

ONCE in a BLUE MOON



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EDUCATORS' GUIDE

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ABOUT THE BOOK

James Henry used to be brave. He hasn't been the same since that fateful night at the lighthouse when his ma went searching for Dog. Now months later, he feels as small as the space between the numbers on a watch, nervous day and night, barely able to go outside. Even words have a hard time leaving his mouth. The only person he speaks to is Hattie, his courageous twin sister, who fiercely protects him, especially from bullies.

James Henry wants nothing more than to be brave again. However, finding his voice will mean confronting the truth about what happened at the lighthouse—a step James Henry isn't sure he can take. Until a blue moon is forecast, and as Gran has said, everything is possible under a rare blue moon. . . .

A beautiful and uplifting novel in verse about family, friendship, and journeys that take us far from home and back again, renewed and more courageous.



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THEMES:

African American Interest, Disabilities & Illness, Family & Relationships, Forgiveness, Historical Fiction



SHARON G. FLAKE is the author of *The Skin I'm In*, which has sold over a million copies worldwide and has been translated into numerous languages. Since its publication, Flake has authored over a dozen books, winning multiple Coretta Scott King Honors, ALA Notable and Top Ten Recommended Books citations, and an NAACP Image Award nomination, among many accolades. She has been writing books from her home (and Panera's) for over twenty years.



PRE-READING ACTIVITIES

1. Look at the cover of the book. What do you notice? What can you guess about the story? Research the origins and meaning of the saying “once in a blue moon.” Are your guesses connected to the phrase?

2. Research Jim Crow laws. What were the lunch counter protests? In what ways did these laws restrict and hinder the movements of Black people? Check out the book *Sit-In: How Four Friends Stood Up by Sitting Down* written by Andrea Davis Pinkney and illustrated by Brian Pinkney.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Retell the story using the words **beginning**, **middle**, and **end**. Give a brief overview of the plot of the story.

2. The narrator, James Henry, doesn't like to leave the house. Reread the poem “MY CONDITION.” (p. 5)

Sometimes
I feel as small as a flea
as little as the space between
the numbers on a watch.
It makes living hard
staying inside easier than leaving the house.

Why does James Henry feel so small? Why do you think he's afraid to leave the house?

3. Describe the relationship between James Henry and his twin sister, Hattie. What are some moments in the story that define their relationship? Where are they living this summer?

4. Reflect on and respond to the following excerpt. (p. 79)

Ma's antidote was education.
Because no matter how you spoke or looked
where you lived
what you had or didn't have
getting an education and learning was your
birthright
as much as breathing air, she said.

5. The blue moon is coming. What is special about this event according to Gran and Hattie? Why is it called the “wishing moon”? What does Hattie believe they need to do to help “be rid of [James Henry's] condition” during the blue moon? (p. 9)

6. Describe James Henry and Hattie's mother. What was her profession? Give examples of ways in which she inspired her students. See “UP A TREE WITH MA” for a start. (p. 66)

7. When Hattie Mae refused to step aside for a white man while in town, why did Lottie Jean decide to intervene? What would you have done if you were in that situation?

8. What is a lighthouse? What is its purpose? Why was it a special place for James Henry and Hattie Mae's mother?

9. What happens to James Henry and Hattie Mae's mother at the lighthouse? In what ways does James Henry manifest his grief and the trauma from the fateful event? Why is it hard for him to process his grief and trauma? Who or what does he turn to?

10. Flake presents this narrative as a novel in verse. Why does this format work for this story?

11. Hattie keeps and trains birds. How do they save lives? What do these birds symbolize? Why do you think they have such a profound connection to her?



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS (CONTINUED)

12. James Henry is a big fan of a sci-fi radio show about a character called Buck Rogers, a space adventurer. Listen to vintage episodes here:

www.openculture.com/2013/11/hear-vintage-episodes-of-buck-rogers-the-sci-fi-radio-show-that-first-aired-on-this-day-in-1932.html

- Why do you think Buck Rogers is James Henry's favorite character?
- In what ways did this radio show inspire James Henry's imagination while playing on the roof with Hattie? See the "CAPTAIN ME" poem. (p. 20)
- What is the contest that James Henry wants to win?
- Describe how this poem foreshadows later events. Reread the poem "FOR THE CHILDREN" (p. 187) for additional insight.
- Give an example of a time when James Henry was in charge and it gave him courage to complete a task or get out of a situation.

13. In "Captains AIN'T AFRAID," (p. 25) James Henry says to Hattie,

"Up here we can drink from any fountain. Sit in any seat we want." What does this statement demonstrate about the racial climate in North Carolina?

14. What happens to Lottie, James Henry, and Hattie Mae when they go to town? By whom are they chased into Reign Forest? Why? Later they discover the Baker brothers. What happened to them? How was James Henry brave and a hero?

15. Reflect on and respond to the following:

- a. "Did you know you can't outrun bad luck?"
- b. "Come if you're coming."



POST-READING ACTIVITIES

1. Create a visual representation of a theme from *Once in a Blue Moon*. Write a paragraph explaining the visual representation, including the media used.

2. Write a letter from Hattie Mae to James Henry. How is she doing in school? What updates do you think she would share with her twin brother?

3. Read the author's note at the end of the book. Flake was inspired by the stories her family told "around [her] kitchen table many a day." Visit or connect with elders in your family or those you consider to be family. Record them telling you about a significant moment or memory. How did it feel to witness this story? Share your reflection.

This guide was written by Dr. Shanecia P. Clark, who teaches courses in children's and young adult literature at Salisbury University.



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