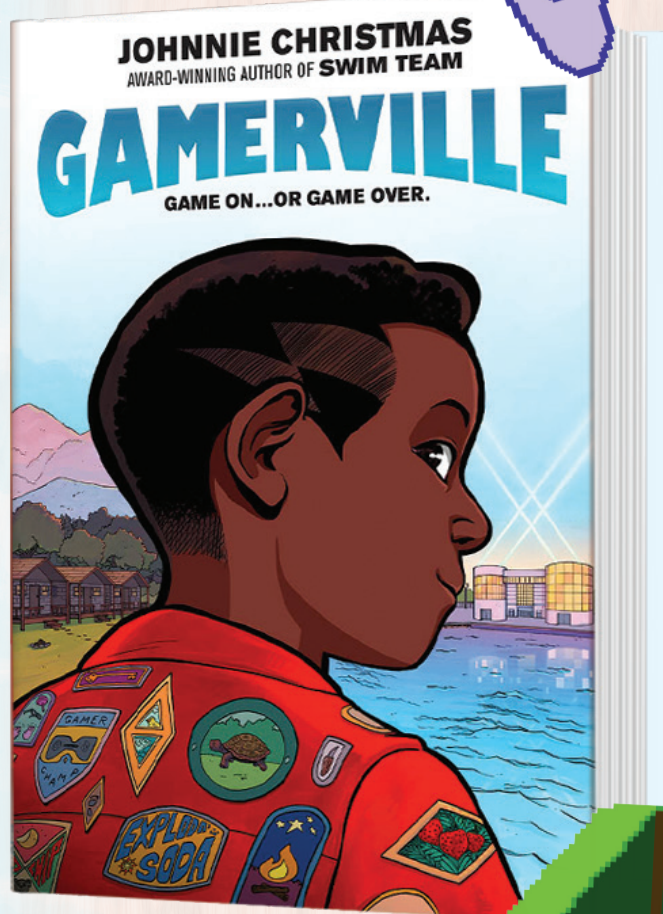


JOHNNIE CHRISTMAS

AUTHOR STUDY



PRAISE FOR SWIM TEAM

Coretta Scott King
Illustrator Honor

Harvey Award Best
Children's or Young
Adult Book Nominee

National Book Award Longlist

Kirkus Best Book of the Year

BCALA Graphic Novel Winner

Eisner Award Best
Publication for Kids
Nominee

Notable Children's
Books in the Language
Arts Award Book

Named to over 25 state award lists!



About Johnnie Christmas

Johnnie Christmas is a #1 New York Times bestselling graphic novelist and author-illustrator of the critically acclaimed middle grade graphic novel *Swim Team*, which was longlisted for the National Book Award, was a Coretta Scott King Honor Book for Illustration, was named a *Kirkus Reviews* Best Book of 2022, and received a Jane Addams Book Award Honor. He calls Vancouver, British Columbia, his home.



Common Themes in Johnnie Christmas's Work

- **Friendship.** The joys, frustrations, and complexities of making friends, losing friends, and what happens when friends change.
- **Community.** The powerful connection and support offered by people who share histories, identities, cultures, passions, and spaces.
- **Self-Affirmation.** A character's realization and recognition of their value as a distinct, unique individual with inherent worth and power.
- **Underdog Competitors.** The endearing thrill of a character with little or no chance of winning a contest who chooses to try their best and hope their hardest anyway.
- **Anxiety.** A character's uneasy or helpless feeling when navigating uncertainty or taking risks, the result of which, might not be positive.
- **Perseverance.** A character's continued effort to do something or achieve a goal despite barriers, opposition, errors, or failure.
- **Navigating Change.** The exciting, uncertain, uncomfortable, intriguing, infuriating, scary, or even painful process of a character shifting from one state of existence or understanding to another.
- **Same Skills, New Challenges.** A character finds that their established abilities, knowledge, and ingenuity, though out of their typical context, can help them solve a new problem or succeed in new circumstances.
- **Past Meets the Present.** Characters may put their own spin on traditions, apply elders' knowledge from past struggles and triumphs to a current situation, or cope with and disrupt the legacies of generational choices, prejudice, or harm.

Classroom Activities

Graphic Novel Terminology

Take time to co-build a shared vocabulary of graphic novel terms and concepts with the class. Several graphic novel teaching resources are included in this guide, but some basics to include in your shared vocabulary include:

Storytelling components like **cover**, **panel**, **gutter**, **frame**, **bleed**, **caption**, **speech bubble**, **thought bubble**, **special effects symbols** (movement, sound, etc), and image composition components like **foreground**, **background**, **midground**, **figures**, **color**, **perspective**, **visual weight**.

Book Tour and K-W-L Discussion

Before reading *Swim Team* and *Gamerville*, allow the class to take a self-guided tour of the exterior. Have students share what they notice about the front and back covers, the flap copy, the title, and the art. Take notes as they share. Based on what they notice, discuss with the students what they think the book might be about and why. Record their thoughts and what they know about the book from their “tour.” Next, move the discussion to what the students don’t yet know and are wondering about. Record what they want to know or expect to learn by reading the book (some of these responses might be posed as questions).

As students read, you can return to these responses, use them to investigate the text, and add to them: what do students now know and wonder about after chapter 1, and so on. After reading, the class can discuss which of their questions the novel answered (what they learned) and which it didn’t (what they interpreted).

Graphic Novel Resources

Teaching with Graphic Novels

The Graphic Novel Classroom by Maureen Bakis

Building Literacy Connections with Graphic Novels
edited by James Bucky Carter

*Teaching with Graphic Novels: Fun and Engaging
Strategies to Improve Reading and Critical Thinking in
Every Classroom* by Tim Smyth

*Teaching Visual Literacy: Using Comic Books, Graphic
Novels, Anime, Cartoons, and More to Develop
Comprehension and Thinking Skills* by Nancy Frey and
Douglas Fisher

*Wham! Teaching with Graphic Novels Across the
Curriculum* by William G. Brozo, Gary Moorman, and
Carla K. Meyer

Visual Storytelling

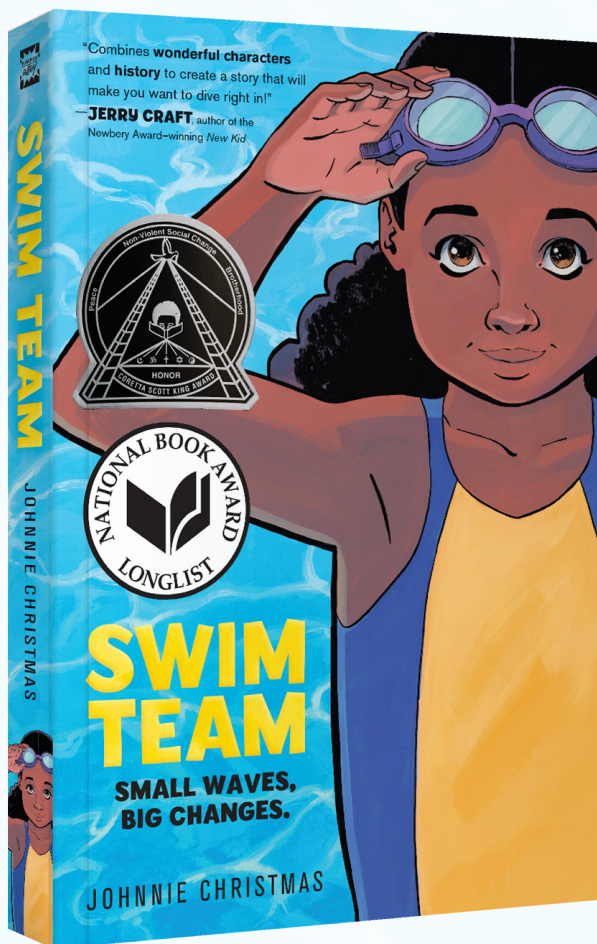
Picture This: How Pictures Work by Molly Bang

Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art by Scott McCloud

Graphic Storytelling and Visual Narrative by Will Eisner

*Framed Ink: Drawing and Composition for Visual
Storytellers* by Marcos Mateu-Mestre





About the Book

Bree's never met a puzzle she couldn't solve. Even moving a thousand miles and navigating being the new kid at her middle school doesn't faze her. That is until she finds herself in the daunting (and required!) elective of Swim 101. Like any puzzle master, Bree steadily figures it out with patience, perseverance, and the help of her community, but no sooner is her fear of the water behind her than another impossible challenge arises: win the regional swim competition or lose the swim team for good. It's sink or swim against the most elite school rivals, and if Bree can't handle the pressure, she may take her whole team down with her.

Pre-Reading Activities

Put students in pairs or groups of three, and have them respond to the following prompt:

Why do you think so many people enjoy swimming? Humans aren't exactly built for the water, so what makes swimming a fun activity for so many?

Give each student one minute to jot down ideas. Have the groups briefly share their ideas with the class.

Have students reflect on and jot down responses to the following prompt:

Think of a time you tried to do something new (riding a bike, making a cake, juggling, painting, etc.) and it didn't go quite right. How did you feel before you tried it? How did you feel after it didn't go to plan? How did you decide what to do next?

Discussion Questions

1. The title of this book seems pretty straightforward, but let's look closer. Describe the meaning(s) of "swim," "team," and "swim team" for this novel. Which aspects of the story are related to "swim" and which are related to "team?" Other than the competitions, how do the concepts of "swim" and "team" overlap in the story for different characters?
2. On their way to Florida, Bree's dad explains the butterfly effect, saying "It's a process that explains how little changes can have a big effect." Describe some of the little changes and big effects in Bree's story.
3. "Remember education is the one thing no one can take away from you." What does Bree's dad mean when he says this? Do you agree with him? What examples of education (that no one can take away) do you see in this story?
4. Bree's dad tells her to apply her great puzzle-solving skills and determination to the challenge of swimming. What do you think of his advice? How is learning to swim the same as or different than solving puzzles for Bree?
5. Discuss Bree's anxiety bubbles. Why do they appear the way they do in the panels? Do they come from inside Bree or from her outside world? What effect do they have on the story and how do they change as the story progresses?
6. Describe the differences between Enith Brigitha and Holyoke Prep's coaching. Which do you think is more successful? Why?
7. Why does Bree initially choose to cut swim class instead of talking to her teacher?
8. What does it take for a group of people to become a team? How do the Mighty Manatees come to connect as a team?

Discussion Questions

9. In your own words, describe how segregation and lack of access to pools for Black communities eventually turned into the stereotype that Black people are inherently bad at swimming. How do external circumstances lead to internal assumptions?
10. Pick three characters that aren't Bree. What does swimming mean to each of them? What does their relationship to swimming tell you about each of them as a character?
11. Why tell this story as a graphic novel? What does the interaction of text and image bring to this particular story?
12. Past and present intertwine throughout the novel: find some examples of where this happens. What's happening in the story during these moments? How do the panels convey movement between past and present? How does this slippage of time shape your reading?

Extension Activities

A Scavenger Hunt

Give the students some time to review the pre-reading activity and conduct a refresher discussion on the ways that images communicate visual information. Students can then split into groups for a *panel scavenger hunt*! You can make a list of any visual items you want to emphasize. Try having students find panels that convey happiness, fear, sadness, excitement, suspense, or love.

Lights, Camera, Trailer!

Graphic novels have a lot in common with films. Have students work together in large groups, or as a class, to create a 2–3 minute trailer for *Swim Team*. Watch a few graphic novel trailers as inspiration and allow students to choose/vote between live-action, animated, still-shot, or other filming methods (consider what your school resources best support). Students can contribute to scripting, storyboarding, props, voice-over, acting, camerawork, or editing. (Note: you can enhance this kind of project and any graphic novel unit with visual literacy instruction—consider collaborating with your school/local librarians and art colleagues.)

Swimming Science

Early in the novel, swimming is a drag for Bree for several reasons, including physics! Help students explore the hydrodynamics at work when swimming with a drag force experiment. Access to a swimming pool is great but not required for the fun. Take two identical toy motorboats and cover one with loose-fitting T-shirt material and the other with tight-fitting swimsuit material. Race the boats and compare their respective times to see the impact of drag force in action (and also understand why athletes don't swim in T-shirts!).

A Tale of Two Topics

Give students two research track options:

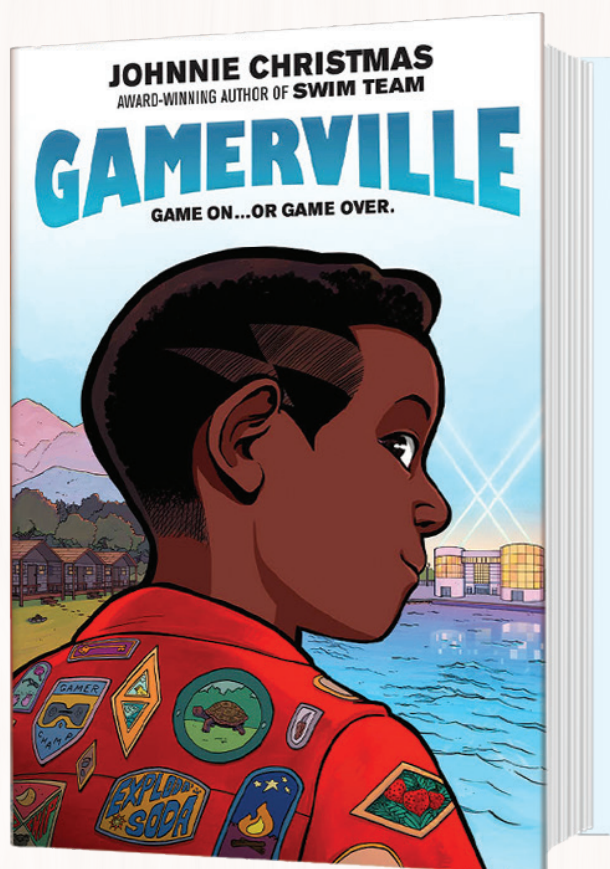
- Research and write a report on segregation in public pools or other public spaces like libraries or parks.
- Research and write a profile of a Black swim star.

Give students a word minimum for their write-ups, image-use options or requirements, and bibliography parameters such as minimum number of sources and source types that must be included or excluded. Encouraging or requiring students to meet with their librarian for guidance or asking a librarian to provide a research instruction session can help set students up for success.

Puzzle It Out

Working in groups or individually, have students choose one of two options:

- Identify a theme from the novel and create a *Swim Team* crossword puzzle using the theme. You can use free online crossword-making software or build your puzzle by hand. The crossword should have at least ten Across clues and ten Down clues.
- Choose a moment from the story and create an image that represents it. Don't copy a panel or art directly from the book. Glue/lacquer your image to a piece of cardboard, draw a grid and outline jigsaw pieces on the back of the cardboard, and cut out the pieces to make a jigsaw puzzle from your image.



About the Book

Max wants nothing more than to play his favorite video game. While other people might need water, sleep, and friends, Max just needs caffeine, an occasional sugar rush, and a character he can play solo right into the Gamerville championships. So when his worried parents send him to a summer camp with fresh air, sunshine, and no electronics allowed, Max is desperate to escape. But with sprawling woods, way too many hills, and watchful counselors, escape from Camp Reset is easier said than done. Max will have to play along, connecting with other campers and putting all his gamer strategy skills to work if he's going to make it out in time to compete, but there's one obstacle he's not at all prepared for: he might just like it here.

Pre-Reading Activities

Put students in pairs or groups of three, and have them respond to the following prompt:

What comes to mind when you think about video games? How does our mainstream media talk about them? What are some of the story-based games you play, video or otherwise? What are they about and what do you like about them?

Give each student one minute to jot down ideas. Have the groups briefly share their ideas with the class.

Have students reflect on and jot down responses to the following prompt:

What does balance look like between the things we enjoy and the things we need? Jot down a situation in which what a person enjoys and what a person needs are different (and maybe even opposite) things. Why are both things important?

Discussion Questions

1. This graphic novel has some interesting connections with *Where the Wild Things Are*. Take a few minutes to (re)read the picture book and discuss the connections with *Gamerville* you find in both the text and the images. How do these connections impact your reading of the narrative and main characters in *Gamerville*?
2. What do you think about Max's parents' decision to send him to camp without asking him? What's good and not-so-good about their choice?
3. At first glance, Max and Zanzi are polar opposites, but what are some important things they have in common as characters? What do they learn from each other by the end of the story?
4. Discuss Dylan's pursuit of forgiveness. He doesn't like the person he was becoming online and in real life and wants to improve himself. What do you think about his strategy? In what ways does repair go beyond Dylan fixing his (self-)image?
5. What do you think of the breathing technique Zanzi shows Dylan? Consider the moments when characters become overwhelmed by negative feelings like anger or fear. Why might deep breaths and counting help de-escalate big feelings like these? Do you have a favorite technique to help you be calm?

Discussion Questions

6. Do someone's actions in a video game reflect who they are in real life? Why or why not? Consider that video games are, by definition, games and not real AND players not only choose and control their characters, they also often interact with and impact other players as part of the game.
7. Discuss the struggles that Max and Zanzi each have with friendship in the story. How are their struggles different? How are they similar? How do the two of them grow as characters (and friends) throughout the story?
8. Imagine Camp Reset and Max's experiences there could be turned into a role-playing game (RPG). Which character would you want to play and why?
9. Find some examples of when the traditional rectangle panel layout is disrupted (e.g. a single panel taking over an entire page, panels overlapping, or elements breaking out of the gutters). What's happening in these moments? How do the panel disruptions convey information and shape your reading of the scene?
10. Why tell Max's story as a graphic novel? What connections do you see between graphic novels and video games? How does the visual storytelling enhance your understanding of Max and the story?

Extension Activities

What Do You Know?

Zanzi gives us her "Guide to the Edible Forest" and Dylan and Ari have their "Guide to Repair." Both guides connect to something important for the characters and the story. Have students create a guide to share their own expertise. It should incorporate visuals and text, and students should include sources that their classmates can read to learn more about the topic (a chat with a librarian is a great help for this bit).

Who's Afraid of the Big, Bad Art

Split students into two groups: a comics and graphic novel group and a video games group. Students in each group will individually research their assigned media's history and write up their findings, including the stigma and censorship associated with their media's impact on young people. Put the students in pairs so each has a graphic novels person and a video games person, and have each pair share and discuss their research findings. Discuss as a class the overlaps in graphic novel and video game history and criticism that each pair noticed.

Make Some Noise

No video game is complete without music to set emotional tones and even provide hints to players. Have students create a score for the Calamity Bay sequence at the novel's end. Students can use existing songs and create a playlist score (those wanting to go the extra mile can edit the songs together into an audio file). Or students can compose something original with tools like Beepbox.

Gamerville 2.0

The story ends with Max receiving the sequel to the *Calamity Bay* game, so let's see what happens next. Have students work in small groups or individually to write and illustrate (digitally or by hand) a brief scene where Max and his friends from camp play *Calamity Bay 2*. Students should incorporate what they've learned about the characters' voices, motivations, strengths, and flaws, and their panels should demonstrate some of the visual storytelling they encountered in the novel.

Game Time

In groups, have students choose between the following two options:

- Choose a picture book, chapter book, or short story to adapt into a video game. Craft a pitch for the game that outlines the playable and non-playable characters, single- or multiplayer options, game levels and objectives, and ultimate goal for the game that will make someone excited to play it.
- Use the Scratch platform to build a game inspired by a character in *Gamerville*. The game doesn't need to tell the character's story, but it should have some clear connection (e.g. a game inspired by Zanzi where the player must gather edible plants while avoiding obstacles like animals or cliffs).

No matter which option students choose, everyone in the respective groups will write a brief reflection piece to describe their game-making process, what they learned, and what they'd like to explore further.

MORE PRAISE FOR *SWIM TEAM*

“This graphic novel belongs on shelves in school and libraries everywhere.”

— *School Library Journal* (starred review)

“A powerful, knowledgeable, and pressing exploration of the intersection where swimming meets Black identity. Empowerment through swimming and swim team is well-embodied in Bree, a smart, perseverant, anxious kid who readers will embrace instantly. The friendly and familiar style of Christmas’ linework pours out into some true artistry.”

— *Booklist* (starred review)

“Challenging the idea that ‘Black people aren’t good at swimming,’ this middle grade debut from Christmas (the Angel Catbird series, for adults) details segregation’s generational impact through a warmhearted story of community, Black diasporic identity, and learning, all portrayed in kinetic contemporary art.”

— *Publishers Weekly* (starred review)

“Problem-solving through perseverance and friendship is the real win in this deeply smart and inspiring story.”

— *Kirkus Reviews* (starred review)

“Questions of belonging, ability, racial justice and who gets to swim are handled with thought and care...its nuanced storytelling and visual appeal will have outsize reach and meaning beyond this age group.”

— *The New York Times*

This guide was written by Anastasia M. Collins. Stacy (she/they) is a librarian, youth literature scholar, and an anti-oppression educator. You can follow them at @DarkLiterata.