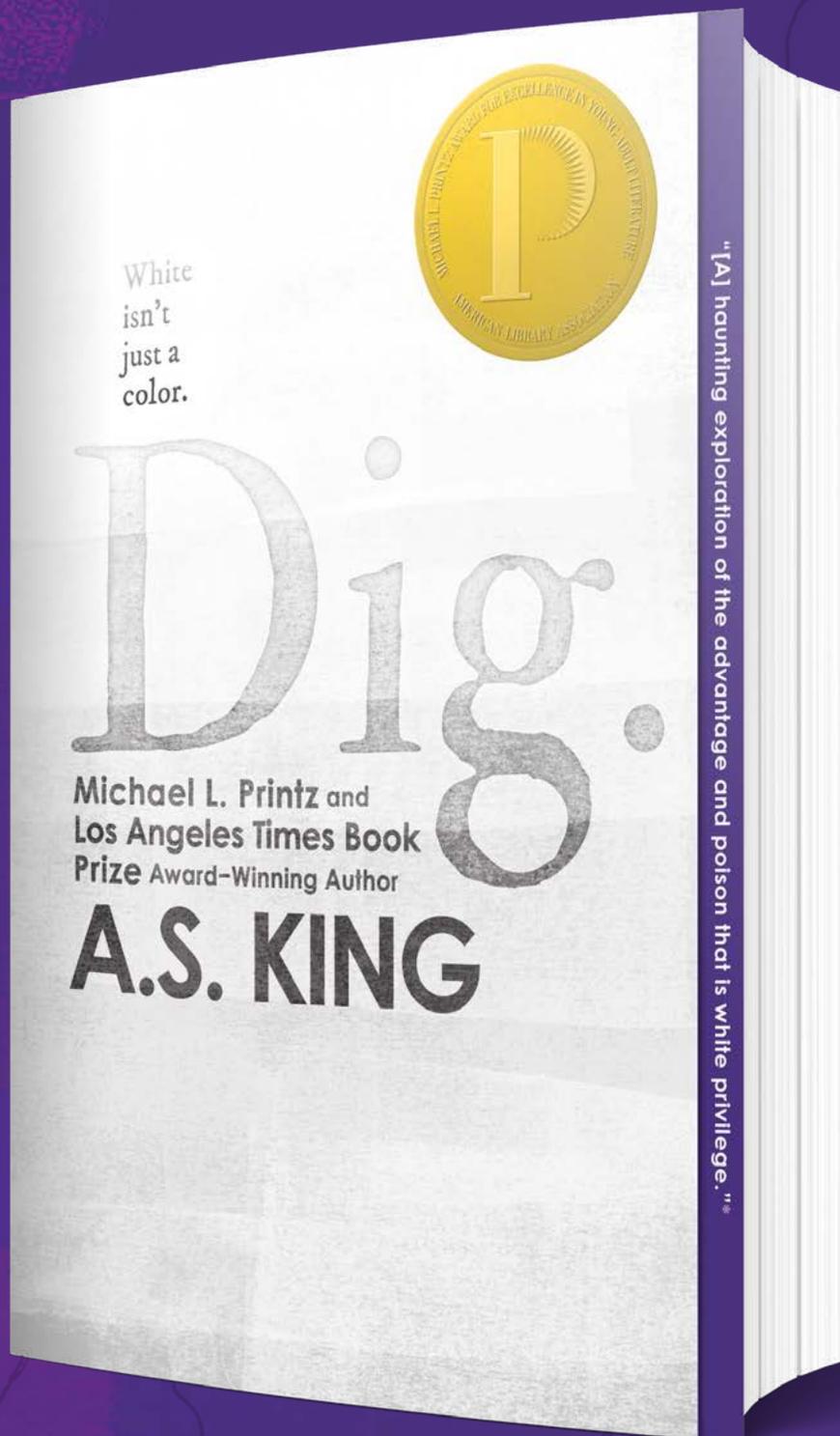


# An Educator's Guide to



White  
isn't  
just a  
color.



# Dig.

Michael L. Printz and  
Los Angeles Times Book  
Prize Award-Winning Author

**A.S. KING**

"[A] haunting exploration of the advantage and poison that is white privilege." \*

Dear Reader,

“Whatever white people do not know about Negroes reveals, precisely and inexorably, what they do not know about themselves.”—James Baldwin, “Down at the Cross: Letter from a Region in My Mind,” 1962

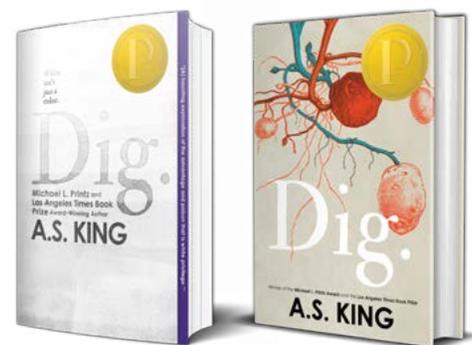
When I sat down to write *Dig*, my main goal was to write about whiteness and explore through one family’s story how white people receive and pass on our ideas about the world and ourselves, especially on the topic of race. This is an uncomfortable conversation for most white people, as none of us were taught to talk about race and privilege, and I know that when people don’t know how to do a thing, they tend not to do it for fear of being wrong or looking dumb. My approach to the novel, then, was a compassionate one. I have never managed to change anyone’s mind with shame, so I decided to provide a mirror in the book as a means to recognize similarities in our own families.

Since publishing *Dig*, I have received many letters from readers age fourteen to seventy-two, all with the same question: “How do you know my family so well?” I know because I am also a white person in America and though my family has often talked about race, we never really talked about whiteness and what it means to be white in America. Even avowedly liberal, open-minded white people who accept the existence of racism in America still practice a kind of willful racial ignorance often expressed as a desire to not “see” color when it comes to their daily lives. And just as I have never changed anyone’s mind with shame, neither have I ever changed anyone’s mind by choosing to show them less of the world as it is.

Because our textbooks at best skim over—and at worst intentionally obscure—the original sins of this country’s founding and early growth and rarely encourage a deep exploration into the moral wrongs we continue to uphold based on race, I wanted to write something that would urge readers to find that history, to see the world for what it really is, and to make a decision about how to move forward. By depicting three generations of a family, I wanted to show that it is possible to change the narrative in our homes and families and ourselves to move forward into a more educated, equitable, and anti-racist way of being. We may not be able to change our racist uncle, but we can change the conversations we have after the family picnic where he said something worth talking about. In doing so, we can open a whole new way to see our country and our role as loving family. By knowing ourselves better, we can begin to change.

Sincerely,

A.S. King, June 2020



This educator guide was written by **Paul Bursiek**. Paul teaches language arts at Fairview High School in Boulder, CO. He enjoys skiing in snowstorms, baking lemon bars with his daughter, goofy dancing that makes people laugh, and long walks on the beach with the family dog, Wally.

# Pre-reading Activities and Prep

Have students take this icebreaker questionnaire:

Question	Yes	No
Have you ever traveled outside the US?		
Have you, a family member, or a close friend ever worked at a fast-food restaurant?		
Have you ever wished you could change something about yourself?		
Do you believe in God?		
Have you ever lost someone you loved?		
Do you, a family member, or a close friend live with a disability?		
Have you, a family member, or a close friend ever had cancer?		
Have you ever been involved in a serious accident?		
Have you ever been discriminated against?		
Have you ever felt like you weren't good enough?		
Do you or someone you know have divorced parents?		
Have you ever been bullied?		
Have you, a family member, or a close friend ever made a racist comment?		
Do you have family members whom you really don't like?		

## Other Supplemental Works to Explore:

-  [“Digging” by Seamus Heaney](#)
-  [“White Man’s World” by Jason Isbell and the 400 Unit](#)
-  [“Space Oddity” by David Bowie](#)

## Discussion Questions

1. The title of the novel includes a period at the end of it. Why might the author have wanted to include this punctuation? What effect does the period have? How might changing or removing the punctuation change the message of the book?
2. Review the cover of the hardcover and the paperback of the book (see page 2). What images do you see? What do they remind you of? What could they symbolize?
3. The novel opens on April 1st, 2018. How might this date be significant?
4. What does Easter celebrate? How might the fact that the book opens with the preparations for Easter Dinner be significant?
5. Over and over, Gottfried returns to his memory of killing the robins with his car. How might this memory be symbolically significant?
6. The point of view often shifts between first person and third person. Why might the author have decided to change the point of view at different times and with different characters in the novel? What effect does the shift in point of view have?
7. Jake and Bill also shovel. How is their shoveling similar to and different from The Shoveler's?
8. "Safe hate" is mentioned on page **143**. What is safe hate? Is it really safe?
9. Some sections of the text are organized into increasingly smaller box shapes such as pages **150-151**. How does the written content mirror the shape? Why might the author have decided to put these particular words into these shapes?
10. What is Marla's big secret and how does it contribute to the plot of the novel?
11. Why might Loretta refer to her life in terms of theater, such as acts, actors and an audience? Why might she be so focused on directing her flea circus?
12. Malcolm and The Shoveler make assumptions about each other. How accurate are their assumptions? What might the author be trying to convey through their interaction?
13. According to this book, what might it mean to be white?
14. CanIHelpYou? often says she is using Ian (**237**). Do you agree with her self-assessment? To what extent is she right?
15. "Why would a kid's mother hide an egg in a sinkhole?" (**313**)
16. Why do the characters have nicknames? What do their nicknames say about them?
17. Mike is both a racist and really kind and supportive of The Shoveler. How does The Shoveler process this tension? Did he make the right decision to end the relationship? What would you have done?

## Discussion Questions, cont.

18. The book takes on issues of race and racism, but has relatively few voices from people of color. What do you make of this? Why do you think the author chose to write this book in this way?
19. Jake is both a victim and an offender. How should his actions be judged based on this fact?
20. In the acknowledgements at the end of the book, A.S. King says, “This book is supposed to be uncomfortable. I’d apologize, but I’m not sorry.” Why do you think she says this? If you asked her why she wrote this book, what might she say?
21. What actions is this book asking us to take? Will you take action? Why or why not?

### QUICK-WRITES AND JOURNAL ENTRIES:

1. Consider the names you have. What do people call you? Do you have nicknames? Does your name change depending on who you’re with? Describe what your name or names mean to a partner. Introduce your partner to the class and explain the meaning of their name.
2. Write about a place where you feel like you belong. Consider Malcolm’s description of belonging on page **246**.
3. Who are the people you consider family? How are you connected to them? Consider the present, past, and future. Consider relatives and friends.
4. A.S. King uses potatoes instead of a tree to represent family connection and history. If you were going to illustrate your family history and connection in a symbolic way other than the typical tree, what might you use? Now, create a family diagram using that symbol and write about it.

## Themes and Essay Topics:

- 1.** The novel often focuses on what is missing, hidden, or under the surface. Easter eggs, secrets, missing fathers and daughters, shoplifting, literal and figurative holes. What do you make of this focus? How does the idea of digging connect to this theme?
- 2.** Although rarely explicit, there are consistent references to white privilege and racism. What does the novel say about these issues?
- 3.** The *consciousness* referred to by Malcolm is his belief system for the way humans connect to the universe. What does this book have to say about religion and spirituality? Do you agree?
- 4.** How do you know when you are an adult? Consider what happens to Malcolm on pages **225-226** and The Shoveler on page **229**.
- 5.** Both Malcolm and CanIHelpYou? are in relationships with people of color. What are the unique challenges of mixed race relationships? How might these challenges be tackled? What does the book have to say about these issues?
- 6.** What does the book argue about class, race, and gender inequality?
- 7.** Most of the adults have failed their children at least in some way. What does it mean to be a good parent? Who among the adults in this book have been the most supportive parents?
- 8.** Many of the characters seem to be unaware of their own privilege and racism. What do you make of this? Those that are aware, like Malcolm and CanIHelpYou?, still fight with themselves to not use other people. Is everyone who is honest at least a little racist? What can be done to reduce racism?
- 9.** What does the book say about the emotion of shame?
- 10.** What does the book say about the importance of paying attention and being present?
- 11.** What does the book say about privilege?
- 12.** What does the book say about how people are labeled by both themselves and others?
- 13.** What does this book have to say about depression and anxiety?

# Activities

## **DIG. HOT SEAT CHARACTER ACTIVITY**

In a group of 4-5 students, you will be assigned a central character from *Dig*. You will thoroughly enhance your understanding of this character by answering the list of revealing questions that get at the crux of his/her personality. Some of the information needed to answer the questions will not be directly stated—you will have to infer, or make educated guesses from what is implied in the novel.

Direct quotes and page numbers, when possible, will be much more convincing as you try to persuade your questioners as to the accuracy of your characters responses.

### **Part I**

1. Who are you?
2. What names do you go by? Do any of your names have any special meaning?
3. What is your approximate age?
4. Describe your physical appearance.
5. What is your home like?
6. What is your favorite place? Why?
7. What are you passionate about?
8. If you had the podium, what would you most like to say to the world?
9. What is your deepest desire?
10. What is your ultimate goal in life?
11. What is/are the biggest obstacles in your pursuit of happiness?
12. What are your greatest strengths and weaknesses?
13. What two adjectives best describe you?
14. What quotation from the book most clearly reveals who you are and what you are about?
15. What is your biggest pet peeve?
16. When are you happiest?
17. What important objects do you own and why are they important to you?

### **Part II**

The group will prepare an opening monologue to introduce yourself to the audience/class.

### **Part III**

Students not in the presenting group will guess which character it is.

# Activities

## DIG. BODY BIOGRAPHY ACTIVITY

Students will be making an art project called a body biography about a character from *Dig*. A group of 3 or 4 students will present the art to the class as a gallery walk—hang them in the classroom and provide time for everyone in class to answer questions about them.

### How do you make a Body Biography?

Groups will plan out several written and visual elements about a character. Students will make a “draft” in class today that includes some of the quotes, symbols, and events in the book that are important for the character. Then, students will get a large sheet of butcher paper for their group. They need to use a marker to trace someone’s body in order to make a body outline. Within and around this body students will place the quotes, symbols and events for the character. Students will be ready to explain their choices and ideas. You will have an opportunity to explain your choices as I grade your group’s Body Biography.

### Requirements:

**Writing: EVENTS.** Explanation of your character’s role in each of the significant events in each chapter of the book. Think of this as a summary of your character’s actions in each chapter. You only need to explain the events that your character takes part in or witnesses. It can be written as bullet points, but should be complete and thorough in its explanation of what happens.

**Writing: QUOTES.** A minimum of 8 of the most important quotes that show something about your character. Try for variety; use some of each method of characterization: description, action, dialogue. Choose each quote carefully, as each one should show something **important** about your character. (REMEMBER THAT A QUOTE DOES NOT NEED TO BE SOMETHING THAT SOMEONE SAYS IN THE BOOK.)

**Drawing: SYMBOLIC OBJECTS.** What objects can you associate with your character that illustrate her/his essence? Are there objects mentioned within the novel itself that you could use? If not, choose objects that especially seem to correspond with the character.

**Drawing: AT LEAST 4.** Use the list of suggestions **below** (or make up your own ideas) to find some other **visual element** to include. It might be related to the parts of the body, the colors of the background, or anything else you can think of that will show something important about your character.

### Body Biography Suggestions for #4 above:

- 1. Spine:** Actors often discuss a character’s spine. This is her/his objective within the play. What is the most important goal for your character? What drives her/his thoughts and actions? This is her/his spine. How can you illustrate it?
- 2. Virtues and Vices:** What are your character’s most admirable qualities? His or her worst? How can you represent these with symbols, colors, or pictures?
- 3. Inside/Outside Placement:** How does your character appear to others on the outside and what is important for his or her inner self? You could show the difference between the body’s “skin” and what is inside. Or you could place certain symbols or words on a certain part of the body to show its importance. What will go in your character’s hands? What will go in his heart?
- 4. Changes:** Has your character changed throughout the novel? How can you depict this with words and images? Maybe a timeline? Or organizing your quotes in order and using images to symbolize what the character was like in the beginning and how he or she has changed by the end?

# Activities

## CONCEPT MAPPING ACTIVITY

1. In a group of 3-4, make a chart of at least 5 characters from *Dig*.
2. On a sticky note, write down the following for each character and place it on the chart below the character's name:
  - a. Important themes and topics associated with your character
  - b. Important relationships or interactions with other characters
  - c. Important moments for your character
  - d. Important motifs and symbols associated with your character
  - e. Important quotes
3. Talk with your group to decide where your characters overlap. Can you find some central idea that ties certain characters together?
4. Rank order or cluster the remaining topics/concepts and work toward arranging them in a hierarchy or diagram on your page. What leads to what leads to what leads to what? Does it all start or end with that big main concept? How do they connect?
5. Draw boxes around concepts that need to be clustered together and draw lines between concepts that are related, including arrows indicating the direction of influence between concepts. Label all linking lines to identify the relationship between them. Possible labels include "one type of," "for example," "precedes," "includes," "manifests as," "leads to."
6. Make sure everyone in your group can explain your map.
7. Tape your map on the wall.

# Activities

## DIG. FOUND POEM ACTIVITY

### The goal:

Write a poem (of any length) that reflects an important idea in *Dig*.

### The catch:

You may only use words from two pages of the book. You can rearrange them in any order you'd like in order to make meaning, but you can't change them in any way.

### The process:

1. Set up a page titled "*Dig*. Found Poem"
2. Pick two (and ONLY two) pages of *Dig*. to work with. Write the two page numbers on your document. The two pages do not have to be consecutive.
3. Skim through the two pages you picked, and make a list of any words that stick out to you.
  - a. list individual words, not phrases
  - b. don't list words like "the" or "and" etc.
4. Read through your list. Look for interesting themes or patterns in the words you listed. Go back through the two pages and add to your list.
5. Start drafting poems. Rearrange words, find more from the pages . . . .
6. Pick a single poem from your ideas to polish
7. Handwrite the poem on a piece of poster paper and decorate it appropriately
  - a. think about the way you lay out the lines of the poem
  - b. think about colors and illustrations and symbols you could add
  - c. make sure to state the pages you used in the doc and on the back of the poster

# Post Reading Research and Discussion:



## Toni Morrison on race and racism:

What do you think of Morrison's definitions of race and racism? How might her views be applied to the themes in *Dig*?



## *How to Be an Antiracist* by Ibram X. Kendi:

“What’s the problem with being ‘not racist’? It is a claim that signifies neutrality: ‘I am not a racist, but neither am I aggressively against racism.’ But there is no neutrality in the racism struggle. The opposite of ‘racist’ isn’t ‘not racist.’ It is antiracist” (9).

“Racist: One who is supporting a racist policy through their actions or inaction or expressing a racist idea” (13).

“Antiracist: One who is supporting an antiracist policy through their actions or expressing an antiracist idea” (13).

What do you think of Kendi's definitions of racism? How might his views be applied to the themes and characters explored in *Dig*?

# PRAISE for DIG

Winner of the 2020  
Michael L. Printz Medal

A Finalist for the 2020  
Los Angeles Times Book Prize

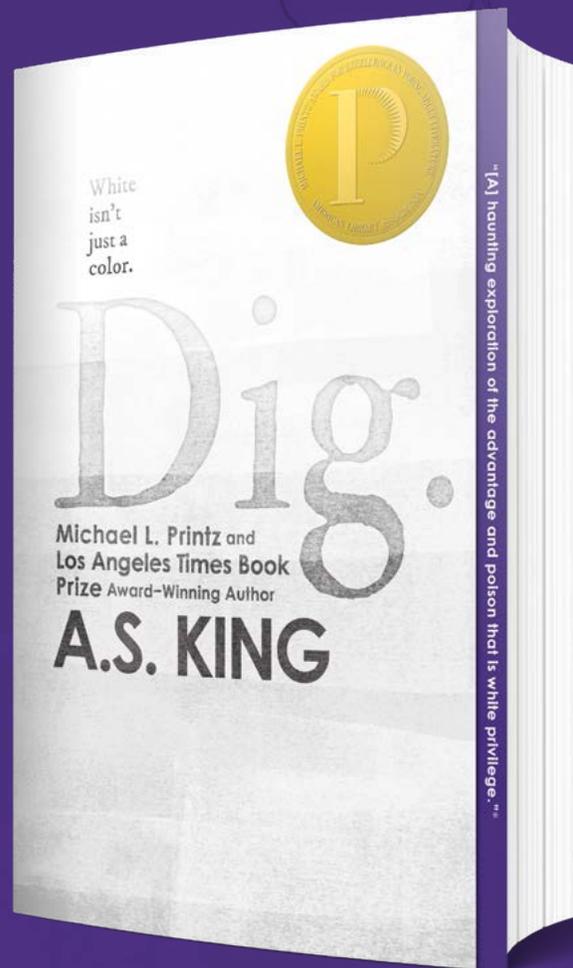
Six Starred Reviews  
★★★★★

A *Boston Globe Horn Book*  
Fanfare Book

A Chicago Public Library Best Book

A YALSA Best Fiction for  
Young Adults Title

A YALSA Amazing Audiobooks  
Top Ten Title



## About A.S. King

A.S. King is the award-winning author of many acclaimed books for young readers. Her novel *Dig* won the 2020 Michael L. Printz Award, and *Ask The Passengers* won the 2013 Los Angeles Times Book Prize. The *New York Times* called her "one of the best YA writers working today." King lives with her family in Pennsylvania, where she returned after living on a farm and teaching adult literacy in Ireland for more than a decade.

[www.as-king.com](http://www.as-king.com)



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