



RICK RIORDAN PRESENTS

# TRISTAN STRONG

PUNCHES A HOLE  
IN THE SKY



KWAME MBALIA

EDUCATOR'S GUIDE

Disney • HYPERION



ABOUT THE BOOK

Tristan Strong is a seventh grader who is navigating the road to healing following several difficult life events. First, he blames himself for the death of his best friend, Eddie. Then he disappoints his family by losing a highly anticipated boxing match. When it seems like things can’t get any worse, he is sent to spend a month at his grandparents’ farm in Alabama. During his first night on the farm, a series of strange events occurs. To his surprise, someone tries to steal the only thing he has left of Eddie—a journal. Tristan chases the assailant and ends up in another universe filled with new friends and enemies. Following his arrival, Tristan strategizes a way to win a high-stakes war by enticing the trickster god Anansi. Can Tristan save his new friends and avoid more loss? Readers everywhere will appreciate the connections to familiar African and African American folklore, adventures, and the character development of Tristan throughout the novel.

COMMON CORE ALIGNMENT

The novel *Tristan Strong Punches a Hole in the Sky* provides a great opportunity to apply complex literacy skills such as inferencing, deconstructing vocabulary, identifying author’s purpose, answering text-dependent questions, and making textual connections. This discussion guide provides suggestions aligned with the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) for Reading: Literature, Writing, and Speaking and Listening. Each activity in this guide includes a reference for the CCSS strand, domain, and standard that is addressed. To support instruction or obtain additional information visit the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) website [www.corestandards.org](http://www.corestandards.org).

- **Instructional Note:** During each of the activities, please encourage students to support their claims with evidence from the text and illustrations. Providing young learners with the opportunity to answer text-dependent questions is critical to success with Common Core State Standards (CCSS).

ACTIVATING BACKGROUND KNOWLEDGE

Explore Important Connections Before Reading

1. Traditional fables typically have the following components, (1) they feature an animal with human characteristics (e.g., the ability to speak); (2) each character usually has one personality trait, such as being clever, that is evident throughout the story; (3) a problem or conflict; (4) a resolution, moral, or lesson that others can learn. Think about familiar fables and consider whether the statements below are true or false.

Statement 1	Statement 2	Statement 3	Statement 4
Fables often reflect the beliefs/values of the individual who is telling the story.	Heroes in fables always make positive decisions.	The animals in fables are usually villains.	Fables are often passed down as spoken stories.
TRUE OR FALSE	TRUE OR FALSE	TRUE OR FALSE	TRUE OR FALSE

- A. When you complete the novel, return to these statements and decide whether you still believe they are true or false. Discuss your initial responses and make changes as necessary based upon evidence from the novel. (*Speaking and Listening: Comprehension and Collaboration, 5.1, 6.1*)

2. Brainstorm the following: What African and African American tales (fables or folktales) have you heard in the past? Describe the stories briefly. Look at the table below. Did you mention any of the included characters during your brainstorm? If yes, note important adventures or character traits of each individual. Next, explain why each individual is significant to African or African American cultural beliefs/values.

(*Reading Literature: Key Ideas and Details: RL.5.1, 6.1*)

Folklore Character	Descriptions	Cultural Significance
Tar-Baby		
Brer Rabbit		
Brer Fox		
Kwaku Anansi		
John Henry		
High John		
Nyame		

- A. Select one character from the table above to research using text and online resources. Be sure to explore the characteristics, problem, and resolution/moral throughout multiple stories about the character. Summarize your findings in one page and share with a small group.

(*Writing: Research to Build and Present Knowledge, W.5.7, 6.7*)

3. Read the description of the novel, review chapter titles, and examine the adinkra symbols drawn at the beginning of each chapter. What are important events that you think will take place in this novel? What must you think about as you read a fictional text (e.g., story structure)? How is the strategy different from reading an informational text?

- A. Think about an adventure novel that you have read in the past. How does this text seem similar to that text? How does this text seem different? Explain the connection using details from your previous reading.

(*Reading Literature: Integration of Knowledge and Ideas, R.L. 5.9*)

ANNOTATION GUIDE

Monitoring Comprehension While Reading

As you read, use the notations below to monitor your understanding. Share your notations with a peer and/or adult to build discussion and meaningful inquiry questions while reading the novel.

Symbol	Considerations
?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>This part is confusing because . . .</li><li>What does the statement _____ mean?</li><li>I don’t understand what sequence of event(s) just happened.</li><li>I wonder . . .</li><li>What does the character mean when she/he says _____?</li></ul>
*	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>This is really important to understanding the plot of the story.</li><li>This character action helped me learn more about him/her.</li><li>This is something important to remember about the character.</li><li>This detail is important because . . .</li><li>This is a really interesting detail that I would like to discuss.</li></ul>
!	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>I am surprised by this event.</li><li>I was not expecting this character to . . .</li><li>I am really surprised by the new information the author shared.</li></ul>
∞	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>This information connects to something important in another chapter because . . .</li><li>This information connects to my life because . . .</li><li>This information connects to another book because . . .</li><li>This action connects to something I’ve seen on television.</li></ul>



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Explore the questions individually and in small groups while reading.

1.

When Tristan Strong first talks about his name he states, “I hated that name. It made me appear to be something I’m not. My name should have been Tristan Coward, or Tristan Failure, or Tristan Fake. Maybe Tristan How-Could-You-Lose-Your-First-Boxing Match” (p. 2). Based upon this statement, how does Tristan feel about himself? How does his family view him (i.e., his parents and grandparents)? Support your response with textual evidence. Is there something about yourself that you have disliked in the past? Why?  
**A.** As you read, consider whether you believe this statement is accurate? How does Tristan’s point of view about himself develop and/or change throughout the story? Which events cause the development and/or change? Provide examples.
2.

Using details from the story, explain why the journal appears to be special. Which events throughout the car ride and at the farm suggest it is supernatural? What does Tristan’s nana explain about the origins of the symbol on the journal? Why does Tristan seem to avoid the journal? How might the journal be connected to Tristan’s future adventure? Make a prediction using textual support.
3.

During several moments in the book Tristan affirms that he is not “soft.” For example: “A flashlight lay on top of the blankets next to me. Not that I’m scared of the dark, you get me, but in case I had to use the bathroom or get a drink of water” (p. 24). Why do you think the author includes this information? How does it help us understand Tristan? Are there moments you try to show others you are not “soft”? Why? Provide an example.
4.

Describe the first interaction between Gum Baby and Tristan. What characteristics are evident about Gum Baby? Do you think Gum Baby is a friend or foe? Why? Use textual evidence in your response.
5.

In Chapter 5, should Tristan trust the shadow he meets? Why or why not? How does he feel while interacting with the shadow? What did his nana previously tell him about the Bottle Tree forest? Why is this information important? Support your response with details from the novel.  
**A.** In Chapter 7, what does Tristan learn about the origins of Alke? Why is this important to understand? Provide details in your response.  
**B.** In Chapter 9, what does the author reveal about “folktale characters” in Alke? What is their role and purpose? How does this differ from Tristan’s previous understanding of the characters? Cite evidence.
6.

When Tristan first arrives in the new world, he asks a lot of questions, but his inquiries are quickly dismissed. Why isn’t anyone willing to answer his questions? Support with evidence. How does the suspense in the chapter help the author develop the plot?  
**A.** When the novel is complete, consider whether storytelling was a positive or negative influence throughout the novel. Explain whether the stories are a source of strength or destruction based upon the events.
7.

In Chapter 9, Brer Fox warns against speaking about the Maafa to prevent giving it strength (p. 97). Tristan reflects about the following advice from his counselor: “we can’t hide from our fears. We have to be able to talk about them, or else they’ll fester like poison, eating us from the inside.” Who do you think gave the better advice? Why?



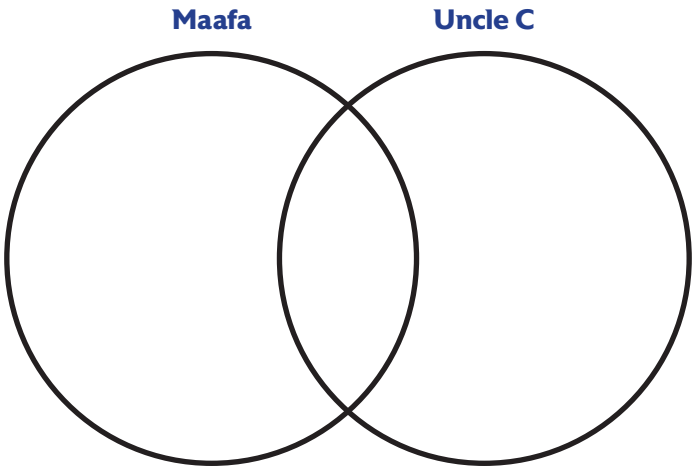
8. How does Tristan respond when he meets John Henry for the first time in Chapter 11? Why? In the novel, which different versions of John Henry’s story are shared? Describe John Henry’s character traits based upon his interactions with Tristan.
- A.** Can you think of other fables or folktales with multiple versions, endings, or events? In your opinion, why might multiple versions of the same fable or folktale exist? Provide an example.
9. As Tristan narrates the novel, he often talks about “grown-ups.” Based upon his perspective, how is he treated by adults? How does he view the adults in his life? For example, consider Tristan’s reflections in Chapter 12. Can you relate to Tristan’s perspective of adults? Why or why not?
10. When explaining the term “Anansesem” John Henry shares, “A storyteller. But more than just words, more than *once upon a time* and *the end*. It’s about the entire experience, from the audience to the stage to the spectacle. There’s music, too, I reckon” (p. 126). What does this suggest about storytelling in Alke? Why is an Anansesem someone special? In your opinion, what makes a good storytelling experience (e.g., imagine telling someone about a really good movie)?
- A.** At the end of the novel, return to this question and add details to the characteristics of a good storyteller based upon Tristan’s adventure.
11. How does Tristan use boxing throughout the novel? How do John Henry and Tristan connect while talking about boxing? What gift does John Henry give to Tristan? How might the gift help him during his journey? Explain with evidence.
12. In Chapter 20, Tristan admits, “I don’t want to go because I’m afraid” (p. 185). How does this acknowledgment differ from his communications in previous chapters? Do you think admitting his fear makes his “soft”? Why or why not?

13. Describe the sequence of events that occurs when Tristan arrives in the Golden Crescent. What problems are they facing in the Golden Crescent? Why is Nyame important to Tristan and his allies? Explain.
14. How does Tristan earn the nickname Bumbletongue at the beginning of the story? Support with textual evidence. As the story progresses, does it seem like a fitting nickname? Why or why not?
15. Nyame shares, “Alke is a land divided” (p. 245). Based upon events in the novel, why is the divide problematic? What are potential resolutions to this divide? Make a prediction. Can you think of ways that we are divided in our society? How does division impact our society? Explain.
- A.** As you read the novel, consider which moments throughout the story suggest people may be unifying. Be specific by providing examples.
16. What is the definition of an adinkra? How does the author intertwine adinkras throughout the story? Which adinkras does Tristan collect? What is the meaning of each symbol? How does each symbol help Tristan during his journey? Cite details from the novel.
17. In Chapter 28, how does Anansi’s lair reflect his character traits? What does the team discover in Anansi’s lair? Why is this information important? Do you think Tristan’s plan should include Anansi? Why or why not? Support with textual evidence.
18. During several parts of the story, Tristan states, “Strongs keep punching.” What does this phrase mean? When does he tend to use these words? How does it help him navigate different situations?
- A.** Is there something that you say to encourage yourself in challenging situations? If not, what phrase could you adopt? Provide an example.

19. How do the individuals in the Ridge defend themselves? Why are they leery of the visitors seeking their help? Who are the important decision makers in the Ridge? How does Tristan convince the leaders of the Ridge to fight a common enemy?
- A.** Describe Thandiwe, how might she be helpful to the team? How is she similar to both Ayanna and Tristan? Support with evidence from the text.
20. Based upon Tristan’s explanation, why is High John Eddie’s favorite folk hero? How does High John both challenge and help Tristan? How does High John explain the power of the story box?
- A.** When Tristan has to face his enemies, what power does the story box provide? How does Tristan attempt to tap into the strength of the story box? Explain using evidence.
21. Although Eddie is deceased, he is a very important character throughout the story. What key events occur that involve Eddie? For example, Chapter 9: “The Paper Giant.” Why is Eddie an integral character? How does he influence Tristan’s development?
- A.** In the novel, what does it mean when Eddie states, “You’re talking to the wrong one” (p. 140, p. 336, p. 448)? How do each of these exchanges make Tristan feel? Why?
- B.** In Chapter 42, Tristan states, “Well, all memories serve a purpose. . . . What are memories except stories we tell ourselves, right?” (p. 379). Do you agree or disagree with this statement? Why? Based upon Tristan’s memory and description of the bus accident, do you think he is to blame for Eddie’s death? Why or why not?
- C.** In Chapter 48, describe the reunion between Tristan and Eddie. What occurs? Why is this moment important? What new details does the reader learn about their friendship? Support with evidence.

22. Reflect upon the events leading up to the conclusion of the story. How does each character transform from the beginning to the end of the story? Did you find the ending of the story surprising? Why or why not? What theme or lesson does the author want the reader to learn from the novel?
- A.** If you could write an alternative ending to the story, what would you make happen? Why?

23. Think about the main antagonists in the story, Uncle C and the Maafa. How does each source cause destruction in Alke? While in their presence, how does each source make individuals feel? What is each antagonist’s goal? How are they similar and different? Compare and contrast using evidence from the story in the Venn diagram below.
- (*Reading Literature: Key Ideas and Details: RL.5.3*)



**Standards Aligned to Discussion Questions**

*Reading Literature: Key Ideas and Details:*  
RL.5.1, 5.2, 5.3, 6.1, 6.2, 6.3

*Reading Literature: Craft and Structure:*  
RL.5.4, 5.5, 6.4, 6.5, 6.6

*Reading Literature: Integration of Knowledge and Ideas:*  
RL.5.9



POST-READING ACTIVITIES

Creative Projects and Writing Extensions

1. **Small Group Discussion:** Prior to the discussion, prepare notes citing textual evidence and relevant questions to pose to the group using the guiding questions in parts A–E.  
*(Speaking and Listening: Comprehension and Collaboration: SL. 5.1, 6.1)*
- A. How do the characters in the novel compare to their original fable or folktale adventures, actions, character traits, and attributes?
- B. How did the author make connections to previous tales?
- C. In the novel, which interactions between characters suggest a previous history within stories? For example, Nyame and High John, Nyame and Anansi, Gum Baby and Mmoatia, etc.
- D. How did the author change the fable and folktale characters in the novel? How did those adjustments enhance Tristan’s adventure?
- E. Choose one character to compare and contrast between the original tales and the new depiction in *Tristan Strong* using the graphic organizer below.

Compare and Contrast a Fable or Folktale Character Character Traits, Actions, Problems/Solutions	
Original Depiction in Fable or Folktale	Tristan Strong Depiction
Similarities in Both	

2. **Art Connection:** Readers traveled to many different locations in Alke with Tristan Strong based upon the rich descriptions provided by the author. Create a map of the different places that Tristan visited using detailed images and accurate map lines to show the separation between locations. Present your map to peers and explain the significance of each place in the novel.  
*(Speaking and Listening: Presentation of Knowledge and Ideas: SL. 5.5, 6.5)*



3. **Creative Writing:** As readers learn throughout the novel, fables and folktales are often viewed as an important fabric that ties a culture and community together. Create your own fable using the steps below.  
*(Writing: Text Types and Purposes: W.5.3, 6.3)*
- A. Brainstorm fable ideas based on familiar tales and events in the novel. Then group similar ideas together and select your favorite idea.
- B. List the character traits of the main character in your fable and the events that will make those traits evident.
- C. Draft your fable by making clear connections to the setting, character descriptions, problem, and solution with a moral.
- D. Allow a peer to read over your fable and make suggestions.
- E. Revise the fable based upon suggestions and add meaningful illustrations to the story.
4. **Current Events:** In the story, we learn that Alke is a divided world, which proves to be problematic throughout Tristan’s journey. With a partner, research a current event that shows a division between two communities, countries, cities, etc. If conflict exists, discuss resolutions that might bridge the divides and/ or resolve the existing issues. In a written summary, describe the existing division, the impact of the division, aligned solutions, and cite your sources. *(Writing: Research to Build and Present Ideas: W.5.8, 6.8)*



# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Kwame Mbalia** (kwamembalia.com) is a part-time pharmaceutical calibration tech, part-time writer, and full-time dad. *Tristan Strong Punches a Hole in the Sky* is his debut novel. He lives in Raleigh, North Carolina, where he is working on another book about these characters. Follow him on Twitter @KSekouM.



# Q&A WITH KWAME MBALIA

- Q:** At the beginning of the novel, you write, “For the stories untold and the children who will tell them.” Can you explain why that statement is meaningful to you personally and within the novel?
- A:** This statement refers to the missing stories of the world, the ones forgotten or skipped over or just plain ignored. You’d be surprised how many of those exist in the corners of society. But children will find them no matter how deeply they’re hidden, because children are good at looking for things adults have conveniently forgotten.
- Q:** While you were growing up, who told you fables and folktales? Which story was your favorite? Why?
- A:** We used to get tucked in and our parents would put on a cassette tape of Anansi tales, and the exploits of the trickster would carry us off to sleep. I’ve always been partial to the story of how Anansi won the sky god’s stories, as it is Anansi at his finest.
- Q:** How did you select which fable and folktale characters to tie into your novel? Was it a difficult decision?
- A:** Ha! I tried to stuff them all in there. Have you seen the size of that book? Sweet peaches, that thing is huge.
- Q:** Who was your inspiration for Tristan’s character? How do you see him evolving in future novels?
- A:** Believe it or not, a lot of Tristan’s personality was based on my oldest daughter. She’s entering middle school in the fall, and at the time of me writing the book, she’d lost her grandfather. Coping with loss and grief while undergoing personal change is a monumental task, and I’m proud of both her and Tristan. And in the future, we’ll see how both will handle the roles they’ve taken on at this new stage of life. But if my daughter suddenly acquires a tiny, sticky loudmouth as a companion, I’m calling for help.

- Q:** Tristan experiences great loss through his best friend, Eddie. Why do you think it is important for readers to explore the theme of loss and healing through Tristan’s life events?
- A:** Because it’s a part of life. There are ups and downs, and we have to understand that we can grieve and mourn the loss of someone, while at the same time be happy and thankful for the time we spent with them. This is all a part of being human and it’s okay.
- Q:** What do you want readers to learn as they explore your novel? How can they apply this lesson in their own lives?
- A:** I want to pass on the stories that were passed to me. I want to develop a new group of Anansesem to carry the stories of the trickster and his friends, of John Henry, of High John the Conqueror, of Brer Rabbit . . . all of them. Create new ones. Share them. Pass on a story to someone and let it come back to you a little different so that we all become richer for it.
- Q:** What did you enjoy most about writing this novel? Why?
- A:** I enjoyed the research. I read so many wonderful folktales and fables from around country, and who knows . . . maybe a few new ones will pop up in the sequel. . . .

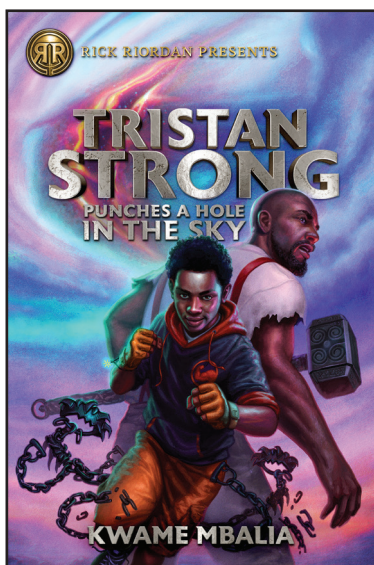




This guide was written by **Dawn Jacobs Martin, PhD**, an assistant clinical professor at the University of Maryland, College Park. She has spent her career supporting students with disabilities through various roles as a practitioner, researcher, special education director, and teacher educator.

She continues to improve the academic outcomes for students with disabilities through teacher development, instructional design, and research in the areas of literacy intervention, social support, and parent involvement. Feel free to contact her with questions at [jacobsdm1@gmail.com](mailto:jacobsdm1@gmail.com).

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