

An instant *New York Times* bestseller!



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Also available in audio

- ★ “Both heartening and heartbreaking, a richly layered, sensitive YA fiction debut.” —*Publishers Weekly* (starred review)
- ★ “Poetic and engaging.” —*BookPage* (starred review)
- ★ “Thought-provoking.” —*Kirkus Reviews* (starred review)

About the Book

The powerful and timely YA novel debut from three-time *New York Times* best-selling author Frederick Joseph is a deeply heartfelt story—and a rallying cry against book banning.

In an instant, Ossie Brown’s entire future is in jeopardy when a torn ACL ends his promising basketball career. Now that basketball is no longer a major part of his identity, Ossie—a Black teen who doesn’t come from wealth and privilege—must navigate his new place in the social and academic ecosystems of his affluent, predominantly white school. When a Black teacher encourages him to join her highly regarded writing program, Ossie begins to find a new purpose, buoyed not only by the rich works of literature by marginalized authors he’s now reading, but also by new friends who see him as something more than an asset to the sports program. Everything changes when some students’ viral “anti-woke” video puts the teacher’s job, the writing program, and even Ossie’s friends’ safety at risk—and Ossie must find his true voice.

This unflinching novel confronts critical issues like racism and classism, the treatment of student athletes, homophobia, and book banning while weaving together a moving testament to family, romance, friendship, and the power of words.

Instructional Standards

This discussion guide, which can be used with large or small groups, will help students meet several of the instructional standards for English Language Arts. These include the reading literature standards for key ideas and details, craft and structure, and integration of knowledge and ideas (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL), as well as the speaking and listening standards for comprehension and collaboration and for presentation of knowledge and ideas (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL). Questions can also be used in writing prompts for independent work.

Discussion Questions

1. Why do you think Ossie decides to go back to Braxton Academy after he is no longer able to play basketball? Would you have gone back to Braxton or finished high school in the neighborhood school? Why?
2. Ossie's parents named him after Ossie Davis. Do some research on Ossie Davis. Based on what you found, why do you think his parents chose to name him Ossie?
3. The author chooses to share the essays that Luis, Naima, and Ossie wrote. Why do you think the author chose to include the essays? Do you think having the essays added to the story? Did they help you understand the characters better?
4. On page 25, Matthew says, "Well, I heard you're the shooter our basketball team has been missing. Which makes sense, coming from Yonkers." What do you think he means by this? Do you think Matthew has even been to Yonkers?
5. Grandma Alice has Sunday dinners at her apartment. Why are they important to her? What are some of the traditions that are important to you and your family?
6. Grandma Alice doesn't tell Ossie that she has breast cancer. Why do you think she decides not to tell him? Do you think that was the right decision?
7. Ossie's dad was going to have a career in the NBA. What do you think Ossie's life would have been like if his dad had lived?
8. Do you use social media? How often? What do you post? Has anything you have posted ever gone viral or caused someone harm? Has anything someone else posted caused you harm?
9. Do you think Ossie should have posted Naima's letter without her permission? If you were Naima, would you trust Ossie again?
10. What do you think happens to Ossie after he graduates? Write a chapter that continues the story after Ossie's graduation.
11. Ossie chooses to play basketball because his father loved it. Do you think Ossie's father would have wanted him to play? What advice do you think his father would have given him? Write a letter to Ossie from his dad's perspective.
12. Naima and Ossie view his neighborhood differently. How does Naima describe his neighborhood? Why is she able to see what he can't?
13. After trying to protect Laura, Matthew is attacked by one of the men he invited to the school to protest. How do you think the experience impacted him? Do you think he will continue to hold his racist views?



14. “Morgan, never one to hold back, is the first to object. ‘Another woke book,’ she says, her voiced dripping with disdain” (page 110). What does Morgan mean by “another woke book”? What makes a book woke?
15. On page 231, Mr. Richmond states, “We will be reading works from America’s literary greats.” What makes someone a literary great? Who decides? Does it remain the same forever?
16. Luis and Naima have the Bali playlist to ground them when they are anxious. What do you do to help ground yourself during tough times? If you were to create a similar playlist, what would be on it?
17. Ossie shares Naima’s letter because he wants to use his platform to make a difference. What are some other ways that he could make a difference?
18. Book banning is a major issue addressed in the book. Do you think books should be banned? Why or why not?
19. The school shared everyone’s writing from the writing program after Ossie shared Naima’s letter. Do you think the school should have shared what the students wrote during class? Why or why not?
20. What is an issue in your school or community that you would like to see changed? What are some ways that you can help to make that change?



Photo by Natiah Jones

About Frederick Joseph

Frederick Joseph is a Yonkers, New York–raised three-time *New York Times* and *USA Today* best-selling author. His books include the poetry collection *We Alive, Beloved*; the nonfiction works *Patriarchy Blues*, *The Black Friend*, and *Better Than We Found It*, cowritten with Porsche Joseph; and the picture book *Black Panther: Wakanda Forever: The Courage to Dream*, illustrated by Nikkolos Smith. Frederick Joseph was recognized with a 2021 International Literacy Association Young Adult Book Award, was named to the 2019 *Forbes* 30 Under 30 list for marketing and advertising, and is an activist, philanthropist, and poet. He was also honored with a 2023 Malcolm X and Dr. Betty Shabazz Vanguard Award and the 2018 Bob Clampett Humanitarian Award, and he was selected for the 2018 Root 100, a list of the most influential African Americans.

These questions were prepared by Dr. Nicholl Montgomery, a former middle and high school English teacher for Boston Public Schools. She is a literacy coach for Boston Teacher Residency and teaches education courses at Boston College.

