

Ghost Train Short Guide

Ghost Train by Jess Mowry

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Overview

Compared to his hard-hitting tales about inner-city street life, *Ghost Train* is a lighter book, depicting realistic characters involved in a mysterious haunting. From his first night in his new home, Remi Du Mont is haunted by a railroad train that chugs straight toward his window and then veers sharply into a curve toward a shipyard that does not exist during the day. He and his new friend Niya Bedford find themselves with a mystery to solve—a mystery that dates back to World War II and to two men who hitched a ride on a train one night, long ago.

About the Author

Much of Jess Mowry's life is still a mystery, even though he has attracted the attention of Hollywood and the literary community. One published account of his life says that he was born in Oakland, California, but the publishers of his novel *Way Past Cool*, Farrar Straus Giroux, claim he was born in Mississippi. In any case, both sources list his birth on March 27, 1960.

Mowry grew up in Oakland, where he was raised by his father.

Educated only through the eighth grade, he spent much of his teen-age life on the streets of Oakland, even working briefly as a bodyguard for a drug dealer. As an adult, he has worked as a garbage hauler and yard cleaner. A strong concern for the welfare of youngsters led him to volunteer to work with children's organizations, bringing with him the experience of once being a youth on the streets of Oakland.

In 1988, using money he earned by recycling aluminum cans retrieved from dumpsters, Mowry purchased a used typewriter for eight dollars and began writing stories about early adolescent gang members living in the grittier parts of Oakland. These stories became *Rats in the Trees*, which won the PEN Oakland/Josephine Miles Award in 1990. At the time these stories were published, Mowry called a bus his home.

With the publication of *Way Past Cool*, he went from struggling for publication to the New York Times best-seller lists, receiving praise for his realistic account of the lives of early adolescents in the toughest parts of Oakland. In *Way Past Cool*, he demonstrated his mastery of the dialect of the young people who were his subjects and his ability to present their lives without sentimentality. Its sharp portrayal of unpleasant lives with unflinching candor has resulted in the novel often being placed in the adult section of libraries rather than the young adult section. *Way Past Cool* attracted the interest of motion picture producers, but Mowry soon earned the reputation of being hardnosed about how his work would be presented. The author turned down large offers of money in fear that the subject matter of his work would be compromised by Hollywood producers searching for a good story. It took until 1998 for *Way Past Cool* to be made into a motion picture. His insistence that the young people of his fiction be honestly presented, even to the point of rejecting money that would make his life considerably more comfortable, has probably made a permanent imprint on the public perception of his persona—as a selfless man more committed to children than to himself.

Since the publication and attention surrounding *Way Past Cool*, Mowry has shown himself to be more than a one-topic writer.

For instance, although still true to the real lives of its teenage protagonists, *Ghost Train* is a very sentimental, fast-paced adventure that includes elements of mystery. It shows Mowry's versatile talents for creating many gripping tales.



Setting

The events of *Ghost Train* take place in and around a three-story house near railroad tracks and an old scrap yard that was once a shipyard for building liberty ships during World War II. The house, old and somewhat decayed, is owned by an elderly woman who lives on one floor while renting out the other two floors. Remi lives on the second floor, delighted to have a room of his own for the first time. The old house connects the past and the present, hiding within its walls clues to an old mystery about a missing soldier and representing both the evils and the hopes of past and present.

Mowry uses the house in a very clever, subtle way. The ghost train that haunts it is an obvious link to the past, showing how an old evil can persist into the present. This is emphasized by Mrs. Marcus, the bitter old landlady who lost her husband and son during World War II, who has lived more than fifty years without knowing what really happened to her son. Unbeknownst to her, the ghost train has the answer. More subtly, the house links past social evils with present ones. The house was home during World War II to blacks who came to Oakland, California, for jobs at the shipyard, men and women who endured the indignities of racism. Their experiences are echoed in Remi and Niya, who live in segregated conditions and on dangerous streets.

Yet, there is hope in the house. The blacks who came to live in the old house brought with them aspirations for better lives, for jobs that would pay for a better life for their families. Remi's family brings a similar hope, with Remi's father being able to earn an income that could buy his family comforts beyond three square meals a day. In their cooperation in solving the mystery of the ghost train, Remi and Niya also find hope of their own, that justice for an almost forgotten black man is possible and that they themselves can grow out of an environment of fear and poverty through their own intelligence and initiative.

Social Sensitivity

Mowry is very interested in giving voice to the concerns of the young people of Oakland, trying to call society's attention to their lives. Thus, his fiction up to this novel has always included issues of poverty, education, and race. *Ghost Train* deals with these issues, but the mystery of the ghost train holds center stage, with the social issues providing background and enriching the experiences of Remi and Niya.

Concerned as he is with depicting his characters' lives honestly, he presents their views, language, and behavior realistically—an honored tradition in American literature dating back to the days of Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884; please see separate entry). Some of this realism may be discomfiting, although familiar to young audiences. For instance, Remi and Niya quickly develop a physical interest in each other, and they talk frankly about breasts, periods, and Remi's still boyish body. They make jokes about their sexual interest, and they tentatively discuss their still emerging sexual interests. Many young readers are likely to recognize the sexual concerns as similar to their own; other readers may be uncomfortable with ones so young being so interested in each other's bodies. There is nothing tasteless about Remi and Niya's physical interests—in fact, the presentation is charming as two youngsters try to understand their growing maturity.

Although none of the novel's characters speaks in a string of profanities, the language is sometimes rough. The coarseness of the language is typical for many young adults and should not surprise the novel's audience. Perhaps more worrisome is the one-time use of the word "nigger," rightly despised for its demeaning connotations. In the case of *Ghost Train*, the word is used to illustrate the character of the murderer. His calling Remi and Niya "little niggers" shows his racist contempt not only for their ethnic group but for the man he killed.

Literary Qualities

Ghost Train reflects Mowry's trademark concerns about the lives of young people and the social concern of race. At its best, the themes, characters, and action are fully integrated, with every event having importance in developing characters and themes.

There are occasional discordant notes such as Niya's too convenient fall as she and Remi race to get to the old house before the train does.

A notable strength of the novel is the crisp dialogue. For instance, when investigating the mystery of the ghost train seems too frightening, Niya points out, "There's a whole lotta live shit to be scared of goin' on all over 'without.' What can dead people do?" In a life where going out of doors is in itself dangerous, a ghost train should not appear to be fearsome.

Some of the dialogue is rich in the slang of the neighborhood. For instance: Niya cocked her head. "Yo. Don't take much to figure what you mean by 'incident.' This is me you talkin' to, Remi. What I sayin' is, if there's a ghost, then you gotta be talkin' 'bout a dirt nap, right? So, just spit it, boy. I'll clue ya when I'm scared."

Language such as this may be mysterious to Mowry's audience, hence the value of having Remi be an outsider. Phrases such as "dirt nap" have to be explained to him, which means they are simultaneously explained to readers. In any case, the authentic ring of Niya's speech enhances the sense of place and time, making the Oakland locale vivid.



Themes and Characters

Ghost Train opens with Remi experiencing the first visit of the loud, ominous train whose bright lamp shines through his bedroom window. The thirteen-year-old is a well-rounded figure, a realistic human being with a complex personality. He and his family have just moved to Oakland from Haiti, his father having landed a job teaching about Haitian culture and the supernatural at the University of California, Berkeley. Much of the novel concerns his adapting to American life, and Mowry uses him to carry most of the novel's complex social commentary. What seems rich to him seems poor to his American classmates—"Even the poorest-dressed boy he'd [Remi] seen would have looked like a hip-hop fashion model among the street children of Port-auPrince."

Remi's partner in Ghost Train is classmate Niya Bedford. She makes for a good partner in the novel not only because of her courage and intelligence, but because her experiences and skills complement those of Remi. Remi's precise standard English contrasts with her teenage slang, and her knowledge of life on the streets of Oakland helps him to adapt to an angry environment in which, to the eyes of someone familiar with Haitian street life, the poor youngsters seem rich.

Remi's respect for her brings out the best in Niya, especially her ability to solve problems and her courage. In turn, Niya's best qualities enhance Remi's own, pressing him to take the difficult steps necessary for solving the mystery of the ghost train. It is somewhat disappointing when she takes the cliched fall—the girl-twisting-her-ankle routine—as the train bears down on the two characters. She had outshone Remi until that moment.

The unifying theme of Ghost Train is justice, with the spirit of a murdered man calling out for discovery and a resolution of the mystery of his disappearance during World War II. Although it is Remi who first recognizes that there is a mystery underlying the manifestation of the train, it is Niya who recognizes the need for justice and demands that it be found. Her desire for justice draws in social themes and ties them to the ghost train. Bitterly cynical about how blacks like herself have been treated, Niya wonders who in the 1940s would care about a missing, perhaps even murdered, black man?

Race is an ever-present idea in Ghost Train, with Niya trying to convey to Remi the despair that comes from being ignored by society. Some of her notions about race reveal prejudices of her own. For example, the remark that "White folks can always afford to move where it's safe" is obviously untrue, revealing only her anger about her own situation. Her belief that if she were not black her life would be better colors much of the novel's dialogue and provides a powerful motivation for saving a murdered black man from the obscurity to which his skin color seems to have doomed him.

Much to the credit of Ghost Train, the social issues of race and poverty are presented with much of their true complexity.



Where Niya looks for straightforward answers, Remi contrasts by finding contradictions. Growing up in a poor country where just having clothes is difficult, he fails to understand why fashionable clothing is so important to American teens. Eating the same food as his classmates, Remi worries about getting fat on the "rich American food." To him, his Oakland neighborhood does not seem poor, because he has come from an even poorer place.

This aspect of his personality, along with his respect for Niya and his solace in reading books, helps Niya grow as a character.

She is much more open-minded at the end of the novel than she was at the beginning, partly because Remi's point of view has somewhat expanded her own. Further, his treatment of her as an equal has encouraged her to take an active role in pursuing justice—in the process giving her more selfconfidence and helping her to discover her own fortitude and courage.

For Remi, Niya serves as a guide to life in Oakland, helping him to speak the dialect of his classmates and to understand some of their customs. Just as Niya grows because of their relationship, he grows. More of a spectator than a man of action, he learns from Niya of the necessity for taking action in the pursuit of justice. He also learns of some of the subtleties of racial relations in America and to see the broader picture of the history of race relations. Thus through interacting with each other, and interacting with the novel's themes of justice and race, both characters grow, a fine achievement for any work of fiction.



Topics for Discussion

1. Is the inclusion of Remi and Niya's interest in one another's bodies appropriate for a novel for young readers? Is it realistic?
2. Why does Mowry contrast Remi's idea of poverty with that of Remi's Oakland classmates?
3. One reason Niya likes Remi is, as she says to him, "You don't figure girls are stupid." Is this a problem among people her age? If so, why? What could be done to change it?
4. Mowry includes words such as "shit" and "nigger" in Ghost Train. Are these words appropriate for readings intended for twelve and thirteen-year-olds?
5. Niya declares, "White folks can always afford to move where it's safe." Why would Niya make such blanket statements about whites?
6. How big of an issue is race in Ghost Train? Does it affect any of the action?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. What were liberty ships? Who designed them? Where were they built? What was their purpose?

Ghost Train 117 2. What railroad companies operated in Oakland during World War II? What were the engines they used? Which one of them would be the original for the one described in Ghost Train?

3. What is daily life in Haiti like for someone like Remi? Why would a poor area of Oakland seem like an improvement?

4. Ghost trains have been a popular part of American folklore since the 1800s.

What are some other stories or novels about ghost trains? How do they compare with Mowry's Ghost Train?

5. What were some of the achievements of African-American sailors during World War II?

6. Niya says that "I never knew a brutha who read books before . . . when he didn't have to." Without regards to race, how true to life is this? How big of a problem is it? What has been done to encourage reading among all young adults?

7. How dangerous is life for young people in Oakland? What are the sources of the danger? What can be done to make their lives safer?

8. In the early 1950s, segregation was declared unconstitutional. Why, then, are there still segregated neighborhoods like that in Ghost Train?

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Related Titles/Adaptations

Ghost Train stands apart from Mowry's other works published so far by incorporating ghosts into its plot. Mowry's first book *Rats in the Trees* consists of short stories about a teenage gang's life in a small area of Oakland. *Way Past Cool* (please see separate entry), Mowry's most acclaimed book, portrays the culture of a gang of young adults, with the title referring to the unruffled way the gang members are expected to face danger. *Six Out Seven* may be somewhat autobiographical, telling as it does about a young African American who flees Mississippi only to find racism in Oakland. *Babylon Boyz* tells of young adults discovering a cache of cocaine and of their struggle to decide whether to sell it and use the money to better their lives or to destroy it so that it will not further poison a neighborhood already hurt by drug abuse. In these books, plot is seldom important, with coincidences propelling events in unlikely directions, but the characterization is masterful—sometimes stunning in its acuteness—and the issues are real ones that real-life youngsters must deal with everyday.



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