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STUDY GUIDE

The Adventures of a Black Girl in Search of God by **Djanet Sears** National Arts Centre | English Theatre | 2015/16 Season

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SUMMARY

Welcome to the study guide for *The Adventures of a Black Girl in Search of God*. The purpose of this guide is to impart information about the play including a brief plot synopsis, character breakdowns, background on its historical context and resources for further investigation. The guide will serve as a launching pad for both pre-show introductory discussion, and post-show exploration. In addition, it suggests discussion topics based on some of the play's themes, and presents a variety of exercises which can serve as an enjoyable and interesting entrée to more involved analysis. The discussion questions and suggested exercises will lay the foundation for further examination of *The Adventures of a Black Girl in Search of God*, in varying degrees of breadth and depth.

SYNOPSIS

Rainey Baldwin-Johnson, daughter of Abendigo Johnson, is in mourning. Her daughter Janie is dead and Rainey, a physician, was not able to diagnosis her child's meningitis in time to save her life. She is wracked with guilt, believing herself a failure as both mother and doctor. Rainey is married to but separated from Michael; they are in the process of divorcing. To compound matters, she is also dealing with the reality of her father's rapidly declining health, and her disapproval of his wishes regarding his approaching death.

Meanwhile, Abendigo – determined to not give in to his illness until he must – leads a covert group of freedom-fighting crusaders, so to speak. For whose freedom do they fight? Garden gnomes and other objects portraying black people in a derogatory light, such as the black lawn jockeys found on the lawns of homes and other institutions in their township. Abendigo and his friends have made it their mission to “liberate” these objects, embarking on a carefully orchestrated campaign of civil disobedience in order to combat the stereotypical depiction of blacks. At the same time, they are fighting to maintain their community's name – Negro Creek – in a midst of a concerted effort by townspeople to have it renamed.

The Adventures of a Black God in Search of God is a vivid, suspenseful, often funny and deeply stirring piece about a daughter trying to come to terms with both her past and her future, and a father whose dying body is no match for his living spirit.

BACKGROUND

The Adventures of a Black Girl in Search of God takes place in the present time, in the community of Negro Creek in Holland Township, Ontario. African soldiers who fought in the War of 1812 were the ancestors of many of the town's modern-day inhabitants. These soldiers, consisting of escaped slaves and free black men, bravely fought and distinguished themselves in key battles against the invading forces – the United States army. The land, given the name Negro Creek (although often called Nigger Creek by prejudiced whites), was given to those black men who had fought the war, and settled by African-Canadians. They and their descendents farmed the land in Holland Township after the conclusion of the war, and continued to live there after the arrival of European settlers.

Derogatory stereotypes of black people proliferated the community, including the practice of displaying “art” -- statues and figurines of black lawn jockeys, Aunt Jemimas, and watermelon boys – on public and private property. The play shines a light on this racist practice. *The Adventures of a Black Girl in Search of God* also addresses the real-life fight to preserve the heritage of the community. In 1995, the white townsfolk tried to change the name of Negro Creek Road to Moggie Road, after a Caucasian settler. In the play, Abendigo and his friends have expressed their opposition to the change to the town council and await the council's ruling.

See Resources on pg. 9 for further background information.

CHARACTERS

Main Characters

Rainey Baldwin-Johnson – A doctor, the daughter of Abendigo and estranged wife of Michael. She is mourning the loss of her daughter while also facing the reality of both her crumbling marriage and her father's rapidly declining health.

Abendigo Johnson - An aging retired judge; Rainey's father and Michael's father-in-law. He has for decades been in love with Ivy, despite having married her sister Martha.

Michael Baldwin – A local pastor, married to but separated from Rainey.

Supporting Characters

Ivy – A member of Abendigo's group, and his former sister-in-law. Abendigo is in love with her and considers her the love of his life.

Darese - A member of Abendigo's group. She is very frugal and an avid comparison shopper.

Girlene - A member of Abendigo's group. She has repeatedly divorced and remarried the same man.

Bert – A member of Abendigo's group. On missions, he chooses to answer only to specific code names.

Guard - He works at the museum where the final phase of Abendigo's crusade takes place.

Dr. Radcliffe - Abendigo's physician.

Chorus - The chorus represents the ancestors of Negro Creek and serves as the production's “living set”. They embody the play's settings through the use of physical movement.

Martha (referenced only) – Abendigo's former wife and Rainey's former stepmother, who raised Rainey as her own. Ivy's sister. She is already deceased at the start of the play.

Janie (referenced only) – Rainey & Michael's daughter. She is already deceased at the start of the play.

Additional Characters: Delivery Man

THEMES

There are multiple themes in *The Adventures of a Black Girl in Search of God*. Here are several that provide opportunity for in-depth and meaningful classroom discussion. All themes are suitable for Grades 9 and 10. The themes with an asterisk indicate topics that may be suited to slightly older students.

Acceptance of Death and Dying *

Coming to terms with death and dying is perhaps the most difficult human struggle. In addition to facing our own impermanence, we are also forced to accept the mortality of those we love. In *The Adventures of a Black Girl in Search of God*, Rainey mourns the death of her young daughter while also being confronted with the terminal illness of her father. In sharp contrast to Rainey's difficulty in dealing with this reality is Abendigo's calm acceptance of coming to the end of his life.

Racism and Cultural Defamation

Racism is the catalyst at the heart of Abendigo's crusade. The township is littered with racist artifacts – portraying small black bodies in grossly demeaning ways – which he and his friends are determined to purge from the community. There is also racism imbued in the attempted renaming of Negro Creek Road. Although some of the white town council may have been motivated to eliminate the word "negro" in an attempt to show political correctness, any possible good intentions are negated by their decision to rename the street for a Caucasian man, rather than with a black settler whose name would have continued to honour the community's history.

Crises of Faith *

"Blind faith" – the acceptance of religious belief without questioning – can often be challenged by the harsh reality of the horrors and injustices in the world. The death of her daughter Janie triggers a spiritual crisis in Rainey. Once a seminary student, she now questions the existence and purpose of a higher power who could allow something so tragic to befall an innocent child, and struggles to understand how the faith of others is able to remain so steadfast.

Preservation of Heritage

The final mission which Abendigo's group undertakes is the retrieval of a military uniform worn by his great-grandfather, Juma. The level of risk assumed indicates how important it is for Abendigo to own this piece of his family history. This theme is addressed on a slightly larger scale with the group also protesting the changing of the name of a local road to one which would erase its African heritage.

Grief

Rainey grieves the loss of a child and the loss of a marriage. The play addresses the mourning that comes from the unexpected end of a relationship, either by death or by separation.

Justice vs. The Law

When Abendigo and his fellow crusaders remove the racist artifacts from public and private property, they become lawbreakers. Their quest, however, is rooted in morality – a protest against the racism being perpetuated throughout their community. Activism and the fight for civil and human rights has a long history of people breaking the law in pursuit of moral justice, when legal justice fails them. *The Adventures of a Black Girl in Search of God* asks the question: Where is the line between criminal and hero, when incongruence exists between what is moral and what is legal?

CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS

The Adventures of a Black Girl in Search of God provides multiple opportunities for connections between the play and the Ontario secondary education curriculum. By engaging in the recommended discussions and exercises in this guide, students will be able to make the following connections in the named areas of study.

ENGLISH

Grades 9-12

- Extend understanding of both simple and complex oral texts by making connections between the ideas in them and personal knowledge, experience, and insights; other texts; and the world around them.
- Identify the topic, purpose, and audience for different types of writing tasks.
- Establish a distinctive voice in their writing, modifying language and tone skillfully to suit the form, audience, and purpose for writing.
- Identify the important ideas and supporting details in both simple and complex texts (e.g., select details from a story to create a profile of a character in the story)
- Explain how their own beliefs, values, and experiences are revealed in their writing
- Analyse texts in terms of the information, ideas, issues, or themes they explore, examining how various aspects of the texts contribute to the presentation or development of these elements.
- Use appropriate descriptive and evocative words, phrases, and expressions to make their writing clear and vivid for their intended audience.
- Identify several different elements of style in both simple and complex texts and explain how they help communicate meaning and enhance the effectiveness of the text (e.g., repetition may be used to create emphasis in a persuasive article; contrast and reversal may create tension or humour in a poem; colloquial language can convey information about a character in a play, novel, or short story)

- Make and explain inferences of increasing subtlety about texts, including increasingly complex or difficult texts, supporting their explanations with well-chosen stated and implied ideas from the texts
- Extend understanding of increasingly complex texts, by making connections between the ideas in them and personal knowledge, experience, and insights; other texts; and the world around them.

THE ARTS
Grades 9-12

Drama

- Identify and describe the forms, elements, conventions, and techniques used in a variety of drama styles, and explain how they help achieve specific purposes and effects.
- Use a variety of drama conventions to establish a distinctive context or role in original or adapted works.
- Identify ways in which dramatic exploration promotes an appreciation of diverse cultures and traditions
- Analyse drama works to determine how they communicate ideas about issues, culture, and society
- Use a variety of expressive voice and movement techniques to support the depiction of character (e.g., use volume, tone, accent, pace, gesture, and facial expression to reveal character and/or intention)
- Explain how dramatic exploration helps develop awareness of roles and identities people have in society
- Use a variety of conventions to develop character and shape the action in ensemble drama presentations
- Identify aesthetic and technical aspects of drama works and explain how they help achieve specific purposes (e.g., write reviews assessing whether the lighting, sound, set, and costumes of a drama are used effectively to illustrate the intended message)
- Use exploration, input, and reflection to develop, revise, and refine plans for integrated art works/productions, individually and/or collaboratively
- Select and apply a combination of key elements and principles from more than one arts discipline when creating and presenting integrated art works/productions
- Identify and describe the elements and principles used to create integrated art works and describe the methods used to combine these elements and principles into unified art works
- Identify and explain the various purposes that drama serves or has served in diverse communities and cultures from the present and past (e.g., to provide entertainment; to highlight or interpret religious or ethical beliefs, as in Aboriginal cultures; to celebrate or commemorate key traditions or historical events of a culture or country)

- Communicate an understanding of the ability of the arts to inform, instruct and contribute to social change (e.g., research art works that communicate a specific message, and describe their effect; explore and describe the purpose of art created for a specific audience; describe the intention and techniques of drama such as Theatre of the Oppressed; research and report on protest songs from different eras)

HUMANITIES

Grade 10

Civics & Citizenship

- Propose different courses of action that could be used to address a civic issue (e.g., a public awareness campaign, a plan for local action, a campaign to pressure for political action), and assess their merits.

Grade 11

Introduction to Anthropology, Psychology, and Sociology

- Describe ways in which social structures (e.g., economy, family, class, gender, race) affect individual and group behaviour

Dynamics of Human Relationships

- Identify strategies for dealing with significant change and/or loss in a relationship (e.g., seeking relationship and/or grief counselling, taking time to grieve, confiding in friends, learning acceptance, believing in oneself, developing self-reliance)

Origins and Citizenship: The History of a Canadian Ethnic Group

- Formulate different types of questions to guide investigations into issues, events, and/or developments relevant to the history of the selected ethnic group (e.g., factual questions: What were the key factors that led to the emigration of this ethnic group?; comparative questions: What are the main similarities and differences between the current and historical experience of this ethnic group in Canada?; causal questions: What impact has institutionalized racism had on this ethnic community in Canada?)
- Explain the role of the denial of civil, human, and/or citizenship rights in people's decisions to emigrate
- Describe instances of the forced migration of groups in different regions and periods of history (e.g., the African slave trade)

- Select and organize relevant evidence and information on aspects of the history of the selected ethnic group from a variety of primary and secondary sources (e.g., primary: artefacts or architecture from the region or country of origin, art work from the time, autobiographies, diaries, letters, maps, oral histories, period newspapers, photographs, political cartoons; secondary: books and/or articles from the library, classroom textbooks, documentaries or other films, current newspapers, websites), ensuring that their sources reflect different perspectives

Philosophy: The Big Questions

- Explain the relevance of some of the big questions of philosophy to their own experiences in everyday life (e.g. about social responsibility in decisions to engage in social action, about the existence of a supreme being and their approach to religion)

World Religions and Belief Traditions: Perspectives, Issues, and Challenges

- Explain the connection between religions/belief traditions and efforts to understand existence and the nature of reality (e.g., belief as a way of understanding destiny, the natural world, and ultimate reality)
- Explain the ways in which individual human needs (e.g., for community, meaning and purpose, psychological or emotional security) can be addressed through religions and belief traditions
- Explain the ways in which community needs (e.g., for commemoration, continuity, institutions, order, organization) can be met through religions and belief traditions

Grade 12

Challenge and Change in Society

- Explain various means of creating social change (e.g., direct action, protest, advocacy, community organization, revolution, political activism)

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Preshow (Grades 7-12)

1. What are your expectations when going to see a piece of theatre? Why does the medium interest you? If theatre hasn't interested you in the past, why not?
2. Which pieces of theatre have you seen that resonated with you? Which aspects of it/them did you find the most compelling and why?
3. Does the writing style and language of a play affect how little or how strongly you engage with the story? Explain your answer.

4. *The Adventures of a Black Girl in Search of God* is multidisciplinary theatre, meaning that it utilizes multiple forms of storytelling including spoken text, choreographed movement, and singing. Have you seen other pieces of multidisciplinary theatre? If so, how did you feel about experiencing several art forms combined into in one work?
5. How much do you know about the history of people of African descent who settled in Canada in the 1800s? Share what you are aware of so far.
6. Have you witnessed examples of racial or cultural defamation? Give examples.
7. As a student in 2015, what is your view on contemporary race relations?

Postshow (Grades 9 & 10)

1. Which character in the piece resonated with you the most and why?
2. Did the images onstage support the text, and how did the show's production design help to effectively relay the story? Explain your answer.
3. Which scene in the play was your favourite? Which was your least favourite? Why?
4. *The Adventures of a Black Girl in Search of God* uses the concept of a "living set". How significant an aspect of the performance was that for you? How did it make you feel to see human movement create much of the world of the show?
5. Have your perceptions of cultural/racial defamation changed after seeing the play? Explain your answer.
6. Do you think there is a difference between justice and law? Was Abendigo's group's crusade right, wrong, or both? Explain your answer.

Grades 11 & 12 (in addition to the previous five questions)

1. How has the play impacted your understanding of the history of African people in Canada?
2. How can creating or experiencing theatre help in processing death and grief? Explain your answer.
3. Had the set been created by objects rather than moving people, how do you think your experience of the play would have been different?
4. Which moment in the play, and which aspect of the production, left the biggest impression on you? Explain your answer.
5. In the play, Rainey is experiencing confusion with regards to her spiritual beliefs. Have you ever experienced similar confusion while trying to understand the world? Explain your answer.
6. Do you think that theatre can change the world? Why or why not?

SUGGESTED EXERCISES

Grades 9 & 10

1. Ask students to write a maximum 200-word synopsis of *The Adventures of a Black Girl in Search of God*. If these synopses were the only information that someone would ever have about the play, what would be the most important things to include?

2. In groups, have students play the role of the Chorus and recreate some of the “living set” elements of the play. (e.g. trees, water)
3. Ask students to write a monologue for one of the supporting characters. If Ivy, Bert, Darese or Girlene had the chance to speak more about their choice to participate in Abendigo's crusade , what might they say?
4. Have students volunteer to perform their monologues for the class.

Grades 11 & 12

5. Ask students to individually write, and then share in pairs, reviews of the play with the class as if critics on a “Siskel & Ebert”-type theatre review show. Their reviews must include commentary on the script, performances, design and overall impressions.
6. Ask students to write letters from the perspective of one character to another character. What are the innermost thoughts and feelings of that character? What do they need to say to the other person and why?
7. Have each student adopt the role of either an interviewer or a character in *The Adventures of a Black Girl in Search of God*. Have the students work in pairs, one interviewer and one character per pair. Ask each pair to write the interview questions together, and then conduct the interview in front of the class. Challenge them to craft questions that will elicit more than short factual responses or simplistic “yes” or “no” answers.
8. Write a final monologue for Abendigo, OR a final dialogue between Abendigo and Rainey. Had Abendigo lived one more day, what thoughts do you think he would have chosen to share? What would he and Rainey have chosen to share with each other?

RESOURCES

For more historical background:

[The Coloured Corps: African Canadians in the War of 1812](#)

[Their Blood Is There, and They Can't Throw It Out": Honouring Black Canadian Geographies](#)

[The Colored Corps: 1812-1815](#)

[Ontario Black History Society – Negro Creek Road](#)

[Street Map of Negro Creek Road](#)

For assistance with bereavement:

[Programs To Help With Grief and Loss](#)

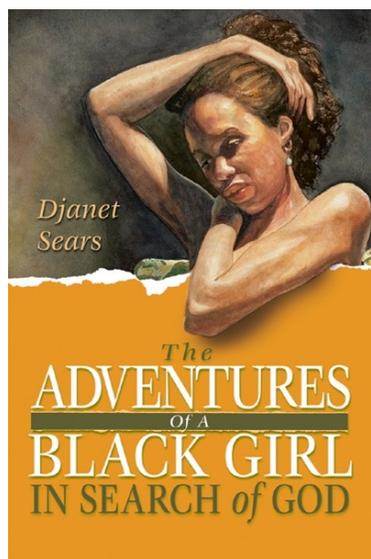
[Bereaved Families of Ontario](#)

IMAGES

Images of Black Lawn Jockeys and Watermelon Boys

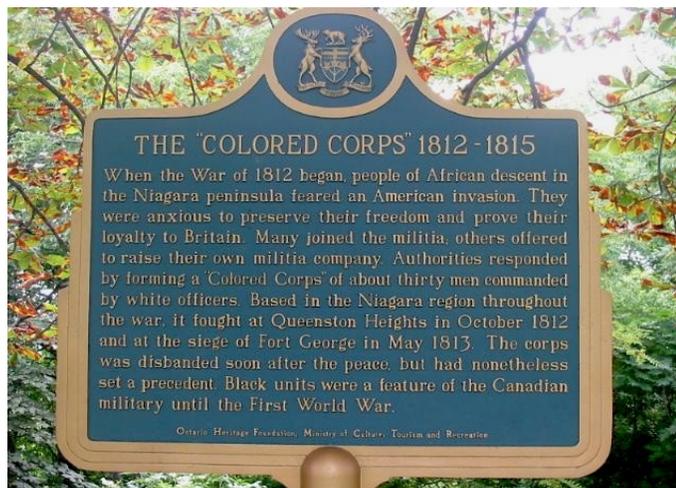
1. Cover image of the play
2. The Colored Corps plaque in Queenston, Ontario
3. Painting: "Runchev's Coloured Corps" by Cameron Porteous
4. Photo of Howard Sheffield, resident of Negro Creek; Toronto Star, photo by Ted Shaw

1.



"Adventures" book cover.

2.



The Colored Corps plaque in Queenston, Ontario

3.



Runchev's Coloured Corps by Cameron Porteous

4.

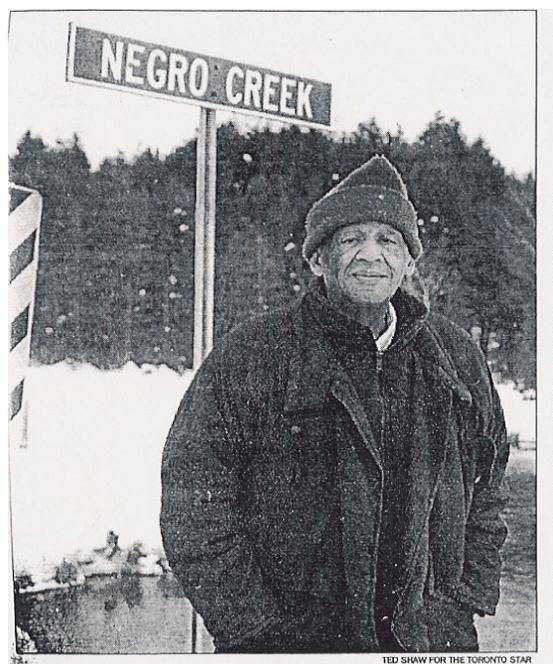


Photo by Ted Shaw, Toronto Star

National Youth and Education Trust

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Should you have any questions or comments about this guide, please contact

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