

Educator Discussion Guide

Nimona

By Noelle Stevenson

Louisiana Teen Readers' Choice Nominee 2018

Grade 9-12

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ABOUT THE BOOK

In this graphic novel, set in a monarchial kingdom where magic and science are both embraced, Ballister Blackheart is a known villain. He uses non-violent scientific methods to fight the kingdom and discredit his former friend and current nemesis, Ambrosius Goldenloin. Nimona, a teenage girl with powers to transform into any human or animal form instantly, becomes Ballister's self-appointed sidekick. Villainous in a completely different way, she is quirky, enthusiastic, and mysterious. While originally reluctant to work with Nimona, Ballister begins to enjoy her company.

The lines of good and evil are blurred when they uncover the king's evil plans. The villains work to save the kingdom's people from the king's plans and tyranny. Ballister and Nimona portray an unconditional love and trust between unlikely friends. Team work and mutual trust forms a bond that is able to bring them success. As Nimona's true identity is revealed and Ballister's relationship is restored with Amrosius, Ballister is given the chance to abandon Nimona as a monster or embrace her as a friend.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Noelle Stevenson is a comic artist from Los Angeles. She originally created *Nimona* as a web comic, later to become a graphic novel. Stevenson has been nominated for a Harvey Award and won the Slate Cartoonist Studio Prize for Best Web Comic in 2012. Stevenson is a writer on Disney's *Wander Over Yonder* and she has written for Marvel and DC Comics. She is a graduate of the Maryland Institute College of Art and currently lives in Los Angeles.

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BOOK AWARDS

School Library Journal Best Book

Publishers Weekly Best Book

Indies Choice Book of the Year

National Book Award finalist

New York Times Notable Book

Kirkus Best Book

NPR Best Book

New York Public Library Best Book

Chicago Public Library Best Book

PREREADING ACTIVITIES

Monarchy

Ask your students what type of government we have in our country. Ask them to list different types of governments in the world and in history. What are the advantages and disadvantages to these types of governments? Discuss how an absolute monarchy runs. *Merriam Webster defines it as an “undivided rule or absolute sovereignty by a single person.”* Can anyone list a country currently run by monarchy? Discuss the different types of monarchy: elective, constitutional, theocratic, hereditary, etc. Discuss what life would be like living under the authority of a king or queen.

Archetypes

Ask the class to define the word “archetype.” Have them discuss archetypal characters from fiction. How are heroes and villains classically presented? Allow students to brainstorm other kinds of archetypes (the mentor or teacher; the jester, or goofy sidekick; rulers, rogues, etc.) How do Stevenson’s characters fulfill archetypal roles? How do they break them?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How does Ambrosius fit into the archetype of a “hero?” How does he break that archetype? Do you consider him a hero or a villain?
2. What could Ambrosius have done differently in the past to save his friendship with Ballister?
3. If you were the kingdom’s villain, how would you have reacted to Nimona requesting to be your sidekick?
4. Between Ballister and Nimona, whose tactics are better at fighting the king? What are each of their talents? Discuss a time in the story when they used their individual talents together and were successful.
5. What are Ballister’s rules? What are Nimona’s? Compare and contrast.
6. Do you consider Ballister a hero or villain? Discuss your answer.
7. Why does Ballister create a potion that mimics the effects of jaderoot? Is this plan ethical? Do you think it was right or wrong? Does the end justify the means?
8. Stevenson gives her characters unusual names. Discuss these names and how they describe their characters.
9. The book reveals that Nimona is an ancient magical creature. If her story of being a child and saving a witch stuck in a well had been true, would that change the story? Why or why not? Would it change how you feel about her character?
10. After reading the Christmas Special mini comics at the end of the book, how do your feelings change about Ambrosius and his actions throughout the story?
11. Discuss the use of Stevenson’s color choices throughout the book. Different characters, locations, and memories all used different color palettes. How do these help define the characters and settings?
12. How does the imagery play into the book’s use of stereotypes? How does it portray the characters versus their true identities?
13. List and discuss the symbolism of certain animals that Nimona often transforms into. How does she use the abilities of each of these animals? What do they mean to her?
14. Discuss the changes to Nimona’s human appearance throughout the book. What do these changes symbolize?
15. Do you think the book had a happy ending? Why or why not?

16. As Nimona and Ballister grew closer, Ballister grew apart from Ambrosius. As Ballister grew closer with Ambrosius, he lost Nimona. Do you think there is a way for them all to be together? Discuss what would need to happen to make a relationship between the three of them possible.

Please Note: More information, including discussion questions about *Nimona* are available at <http://cbldf.org/2015/12/using-graphic-novels-in-education-nimona/>.

CLASSROOM CONNECTIONS

Social Studies:

- Name major characters from the book and have students indicate if they are heroes or villains. Begin with the most obvious and end with Ballister. Ballister was a hero that was treated as a villain by society. Have students name famous heroes from history that were treated like villains.

Martin Luther King Jr. was a famous hero from American history who was often treated as a villain by part of the society. Discuss peaceful protesting and the March on Washington.

Let them listen to the speech here:

<https://www.wyzant.com/resources/lessons/history/hpol/mlk/ihaveadream>

Have students complete the Extension Activity here:

http://www.pbs.org/newshour/extra/lessons_plans/the-march-on-washington-and-its-impact/

Have them either discuss as a class or divide into groups. They will choose a current injustice and plan a new march for it.

- Have the class discuss the type of government that was used in *Nimona*. It was a monarchy. Are there any monarchical governments in existence today? How are those different from the one in the book? In *Nimona* they have an absolute monarchy. Have the class discuss how it is different than our government style in the United States. Divide the class into two groups. One is a democracy and the other is an absolute monarchy. List several major responsibilities of a government, such as passing laws, creating and spending budgets, maintaining the judicial system, declaring war, etc. Have the two groups discuss how they would handle these responsibilities in their respective types of government. Close the lesson by discussing which type of government they prefer as a citizen. How can they participate in our current government to optimize our rights as a democracy?
- *Nimona* breaks a lot of stereotypes. Good and evil, hero and villain, males and females. Have the class, over the course of three days, discuss stereotypes, list stereotypes they are aware of in media and our current culture, and discuss their own experiences with being stereotyped. Then have them create a timeline using major events in history regarding the breaking of stereotypes in race, religion, gender, etc.
<http://www.discoveryeducation.com/teachers/free-lesson-plans/understanding-stereotypes.cfm>

Science:

- In *Nimona*, Ballister prefers to use science rather than magic. At one point, he uses chemistry to create a potion. What type of “potions” do we use to help us in our world? Lead the discussion toward the use of medications. Discuss how medications are created and used through chemistry. The king in the book also used chemistry to create weapons. How can the use of chemistry be used for good and evil in our society?

In the chemistry lab, have students follow instructions to create aspirin. This will take one full class. On the following day, have the class follow instructions to test the purity of their aspirin. Discuss the importance of knowing the purity when creating something that can be used by the public.

Language Arts:

- <http://study.com/academy/popular/symbolism-lesson-plan.html>
The book utilizes a lot of symbolism. Define symbolism and discuss that which the author uses in *Nimona*. Create a chart listing symbols and meanings throughout well-known stories. Have the class create a comic strip of a short story using symbolism.

Art:

- Discuss the use of colors as symbolism in art and literature. How is color used in *Nimona* to convey emotions and themes? List specific examples in the book where colors are used as symbolism. Examples can be the green of technology, dark colors for the villain, light colors for the hero. Note Ballister’s change from dark to light armor as the reader’s view of him shifts from villain to hero.

Discuss the different symbols of colors:

Color	Common symbolism
Red	Anger, evil, desire
Green	Peace, relaxation, growth, jealousy
Yellow	Happiness, energy, hope
Blue	Calmness, comfort, depression
Pink	Femininity, romance, love
White	Innocence, purity, youth
Purple	Royalty, wisdom, transformation
Black	Despair, death, mourning

Were any of these present in the book?

Give each student a few crayons in varying shades of one color. Have each one create a scene conveying symbolism and emotion related to that color.

Vocabulary:

Ransom	Viable	Infiltrate
Squire	Precise	Corrosive
Vulgar	Fearsome	Inanimate
Gibberish	Discredit	Contaminate
Skepticism	Impede	Abomination

RELATED WEBSITES

Gingerhaze

<http://www.gingerhaze.com/>

A collection of the author's online comics

Interview: Noelle Stevenson on Webcomics, Fan Art, and "Nimona"

<http://www.slj.com/2015/12/interviews/interview-noelle-stevenson-on-webcomics-fanart-and-nimona/#>

An interview with the author of *Nimona* on her book and webcomics

2015 National Book Award Finalist, Young People's Literature

http://www.nationalbook.org/nba2015_ypl_stevenson.html#.WV2ueYjyu01

A video of Noelle Stevenson reading an excerpt from *Nimona*

Using Graphic Novels in Education: *Nimona*

<http://cblfd.org/2015/12/using-graphic-novels-in-education-nimona/>

Resources for students and educators about the book by Meryl Jaffe