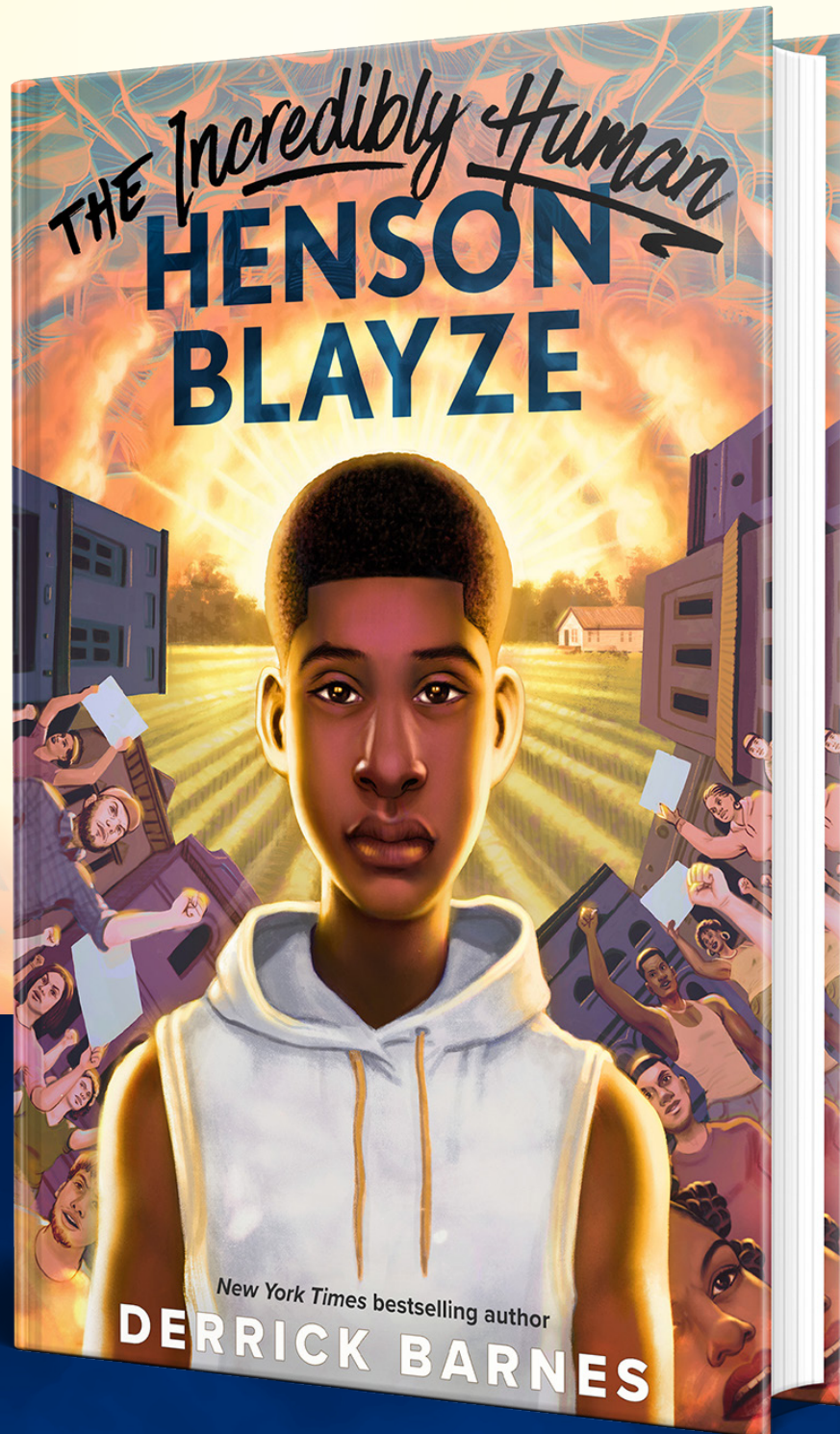


A Discussion Guide to



Penguin
**SCHOOL
& LIBRARY**

Praise for ***The Incredibly Human Henson Blayze***

A Kirkus Prize Finalist

Longlisted for the National Book Award

★ **"BOLD, EXTRAORDINARY STORYTELLING:** not to be missed."

—KIRKUS REVIEWS, starred review

★ **"A MODERN FOLKTALE** that leaves a damning indictment."

—BCCB, starred review

★ Barnes weaves together stories of spirituality, injustice, unrealistic expectations, and police brutality into

A POWERFUL TALE."

—PUBLISHERS WEEKLY, starred review

"EMPOWERED, EMPOWERING, AND INCREDIBLY HUMAN.

You won't be the same after reading it."

—ERIN ENTRADA KELLY, two-time winner of the Newbery Medal

ABOUT THE BOOK

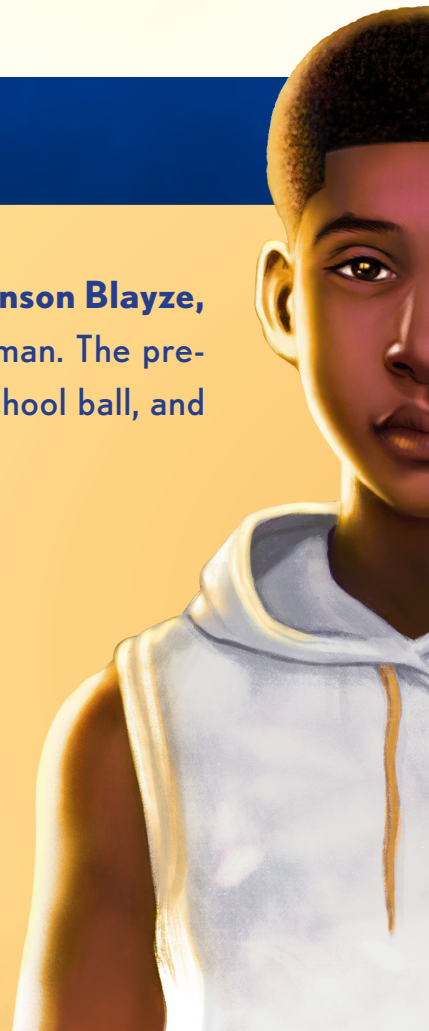
In the small town of Great Mountain, Mississippi, all eyes are on Henson Blayze, a thirteen-year-old football phenom whose talents seem almost superhuman. The predominantly white townsfolk have been waiting for Henson to play high school ball, and now they're overjoyed to finally possess an elite Black athlete of their own.

Until a horrifying incident forces Henson to speak out about injustice.

Until he says that he might not play football anymore.

Until he quickly learns he isn't as loved by the people as he thought.

In that moment, Henson's town is divided into two chaotic sides when all he wants is justice. Even his best friends and his father can't see eye to eye. When he is told to play ball again or else, Henson must decide whether he was born to entertain people who may not even see him as human, or if he's destined for a different kind of greatness.



FOR EDUCATORS TO CONSIDER,

A Modern Maniac Magee

Derrick Barnes has cited *Maniac Magee* as part of his inspiration for *The Incredibly Human Henson Blayze*. Both books are centered around local star athletes and segregated/racially divided towns, and both deal with themes of family, prejudice, loss, and self-discovery.

Consider using *The Incredibly Human Henson Blayze* as a supplemental text to *Maniac Magee* or a paired text. Comparing the two texts can be a great sociological discussion on the differences between the two time periods the books were written in as students analyze what has changed and what hasn't. In what ways do you find *Maniac Magee* and *Henson Blayze* to be similar? What do you notice about the communities in which they live?

OTHER PRE-READING CONSIDERATIONS/IDEAS FOR TEACHERS

- **Ask students to define what makes someone “incredible” or a “legend.”** Have them brainstorm examples of people—either fictional or real—who they consider to be legendary.
- **Discuss how reputation can be built.** Ask students to consider how stories, rumors, and observations contribute to how others perceive a person. How might a person's reputation differ from their true self?
- **Introduce the idea of a persona,** the aspect of one's character presented to or perceived by others.
- **Discuss the role of community.** Ask students to think about how a community shapes and is shaped by its members. How does a community's response to an exceptional individual differ when that person is an outsider versus when they are an insider? How do communities celebrate or vilify their heroes?
- **Reflect on the following African proverb:** “Until the lion learns to write, every story will always glorify the hunter.” What role does storytelling play in preserving someone's legacy?
- **Read and discuss LeBron James's Instagram post** that depicts the image stating “I AM MORE THAN AN ATHLETE.” Who is LeBron James? Research the history of this post and social commentary on an interview in which a national news channel host told him to “Shut up and dribble.” Research how Black athletes have used their platform to disrupt the notion of, for instance, “Shut up and dribble” to advance social justice.

PRE-READING QUESTIONS FOR READERS

1. Have you, or a friend, ever felt pressure to be something you're not or live up to expectations others have for you? How did you, or your friend, manage these pressures or expectations?
2. Take some time to look closely at the book's cover. What do you notice? Who is on the cover? What is happening? What mood do you feel as you look at the cover? What questions does this cover evoke about the story? Discuss your observations.
3. Read the author's note. What inspired Derrick Barnes to write this book? Does reading his note provide additional insight into Henson Blayze's story?
4. What are some of the stereotypes and expectations that Black boys and men, especially in sports, face in society?
5. How do you think the title, *The Incredibly Human Henson Blayze*, is connected to the story? What do you think makes him "incredibly human"?



DURING READING DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. The prologue is a transcript of an incident between two troopers and a suspect. What happens in this confrontation? Do you think the identifier of “suspect” is intentional? What do you think the suspect looks like? Why? How do you feel after reading this transcript?
2. Who is Henson Blayze? Describe him. Who is Menkah? Describe the relationship between these two boys.
3. Recount the founding of Great Mountain, Mississippi, according to Mr. Deacon Jonathan Blayze. Who were Grace and Preston St. Louis? Where did they and the other escaped enslaved people form a community? Describe the relationship between the former enslaved people and the Choctaw tribe. What mis- and disinformation was taught in schools about the founding of Great Mountain? (p. 15)
4. While Menkah and Henson toss the football the night before the first day of school, the two boys have a heart-to-heart conversation. Menkah is nervous about going to the fifth grade; Henson is anxious about being in eighth grade and playing on the high school football team. How do the two friends reassure one another? (pp. 23–26)
5. Where is Henson’s mother? What can you infer from his actions at the dinner table the night before the first day of school? What can you assume about their relationship and about her? (pp. 33, 50, 179, 180, & 228)
6. On the first day of school, Henson decides to ride his bike to school and he makes his way through town. Describe his interactions with the townspeople. In what ways are, for example, the Clyburns, the Bozemans, and Miss Johnnie Mae different (Ch. 9–11)? What is his reception like when he arrives at school? Describe what happens in his classes and at the cafeteria. Why do you think the behavior of the townspeople, the school faculty, and Henson’s classmates is significant?
7. Who is Flowell Bridges? What is his connection to Henson? Why does he spin tall tales about Henson? Why doesn’t he notice how the endorsement he got from Piggly Wiggly is problematic? Why does Skee-Bo, a worker on the Blayzes’ vineyard, express disgust at the ad’s image? Why are Menkah’s toy arrows and tomahawk chop chants also concerning?

DURING READING DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

8. Who is Freida? Describe her character traits. How does Henson feel about her? What sage advice does she give to Henson? Discuss her lineage and how it relates to Henson's family.
9. The day before the first football game of the season, the team volunteers in town. At the end of the day, a photo with the team and the mayor is taken. Why do you think Henson decides to step outside of the photo frame? Do you think this decision will impact him later in the book? (p. 108)
10. During the first game of the season, Henson's play proves that he is a rare talent. What does Henson's noticing that his father and Menkah are not in the stands foreshadow?
11. What news causes Henson to leave the game during halftime? What happened to Menkah?
12. When Henson addresses the stadium crowd with Mrs. Jupiter to alert all to Menkah's injuries, the crowd ignores their pleas. Describe why Henson is taken aback by the crowd's response (pp. 124–126). What does the crowd do as Henson walks out of the stadium? What do the ancestors do to the nine people who throw cups, food, and spit on Henson?
13. What were the injuries sustained by Menkah? Why do you think Freida suspects that something else healed his injuries so quickly? What do you think she is considering?
14. A crowd gathers outside of the hospital demanding Henson to come back to the football team. What is your opinion of the crowd's assembly and behavior? To what is Freida alluding when she exclaims, "I hate to inform you, but you cannot and will not demand that we do anything. You're talking like you and these folks have deeds on us, and I know you're not implying that, are you, Mr. Crane"? (p. 159)
15. Who is Shaka St. Louis? What is the OBF, One Big Family? Why are they at the hospital?
16. After dinner with Mr. Blayze, Freida and Henson go for a walk. They dream about their future. What do they imagine for their future? In what ways does this evening shift their relationship? (pp. 184–188)

DURING READING DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

17. Henson travels with his father on a “work and family-business-related trip,” or as Deacon describes, “my rounds to show my gratitude. Our gratitude” (p. 192). What happens during the stops? What financial revelations are shared with Henson? Why does this duty—service—cause Henson to question his legacy? What new considerations does Henson have after having his heartfelt conversation about familial expectations? (pp. 192–210)
18. Recount the story of “The Brief and Wonderous Life of Peacock Honeygrove” (p. 211). Describe how this story connects both to Henson’s circumstances and with the police troopers who harmed Menkah (see the epilogue).
19. When Henson returns to school, his reception is quite different than on the first day of school. How do his neighbors and the school administrators, faculty, staff, and students treat him? In what ways do they demonstrate their disgust with Henson? Mrs. Pendegrass does not follow the mob. Describe how she treats him at lunch.
20. During the assembly for Henson’s announcement, the bodycam video of police troopers brutalizing Menkah is posted on social media and is shared in the news. In what ways do the townspeople and school community react to the video? What do their reactions confirm to Henson?
21. What is the significance of the senior players—Nick the Quick, Romeo Ruffin, Quasar Livingston the Third, and Gavin Ellington—taking off their jerseys and physically moving away from the team? (pp. 242–243)
22. Henson is shot by an arrow from Flowell, who cries, “Please tell them I mean no harm. Tell your people that I mean no harm. Please!” (p. 247). Who are his people, and why is Flowell terrified?
23. Henson walks out of the school, returns home, cleans himself up, and goes to work with his father. What do you think of Henson’s decision? What do you think he will do long-term?
24. Explain why the statues of the Choctaw Natives being returned among the cypress trees are a penance.

AFTER READING PROMPTS & QUESTIONS

Reflect on the following quotes. Discuss their significance in relation to this story.

- **(p. 11)** “So listen . . . with eyes and ears open.”
- **(p. 16)** “But I guess when you hold the pen and write the stories of others, no one notices that the beautiful cursive strokes on the page are crafted with blood.”
- **(p. 23)** “Is everything *everything*?”
- **(p. 25)** “Just. Be. You. My dad always tells me to take ‘me’ wherever I go. One thing will be certain . . . you’ll be the only ‘you’ there, and that’s always a good thing.”
- **(p. 31)** “Win the day!”
- **(p. 43)** “Come on, now, Henson, let’s get one pic before you git goin’,” ordered Georgiana. “It’s gonna be worth something someday, and so are you.”
- **(p. 88)** “But you don’t mind them showing you as a stereotype? Looking like a runaway slave, stealing melons from fields and back porches? Okay. Cool,” said Skee-Bo. “I thought y’all said this boy was smart . . .”
- **(p. 125)** “We didn’t come to hear you speak!” a man behind the home bleachers at the fifty-yard line screamed. “Now put your helmet back on and play ball!”
- **(p. 131)** “The ancestors are always watching.”
- **(p. 137)** “We think folks are one way, until they show you that they’re not that way at all. It’s the ways of man, son,” Deacon explained, calm, somber, straight. “The thing is—who do we really know? There are signs though. That’s why we study history. It shows a lot of human behavior. I’m a firm believer in the intersectionality of both.”
- **(p. 155)** “Yes. I just hoped that he can stay ten years old for a little while longer, you know? They tried to take that away from him that day, but they didn’t. They won’t, right?”
- **(p. 196)** “Because, son, the protection that we’ve been blessed with, that peace from evil which has afforded us to amass all that wealth, has a price attached to it—service. We do it for lineage, for legacy, for always, son. Remember that.”
- **(p. 210)** “Those folks have been waiting a mighty long time for this. For you. I’ve always feared that. I just never talked to you about it—I’m sorry, son.”
- **(p. 233)** “. . . All they want is you, doing exactly what you were born to do, and nothing else.”
- **(p. 246)** “YOU DON’T OWN ME!”

AFTER READING PROMPTS & QUESTIONS

1. Mrs. Jupiter yells at the doctor who labels Menkah as a “young man” (p. 133). Why is the adultification of Black children dangerous? Research examples of how these labels and viewpoints cause harm both physically and emotionally.
2. Freida becomes a fierce advocate and refuge for Henson. Discuss the ways in which she supports Henson.
3. When people are trying to disparage Henson, they called him “uppity.” Discuss why this term is being used in a negative way. What does it say about the presumed status of Black people in the community?
4. The chapters in this book are a few pages long. In what ways do these short chapters advance the flow of the story?
5. Storytelling is used to pass on wisdom and contextualize situations. Deacon, Flowell, and Freida tell stories for various purposes. Why do they tell stories? How do they build the narrative?
6. What is the theme of this book? Discuss and refer to the story to support your answer.
7. This book is set in Mississippi. Describe and discuss ways in which its racial and socioeconomic history informs Barnes’s work.
8. Barnes incorporates elements of tall tales, magic, and folklore. Describe how these narrative choices are effective.

This guide was written by Dr. Shanetia P. Clark, a professor of literacy in the department of early and elementary education at Salisbury University. Prior to joining the faculty at Salisbury University, Dr. Clark taught seventh grade English in Richmond, Virginia, and served as the site director of the Capital Area Writing Project. Her research interests include young adult and children’s literature, the exploration of aesthetic experiences within reading and writing classrooms, and writing pedagogy. She teaches courses in children’s literature, creative arts in literacy, and language arts methods. In addition, Dr. Clark supervises interns in local schools. She is the coeditor of *Voices from the Middle*, the National Council of Teachers of English middle level peer-reviewed journal.