

The Residue Years

By Mitchell S. Jackson

These discussion questions are designed to enhance your group's conversation about *The Residue Years*, a gritty, lyrical novel about a family's entanglement with Portland's underground drug world.

About this book

Shawn "Champ" Thomas has one goal: to buy back the house on Portland's Sixth Street where his family found brief happiness. Champ, now in his senior year of college, is dealing crack cocaine in order to save up for his dream. But two new expenses set him back: his mother, Grace, is fresh out of rehab and needs help getting back on her feet. And Champ's girlfriend, Kim, is pregnant, and Champ wants a better life for his growing family.

Grace is surrounded by temptation, but she is determined to stay clean and make her family proud. But the father of her two younger sons, Big Ken, sues for full custody, and Grace's world starts to fall apart. As she yields to the temporary escape of drugs, Grace inadvertently takes Champ down with her.

For discussion

1. Discuss the prologue of *The Residue Years*, which introduces Grace as she visits her three-year-old granddaughter, and then her son in jail. How does this prologue set the scene for the chapters to come, which take place before Princess's birth? How does the knowledge that Champ ends up in jail affect your impressions throughout the novel?
2. *The Residue Years* switches between Champ and Grace's perspectives. How does this alternating point of view shape how the story develops? How do the mother and son's narrating voices resemble each other, and how do they differ?
3. According to Grace, "I've been an expert at reading people . . . I've also been an expert at other things, the worst of which is lying—to others, to myself" (16). How does Grace's intuition—her "first mind," as Mama Liza calls it—help her? When is she guilty of lying to herself and others? Does Champ seem to share Grace's gift of intuition? Why or why not?
4. Champ tells Kim, "I refuse to be one of these fools anonymous everywhere but inside their head" (253). Discuss Champ's ambition to make a name for himself. How do his experiences on the basketball court and on the streets influence his ambition? What are the risks and consequences of his determination to dream big?
5. Discuss Champ's determination to buy the house on Sixth Street, where he grew up with Mama Liza and Bubba. Why is Champ so fixated on the house, and how does his dream blind him to other options? What sacrifices is Champ willing to make in order to get the house back?

6. According to Champ, “Life has options! This is what they preached to us in my old youth program, which I tell my bellicose brothers whenever they’ll listen, which ain’t if ever often enough” (23). What life choices does Champ currently face, and to what extent are his options limited by his family, his past, and his environment?
7. Consider the changing landscape of Northeast Portland, where *The Residue Years* takes place. How has gentrification changed the look and feel of these streets? What are some of the positive and negatives aspects of the area’s evolution, according to Grace and Champ?
8. *The Residue Years* features several official documents, from a drug program contract to a custody court summons. How do these documents add to the realism of the book?
9. Grace told Champ after his first heartbreak, “Son, if you’re going to risk your love, save all the space you can for hurt” (121). Champ later wonders, “What happens when that first love warns you to save room for hurt and spends half your life applying the most harm?” (233). Discuss Grace’s approach to love, and consider how it affects her son. What habits of love, good and bad, has Champ learned from his mother, his “first love”?
10. Discuss the relationship between Grace and her father, Andrew. What past traumas does Grace hold against Andrew? How does their relationship begin to heal, by the end of the novel?
11. Mister tells Champ, “Most of us, if we’re lucky, we see a few seconds of the high life. And the rest are the residue years” (182). Which moments are the “high life” for Champ, and which are the “residue years” that follow? Why do you think the novel is titled *The Residue Years*?
12. Grace tells her three sons during their hike to Multnomah Falls, “You, me, us—we can’t ever get trapped by who we were. Who we were is not who we are” (285). How does the ending of the novel reinforce or contradict Grace’s words? How does Grace’s past catch up with her? Does her past define her identity? Why or why not?
13. At the end of *The Residue Years*, Champ refuses to leave his mother’s side as they are arrested together for drugs. What are the consequences of Champ’s loyalty to his mother? How does Grace deal with her son’s downfall?
14. Mitchell S. Jackson, like Champ, grew up in Portland and attended Portland State University after his basketball dreams evaporated. In what ways does this novel feel autobiographical? Jackson also writes and publishes poetry. Choose a passage of *The Residue Years* that feels particularly lyrical, and discuss Jackson’s poetic use of language.

Suggested reading

Jesmyn Ward, *Salvage the Bones* and *Men We Reaped*; Junot Díaz, *This Is How You Lose Her*; John Edgar Wideman, *Brothers and Keepers*; Doug Merlino, *The Hustle: One Team and Ten*

Lives in Black and White; Edward P. Jones, *Lost in the City*; Denis Johnson, *Jesus' Son*; Teju Cole, *Open City*; Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *Americanah*; Paul Beatty, *Slumberland*

Mitchell S. Jackson was born and raised in Portland, Oregon. He holds a master's in writing from Portland State University and an M.F.A. from New York University. He teaches writing at NYU, Medgar Evers College, and John Jay College. He also works as a journalist, writing about entertainment and sports for *Vibe*, the *Source*, and various other publications. His fiction and poetry have appeared in literary journals, and he is a winner of the Hurston Wright Award for College Writers and a fellowship from the Center For Fiction. He lives in Brooklyn, New York. His website is www.mitchellsjackson.com.