

# The yoto Carnegies

NEWBERY MEDAL-WINNING AUTHOR OF *THE CROSSOVER*

**KWAME ALEXANDER**

'At once vivid and simple, lyrical  
and surgical, expressive and exacting'

LUPITA NYONG'O

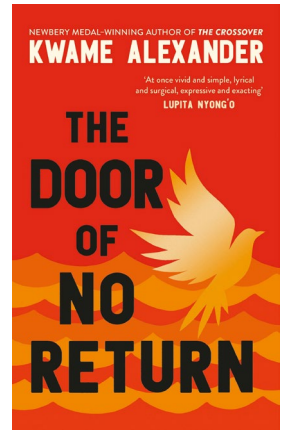
# THE DOOR OF NO RETURN



## The Yoto Carnegie Shortlist 2024 Shadowing Resources



## Activities for The Door of No Return by Kwame Alexander



### Content warning

Violence, implied sexual assault, enslavement, death, suicide.

### General Activities for all books

- Lego Fun: Create a scene from one of the books using Lego or other building materials/toys.
- Shadowing Scrapbook: Document your journey through the 2024 Shadowing period. This can be used to record books and activities discussed in each session, as well as offer a creative space for reviews, reflection and anything else you might like to add.
- Take the title or first line from each of the shortlisted books and create a poem or story by combining them with words and phrases of your own.
- Carnegie Washing Line: Cut out shapes of clothes (e.g. socks, tops, trousers etc) using cardboard and write quotes from the Medal for Writing books and pictures from Medal for Illustration and hang on a washing line with pegs to display. Group members could do this as an activity in the session if time allows or asked to do at home and then to bring to the next session.
- Think of some questions you would like to ask the shortlisted authors and share them on social media using the hashtag **#YotoCarnegies24**
- When Worlds Collide: Select two characters, each from a different shortlisted book. Imagine what they would say to each other, if they met. How would they behave? You could improvise this, or write a script or short story that describes the encounter. E.g, Erik from Crossing the Line meets Growls from Steady for This.
- Carnegie Touch and Taste:
  - Touch: Curate a selection of items inspired by the shortlists, place them into a drawstring bag and have shadowers try to identify each item using touch. As time goes on, and shadowers become more familiar with the shortlisted books, you can expand the game to include guessing the title of the book based on the collection of items in the bag.
  - Taste: Mine the shortlisted titles for references to food and use this to spark discussions about food they like and dislike. You could encourage everyone to bring a snack each week, focusing each session around one of the titles. Alternatively, you could throw a shortlist celebration party and have everyone contribute a dish inspired by one of the shortlisted books. and then offer them to try different foods from the shortlisted books. Make sure you have a conversation about allergies and dietary requirements well in advance!
- The Shadowing Tree: ask shadowing group members to write very short reviews or info about characters on leaf shaped cutouts or sticky notes. The cutouts could be hung on an artificial tree, or a real one, depending on your setting, whilst sticky notes could be arranged on a poster and displayed in the library.
- Think about who would play the main characters in a film or TV adaptation of one or more of the shortlisted titles. Create a cast list and explain your choices.

- Rewrite the ending of one of the shortlisted books. What have you changed, and why? Does it alter how you feel about the story?
- Have a go at creating spine poetry by using the titles of the shortlisted books as phrases/words. Share your creations online using the hashtag **#YotoCarnegies24**
- Create your own playlist to accompany a shortlisted book - you might want to highlight a particular theme, tap into the geography or time period of the book or create a playlist that reflects a particular character.
- Choose a character from one of the shortlisted books and reinvent them in the art style of your choosing. You could create your character digitally, draw them by hand, paint them or even make a sculpture. You could try creating the same character in a variety of styles - Manga, Pop Art, Disney - using different materials.
- Create your own book trailer for one of the books, or work together to make a trailer for the entire shortlist. This could be a TikTok style 'sell' of the book or a more traditional thematic video.

## Book Activities

1. *The Door of No Return* is inspired by history and the real lives of the Asante people. The Asante people are native to the region of West Africa now known as Ghana. What do you know about the Asante people, and the region they come from? How could you find out more? Where might you go, what skills would you need and what sources could you look at?
2. Read the Author's Note at the front of the book. Here, Kwame Alexander quotes Ralph Waldo Emerson, who said 'Be an opener of doors.' Kwame writes that he himself has tried to be an opener of doors in writing this book. If the author is the opener of doors, what is your role in this reading experience? Do you think these roles are the same for all books? Why/why not?
3. Kofi Offin speaks Asante Twi. Spend some time learning how to say a few phrases in Asante Twi using online resources to assist you. Start with 'hello', 'goodbye; and 'let's go swimming'. Use the glossary in the back of the book to learn some additional words and phrases. How does it feel to be learning a new language? What does Asante Twi sound like to you? What does the language do to your voice? How do the words feel in your mouth, compared to your first language?
4. In the novel, Kofi's teacher Goodluck Philips has a strong affinity for all things British and urges his students to abandon their own language and culture, learn the English language and embrace all things British to improve themselves. How far is the language we speak linked to our sense of identity? Why might Kofi not want to speak English, despite Philips' insistence?
5. Read After Morning Assembly on p147. How do you think Kofi feels, being taught history that does not belong to him and to which he struggles to connect? Have you ever felt this way about a history lesson? Can you identify any gaps in your own knowledge of history? What can be done to improve the way we teach and learn world history and the roles our ancestors have played within that?
6. The book contains many vivid descriptions of the river and sea. Choose your favourite and recreate it as a drawing, painting or collage.
7. The novel ends with the sinking of the slave ship and with Kofi being reunited with his cousin. We know that the story is the first instalment in a planned trilogy. Think about what might happen next. How do you think the story continues? What would you like to see happen? Are there any differences between what you think will happen and what you'd like to happen? Why do you think this might be?
8. Adinkra symbols are placed at the beginning of each section of the novel to foreshadow what is about to happen. The author includes an explanation of these symbols at the end of the novel. Take some time to explore the symbols and consider the contribution that they make to our understanding of the story.
9. Read The Storyteller on p3 aloud. Listen to the rhythm, and the way the words fit and flow. Have a go at rewriting the poem as a piece of prose - what happens to the information? Is it easier to communicate, or more difficult? Does it work better as a piece of prose or as free verse?
10. *The Door of No Return* is a verse novel, which means the entire narrative is told in verse. What effect does this have on:
  - a. The story
  - b. The reader

## Before Reading

These tasks are designed to be completed in small discussion groups. However, they can easily be done on your own too. Instead of talking about the tasks, you can write down and keep a record of your ideas.

## Before the beginning

Look at the first few pages of the book which include:

- A dedication to Kwame Alexander's mother
- A quote from a poem by David Diop.
- A map
- A note from the author
- Drawing on these pages, discuss your predictions about the story you are about to read.

## During Reading

WARNING: DON'T READ THE QUESTIONS BEFORE READING EACH SECTION!

Read the chapter and then answer the questions. You will probably need to spend about 5-10 minutes answering each set of questions.

### Chapter 1

- Which poem in this chapter gives you the best sense of the setting?
- What seems to be the importance of the river to Kofi?
- What different views about learning to speak English do you hear from Mr Phillip, Kwasi and Maame?

### Chapter 2

- What is your impression of Ama so far? What do you think about the views she expresses about the rival tribe in the poem 'Dispute'?
- What is Kofi's cousin like? What kind of relationship do he and Kofi have?
- What do you think about Mr Phillip's ambitions for Kofi?

### Chapter 3

- What's your impression of Nana Mosi, the village storyteller, and his relationship with Kofi?
- What chores do the children do and how does this compare with the kind of chores you are asked to do at home?
- Find your favourite description of one of the wrestling bouts or one of the wrestlers (Kwasi, Bonsu, Prince Yaw). How is it written?
- Before reading the next chapter, discuss what you think might happen next.

### Chapter 4

- In the first poem in this chapter, how does Alexander contrast what is happening with what would usually happen in this situation? What's the effect of this on you?
- How are some of the different characters reacting: Kwasi, Maame, Papa?
- Do you agree with the council's decision?

### Chapter 5

- Who do you think the 'Wonderfuls' are? What are your theories about what Papa is withholding from Kofi to protect him?
- What do you expect to happen between Kofi and his cousin in the swimming race?

- In this chapter there are several poems which are conversations between characters. Choose one of these and think about what you learn about the characters in the conversation.
- Who do you think set the trap in the forest?

### **Chapter 6**

- Why do the boys think they have been caught? When do they realise what's going on?
- Why has Kwasi been taken captive?
- How does Alexander show Kofi's grief?
- This chapter contains some events which can be hard to read about. When you have finished this chapter, take a moment to think about and discuss how you feel about what has happened and how Alexander chose to describe it.

### **Chapter 7**

- Now you have met the 'Wonderfuls', who do you think they are?
- What does Kofi learn from the 'dark lady'?
- There is more than one real 'Door of No Return' where Africans were put onto boats to be sold as slaves. There is also a memorial to enslaved Africans called '*The Door of No Return*' which was created in 1995. What do you now understand about the title of the book?
- As Kofi passes through the 'Door of No Return' what does he lose that he can never get back?
- How do the captives comfort themselves and each other?
- What do you think is happening in the last poem when Kofi says 'And together, we fly'?

## After Reading

### Initial thoughts

- Now that you have finished reading, take a moment to think on your own about the novel as a whole, before discussing some of the questions below in a pair or small group.
  - What do you like about the book?
  - What do you dislike about the book?
  - Which moments most stick in your memory?
  - Do you think Kwame Alexander does a good job of presenting difficult events and emotions (such as death, grief, violence, enslavement)?
  - What do the prose introductions to each chapter add to the novel?
  - Why do you think Kwame Alexander decided to write this as a verse novel? If the novel were told all in prose, with Kofi as a first person narrator, how would it be different?

Take up to 20 minutes for this activity.

## Exploring the book further

Use one or more of these tasks to explore *The Door of No Return* further.

### The middle of the story

- Take up to 10 minutes for this activity.
- Read the Acknowledgments in the back of the book and then discuss:
  - What are the reasons Alexander gives for writing this book?
  - Why do you think Alexander chose to explore such a difficult, emotional topic by following one young boy?
- You have probably learned about colonialism and slavery in school. What does the book add to what you already knew?

### Who should read this book?

Take up to 10 minutes for this activity.

- Read the opinions of three reviewers, below, about who the book is suitable for.
- Discuss with a partner or small group:
  - what age range you think the book is suitable for, and why
  - who should read this book, and why.

There is quite a bit of graphic violence and very difficult plot points. My 15-year-old can and should read it. My 13-year-old wouldn't want to read it because of the depth of the content. My 11-year-old won't be allowed to read it yet.

*Lauren, [www.goodreads.com](http://www.goodreads.com)*

This novel in verse is relatable, moving, and sometimes difficult to stomach. The beauty of the language makes it easier to endure some of the graphic scenes. This may be appropriate for mature younger readers despite the violent moments, which are included to give an unflinching look at historical realities. Commonsense Media recommend for children 12+.

*[www.common sense media.org/book-reviews](http://www.common sense media.org/book-reviews)*

I read this book to my 8-year-old because I saw it in the kids' section of the library. I love love love it. It is beautifully written and tells an important story. I would warn parents that there is at least one very graphic scene. I read it aloud to my son but immediately questioned whether it was appropriate. I generally don't hold back on what I read to him, but could see that scene frightening him or other kids. Overall, I'm still glad I read it to him.

*RAR, [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com)*

### The chapter headings

Take up to 10 minutes for this activity.

- Each chapter has a symbol, which Kwame Alexander says he used 'to foreshadow what's about to happen'. These are listed in the appendix 'Adinkra Symbols' in the back of the book.
- Read the appendix with the explanations for each symbol.
- With a partner or small group, discuss the questions below.
  - How does each symbol foreshadow what happens?
  - Why do you think Alexander wanted to foreshadow events in this way?
  - If the symbols are intended to foreshadow events in the chapter, why do you think Alexander uses symbols rather than words and only explains them at the back of the book?

### More than a game

Take up to 10 minutes for this activity.

- Read the information about oware, below, and then discuss why you think Alexander gave this game such an important place in the book.
- The Oware Society encourages the teaching of the game in schools. Discuss why they might think this is a good idea and whether you agree.

Oware is the oldest board game that is still widely played and is an important part of African culture and heritage. Oware is a very social game: spectators take an active part, giving advice and joining in the banter which is part of the game. As well as being something which brings people together and helps pass the time, oware was used to teach children and also by leaders to hone their leadership skills and get to know their people. The game helps players to develop a wide range of skills and values such as:

- Planning, thinking ahead
- Thinking strategically to make wise moves
- Sharing
- Saving face
- Arithmetic
- Patience
- Communication
- Negotiation and decision making.



## Reading the reviews

Give yourself 30-60 minutes to complete this activity.

The extracts, below, are all from reviews of the book.

- Read all of the reviews and discuss which comes closest to your own view.
- Working individually, write your own paragraph expressing your views about the novel. If possible, share your reviews with a group.
- Submit your reviews to the Carnegie Shadowing Scheme website. This can be accessed at: <https://yotocarnegies.co.uk/medals/>

A.

The most brilliant historical fiction written in verse that I've ever read!

Kwame Alexander teaches readers through his unique style of verse once again. But this time, you will encounter young Kofi and his Ghanaian family. Just imagine walking alongside him through a timeline of events that are filled with characters who pull on every emotion possible. This author will have your imagination running WILD! This is a very honest story that will teach readers about love, learning, grief, ancestors, and much more. And you will experience funny moments as well from these strong characters.

*Octavia, www.goodreads.com*

B.

Revealing hidden history and brutal truths, this masterfully conjured novel-in-verse is underpinned by the author's intention to show that, 'while the brutal captivity and bondage of Africans was a part of my story, it was not the first chapter, or even the second...I wrote this story because people need to know that the middle was not our beginning. I wanted to speak the truth about the history of African Americans, because while most of us are aware of the American part, it's time for us to know more about the African part, right?'

While sharing this important history, *The Door of No Return* is also brilliant at evoking relatable emotions, with the story centred around eleven-year-old Kofi — a boy who loves swimming in the river, loves a 'girl/who makes my stomach wobble/and my heart beat', and loves playing oware with his wise grandfather, Nana Mosi, the village storyteller. At school, though, Kofi wonders why they're forced to learn so much British history, 'why we do not spend/ as much time/learning the history/ of our own kingdom', and why pupils are forbidden from speaking Twi.

Alongside such cultural oppression, an annual festival honouring a peace treaty sees Kofi's older brother face Lower Kwanta's heir to the throne when he's selected to fight for Upper Kwanta. The result of the contest unleashes a tsunami of trouble, and Kofi faces a 'door of no return'. Forced to take a 'slow passage/over troubled waters' in brutal conditions, he finds some solace in memories, dreams, and singing praise songs to his family. The heart-stopping ending will leave readers desperate to find out what Kofi does next.

*www.lovereadings4kids.co.uk*

C.

The immediacy of this verse novel places readers alongside Kofi, thriving as a young boy surrounded by family love and legacy before being abruptly snatched from all he has known. Alexander's rich language is lyrical and haunting as the water, long a source of comfort for Kofi, becomes full of uncertainty and danger.

A riveting, not-to-be-missed trilogy opener that will leave readers invested in what is to come.

*www.kirkusreviews.com*

D.

Alexander is an accomplished writer, decorated with the top awards given to authors of literature for young people. He is aware of the minefield a book can represent in today's American education system and of the many parents who want to ban Black stories that make white children feel bad about themselves. So he compromises. He shows that the baddies include Africans, ranging from those who are ashamed of their Africanness and want to celebrate Europeanness (like the teacher Goodluck Phillip), to the school bully who traumatizes Kofi (his cousin), to the men who capture Kofi and his brother and murder Kwasi in front of him. White people make a brief appearance at the end, but Alexander can't be accused of blaming slavery entirely on them.

*Kwame Dawes, The New York Times*

## Writing Activities

On your own, or with a partner, complete one or more of these writing activities to help you develop your thoughts about *The Door of No Return* further.

You will need 30-60 minutes for each activity.

Throughout the book, Kofi's elders share their wisdom. Read through the quotations below, then use them to write a poem. You can use as many or as few as you wish and change them in any way you want.

The bird who dares to fall is the bird who learns to fly.

Dreams are today's answers for tomorrow's questions.

By trying often, the monkey learns to jump from the tree.

The lion's power lies in our fear of him.

Once you carry your own water, you will know the value of every drop.

A heavy heart seizes the tongue.

It is not the crown that sits atop a man that makes him big. It is what is inside.

Guilt has the footprints of an elephant.

There is nothing more confining than the prison we do not know we are in.

What you do not suffer for, you can never truly value.

The sun shines on those who stand up for themselves before it shines on those who kneel to cowardice.

- Write a letter to the author, Kwame Alexander, explaining how his book affected you and why you are glad he wrote it.
- This book is the first of a trilogy. Think about what might happen in the next book and write either a prose introduction to the first chapter, or an opening poem of your own.
- Write a short speech to give in assembly about something you feel passionately about that is related to the book. Some ideas to get you started:
  - Slavery – modern slavery or slavery in the past
  - Whether books for young people should address important but difficult topics
  - What we learn from playing games
  - Why it's important to learn about the past.