



# JAX FREEMAN AND THE PHANTOM SHRIEK

NEW YORK TIMES BEST-SELLING AUTHOR

**KWAME MBALIA**

**EDUCATOR'S GUIDE**





## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kwame Mbalia is a husband, father, writer, *New York Times* best-selling author, former pharmaceutical metrologist, and publisher with Freedom Fire Books, an imprint of Disney Hyperion. His debut middle grade novel, *Tristan Strong Punches a Hole in the Sky* was awarded a Coretta Scott King Author Honor, and it—along with the sequels *Tristan Strong Destroys the World* and *Tristan Strong Keeps Punching*—is published by Rick Riordan Presents/Disney Hyperion. He is the coauthor of the Last Gate of the Emperor series with Prince Joel Makonnen, from Scholastic Books, and the editor of the #1 *New York Times* best-selling anthology *Black Boy Joy*, published by Delacorte Press. A Howard University graduate and Midwesterner now in North Carolina, he survives on dad jokes and Cheez-Its.

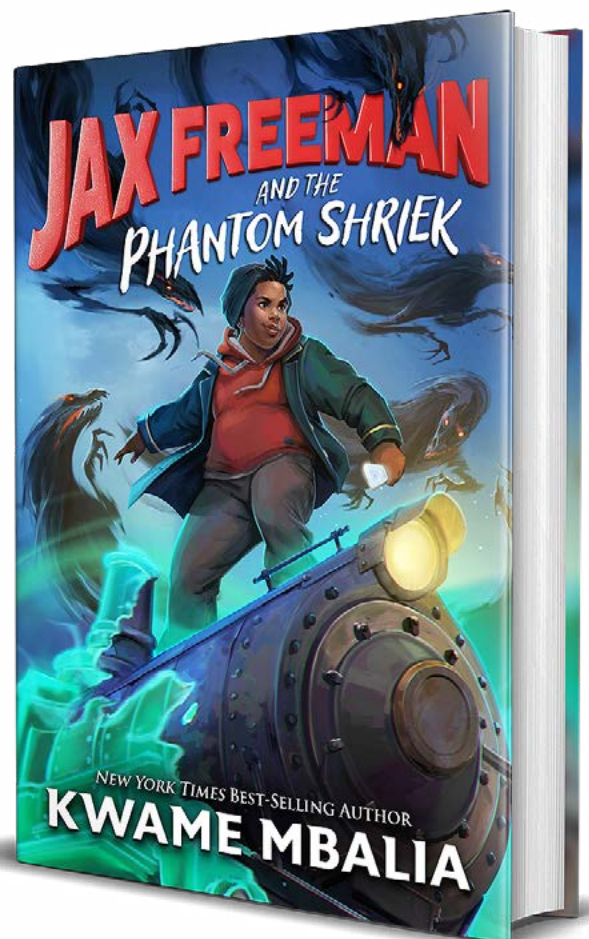
## ABOUT THE BOOK

All Jackson “Jax” Freeman wants for his twelfth birthday is for *things to be like they used to be*. Jax is forced to leave his home in North Carolina to live with family he doesn’t know well. Things go from bad to worse when he arrives in Chicago, discovers his luggage is lost, and is attacked in the train station. All the events seem unreal, and he wonders if he is hallucinating or just really tired.

The next day Jax attends his new middle school, and it’s very different from the one he left. He is even signed up for a “summoners” class, which he doesn’t understand. He is immediately thrown into a world of adventure as he discovers what summoners do, his complicated family history, tensions between leading families, and his own special talents.

With the help of new friends, Jax follows clues left by his great-grandfather, who was wrongfully accused of causing a tragedy. He bravely faces dangerous spirits while figuring out his own unique skills.

Kwame Mbalia creates a new world filled with imagination, travel, history, and mystery that readers will race through!





## COMMON CORE ALIGNMENT

The novel *Jax Freeman and the Phantom Shriek* provides meaningful opportunities to apply complex literacy skills such as inferencing, deconstructing vocabulary, understanding an author’s purpose, and making textual connections. This discussion guide contains suggestions aligned with the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) for Reading: Literature, Writing, and Speaking and Listening. During the activities and questions, encourage students to support their claims with textual evidence. To obtain additional information, visit the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) website: [www.corestandards.org](http://www.corestandards.org).

## ACTIVATING BACKGROUND KNOWLEDGE

**Explore important connections before reading.**

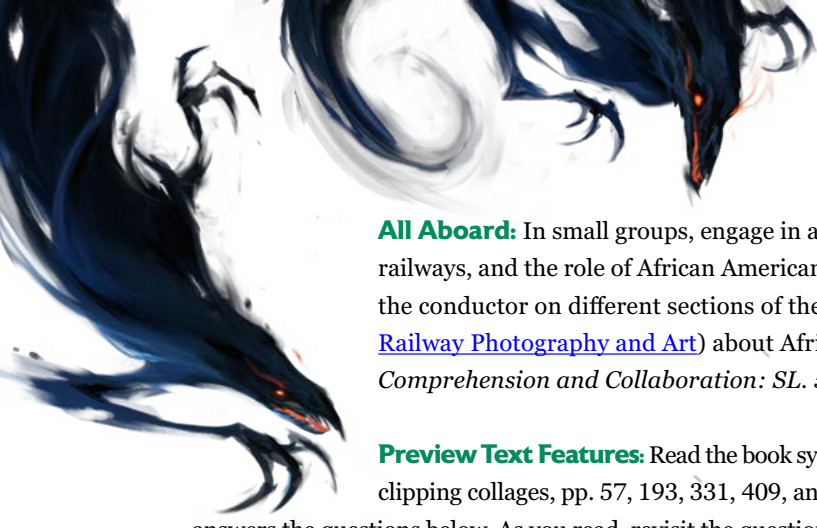
**“Family” Vocabulary Connections:** Think about how the terms *ancestor* and *heirloom* are important in the novel. Use the questions below to demonstrate understanding of the vocabulary words. (*Literature: Craft and Structure: RL. 5.4, 6.4*)

1. In your own words, what does each word (*ancestor, heirloom*) mean?
2. Why are ancestors and heirlooms an important part of families?
3. Create one sentence that includes both new terms. Can you think of any synonyms for each word?
4. How might each word connect to the Jax Freeman’s story? Make a prediction.

Complete an Heirloom Hunt in your home or the home of a relative to find items that are relevant to your family. Be prepared to share why each is special to you or someone in your family. If possible, take photos of the items to share when you discuss your findings.

<b>What is the object or item?</b>  (e.g., jewelry, blanket, art)	<b>Who is the original owner?</b>  (e.g., grandma, grandpa, great uncle, aunt)	<b>Where is it stored or displayed?</b>  (e.g., cabinet, box)	<b>What makes the item special?</b>





**All Aboard:** In small groups, engage in a discussion about the history of trains, the importance of the railways, and the role of African Americans in developing the railways. Discuss the jobs of the porter and the conductor on different sections of the train. Also, explore helpful historical resources ([Center for Railway Photography and Art](#)) about African Americans and railways. (*Speaking and Listening: Comprehension and Collaboration: SL. 5.1, 6.1*)

**Preview Text Features:** Read the book synopsis and preview the last page of each section (i.e., the newspaper clipping collages, pp. 57, 193, 331, 409, and 461). Based on the information provided, create a chart that answers the questions below. As you read, revisit the questions and predictions. (*Literature: Craft and Structure: RL. 5.5, 6.5*)

<b>What is one word you found confusing? What might it mean? As you read, be sure to look for that term.</b>	<b>Who is one person you want to learn more about in the story? Why?</b>
<b>What is one event you think will happen in the story? Cite evidence.</b>	<b>What novel(s) have you read that seem like the Jax Freeman story? Why?</b>

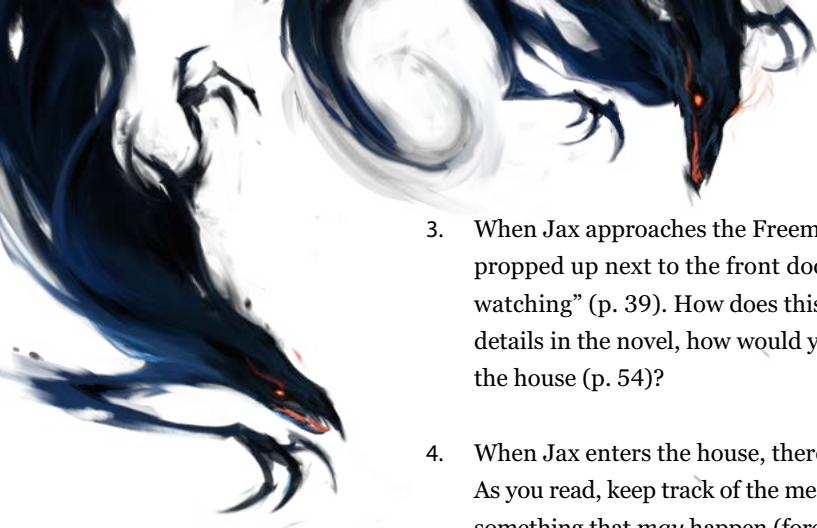
**Weather Alert!** When Jax arrives in Chicago, he says, “It was freezing here. Winter in Chicago was apparently in full force, and snow flurries drifted in from the train tunnels as I blew into my cupped hands” (p. 7). How does winter differ between Raleigh and Chicago? If you could move to any new place, where would you choose? Why? What might be fun and/or difficult about moving somewhere new during middle school? Explain.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

**Explore the questions individually and in small groups while reading.**

1. Jax is only twelve years old; how is he able to travel alone on the train without an adult (p. 5)? In part one, when Jax arrives at the Chicago train station, what strange things happen? How does Jax respond? How would you respond? Cite textual evidence.
2. Ms. Ella says, “You can see spirits, including the ancestors of some folk, I reckon. A powerful gift, that is” (p. 24). Why does Jax think that is ridiculous? What other important information does Ms. Ella reveal to Jax? How would you describe Ms. Ella? How does she help him defeat Conductor Buck? Be specific.





3. When Jax approaches the Freeman house, he says, “Then there was a painted wooden sign propped up next to the front door and illuminated by porch light . . . Your ancestors are watching” (p. 39). How does this connect to his encounter at the train station? Based on the details in the novel, how would you describe the Freeman house? What seems different about the house (p. 54)?
4. When Jax enters the house, there are more signs with interesting messages that seem to change. As you read, keep track of the messages in the house. How does each changing message connect to something that *may* happen (foreshadowing) or something that already has happened? Be specific.

	<b>Message in House</b>	<b>Connection to Events in the Novel</b>
	<b>YOUR ANCESTORS ARE WATCHING</b>	
	<b>MAY YOUR ANCESTORS GUIDE YOU TODAY</b>	

5. In chapter 6, how is Jax’s new school different from his previous middle school? Who are the new classmates and teachers he meets? Describe each person’s character traits.
6. In chapter 7, what is on Jax Freeman’s “*Things of Deep Distress*” list (p. 81)? What examples or details provide supporting evidence for each item on his list? What else would you add to Jax’s list based upon the recent events?
7. In, chapter 8, what does Jax learn about his “summoner” class? Why does he think he doesn’t belong? Explain.
8. Jax learns that “Sycophants are unbalanced spirits that attract other unbalanced spirits” (p. 108). What could happen if a sycophant were not stopped? What actions led to the sycophant appearing? What are other examples of cause and effect in the novel? Cite textual evidence.
9. Devin says, “Your family is always messing something up and now you go and follow in their footsteps” (p. 116). What is the history of the Freeman family? In chapters 11–13, what does Jax learn as he travels? It may be helpful to create a timeline using the [Read Write Think Timeline Creator](#) or a similar online tool.
10. Jax discovers that, “There was no Gray Line on my map” (p. 136). Why are the maps different? What does Jax learn about the Gray Line? Why is it important to his community? Be specific.





11. In Chapter 16, How does everyone act around Papa Coin? How does Papa Coin treat Dre, Devin, and Nina? How does Papa Coin treat Jax? What does Jax learn from Papa Coin? Cite evidence.
12. When Jax meets Dre, he says, “You heard that right. He didn’t untuck a chain—the chain untucked *itself*” (p. 153). Then, during the battle, Jax says, “Devin’s older brother was poetry in motion. Violent poetry” (p. 185). Based on the novel, how would you describe Dre, both in the regular world and as a summoner? Based on Devin’s actions, how does he feel about his brother? Be specific.
13. In chapters 21–22, what is the significance of the praise house? What happens in the praise house? How is the praise house connected to Jax’s mission? Be specific.
14. Describe how Jax’s skills develop throughout the book. Jax says, “I was a porter. What did that mean? I guess I’d find out if I could open that door” (p. 259). What are Jax’s special skills? Which skills seem to impress Nina and Devin? How are each of their heirlooms unique? Be specific.
15. In chapter 27, Jax says, “The point was, the three of us had one another’s backs, and after tomorrow, we could stand up to anything” (p. 301). How does the relationship between Devin, Jax, and Nina shift as the story unfolds? What events happen to change their relationship? Provide evidence.
16. Naomi says, “I ran and ran. Not away, though. *Toward Power*” (p. 318). What does this mean? Describe Naomi’s relationship to her family. How might that history influence her goals?
17. In part four, how does Ms. Ella help Jax and Devin? What tasks must Jax accomplish? What does he learn from his failures and triumphs? What skills does he refine during his time with Ms. Ella?
18. Jax says, “An heirloom, from an ancestor who believed in me and what I was capable of” (p. 367). What is the significance of Jax’s heirloom? How does it connect to his ancestors?
19. What proposition does Uncle Moe make in chapter 33? Why? How does Jax respond? What is Uncle Moe’s intention or goal? What happens when Jax and Uncle Moe encounter the Gringemaw? How does this encounter help Jax realize his greater power?
20. When Jax connects with his great-great-grandfather, he says, “*I am Freeman, the name that is a celebration of the summoner, the porter, the first in the family, and I am so proud of you, Jackson. I am . . . mighty proud*” (p. 438). Why is this moment important for Jax? Can you think of a time when you made someone proud? Explain.
21. Who are the members of the congregation? How does the congregation respond to Jax’s actions? How does their response differ from his expectations?





## DURING READING DISCUSSION STATIONS: FAMILIES IN NOVELS

**Directions:** Place four posters around the room, each with one of the guiding questions below. Every participant should have Post-it notes and a pencil to jot down responses and a copy of the book. Take ten minutes for students to individually brainstorm answers at each poster. Then have them work in small groups to discuss the responses around the room. Remember that they should collaborate by following agreed-upon rules for discussion:

1. Take turns sharing ideas
2. Listen to all ideas without interrupting
3. Ask questions for clarification
4. Find evidence from the novel to support ideas

*(Speaking and Listening: Comprehension and Collaboration: SL. 5.1, 6.1)*

Station #1	
In chapter 17, Devin explains, “About a hundred and fifty years ago, five families worked together on a farm” (p. 176). How did the families go from farmers to having power?	

Station #2	
On page 284, Jax asks, “Why did the feud between the summoner families happen?” Based on the details in <b>multiple sections</b> of the novel, can you answer Jax’s question? Why might the truce have been broken?	

Station #3	
Readers learn, “The families split up and established their own territories around the city” (p. 199). What makes each family (Coins, Baskets, Skulls, Knives, and Wands) unique? Who are the important people in each family?	

Station #4	
As the novel progresses, the author reveals that although the families became divided, some connections remained. What are some surprising connections or relationships between the families?	





## POST-READING QUESTIONS

1. Ms. Ella is an important character at the beginning, middle, and end of the novel. What is Ms. Ella's history? Why was she helping Jax along the way?
2. The book is divided into five parts. What are the key events in each part? Who are the important characters in each part? How does each part build to create a more complex story? In your opinion, what is the theme of each part and of the book overall?
3. Go back to the newspaper articles included at the end of each section. How does each conclusion highlight something important from the previous chapter and build anticipation for something that is about to happen?
4. In the final chapter, Jax says, "Their opinions were their own. I knew who I was" (p. 460). How is this a shift from Jax's perspective at the beginning of the novel? Be specific.

*(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 Project, Research, and Writing Extensions**

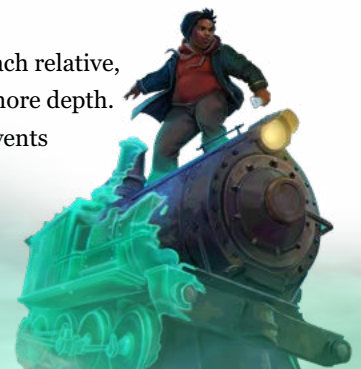
**Weathering Winter:** Jax moves from a warm climate (Raleigh, North Carolina) to a very cold climate (Chicago, Illinois). Compare and contrast the weather patterns in Raleigh and Chicago using information from the [National Weather Service: Just for Kids](#). Answer the following questions:

1. What are the temperatures like in winter for both locations?
2. What are *severe* weather events in each location?
3. Which location would you rather live in? Why?
4. Pick another city, then explore the weather patterns during each season in that location. Share the facts you've learned from your research with a partner.

*(Speaking and Listening: Presentation of Knowledge and Ideas: SL. 5.4, 6.4)*

**Creating a Family Tree:** First, create family trees for the summoner families in the novel using [Canva](#) or a similar online tool. Think about what readers learn about the Coins, Baskets, Skulls, Knives, and Wands families. You may not be able to complete all the trees, and that is okay; just fill in what you know thus far. Also, be sure to highlight connections across the trees (for example, Nina's parents come from the Baskets and Coins, p. 201). Based on the family trees, what information do you want to learn about each family in a sequel?

Next, create a family tree for your *own* family. Include photographs (if available), descriptions of each relative, and how each relative is connected to you. Select one person on your family tree to write about in more depth. You should include a detailed description of why that person is special, an organized sequence of events in their life, and a clear conclusion. *(Writing: Text Types and Purposes: W.5.2, 6.2)*







## LEARNING ABOUT PRAISE HOUSES

**Planning:** Jax learns about the significance of the praise house, which is an important realization in the novel. With the support of an adult, use print and online resources to research the history of praise houses. Create a list of reasons these locations were important for African Americans.

Reasons Praise Houses Were Important for African Americans	Citation or Source of Information
1.	
2.	
3.	
4.	
5.	

**Drafting:** Circle one reason (listed above) that you want to research further. Then write an essay (4–6 paragraphs) that explains the significance of praise houses in detail. Include an introduction, details supported by evidence, relevant facts, and a conclusion aligned with sources cited. Consider graphics such as tables, charts, and timelines that can help convey the important information. (*Writing: Research to Build and Present Ideas: W.5.8, 6.8*)

### Revision and Peer Editing Using Examples from Kwame Mbalia:

- Think about your favorite character or event from the novel. What descriptive words did Kwame Mbalia use to make the character/event interesting to read about? Descriptive language is important in fiction and nonfiction (i.e., informational) writing. Revise your essay by adding more descriptive language about praise houses and their community significance.
- Review pages 120–121 of the book for an example of emphasis on the same word using different punctuation. Add one word with two different types of punctuation to your report.
- Lastly, have a peer read the essay and provide suggestions in the following areas:
  - Spelling
  - Punctuation
  - Descriptive sentences

Each peer should provide one compliment and one suggestion for improvement.

## EXTRA, EXTRA, READ ALL ABOUT IT!

Jax discovers a lot about his history from reading newspaper articles. Research a historical or current event that is highlighted in news articles. Create a visual collage of the articles like the ones in the novel (pp. 57, 193, 331, 409, and 461). Present the collage to a small group and discuss the important details you learned in the news articles and any bias (if applicable) you noticed. (*Speaking and Listening: Presentation of Knowledge and Ideas: SL. 5.5, 6.5*)



#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR OF THE GUIDE

Dawn Jacobs Martin has spent her career supporting students with disabilities through various roles as a practitioner, a researcher, a special education director, and currently an associate clinical professor. She continues to improve the academic outcomes for students with disabilities through teacher development, instructional design, and research in the areas of response to intervention, social support, and parent involvement.



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