



WHAT TO KNOW about Cameron Barnett



Cameron Barnett is a poet and teacher in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. He is the author of *The Drowning Boy's Guide to Water*, winner of the Autumn House Press 2017 Rising Writer Contest and finalist for the 49th NAACP Image Awards for Outstanding Literary Work in Poetry. His second full-length collection, *Murmur*, was published by Autumn House Press in February 2024. Cameron is a graduate of Duquesne University, and he holds his MFA and MAT from the University of Pittsburgh. He was

the 2022-2024 Emerging Black Writer in Residence for Chatham University's MFA program. He was the 2019 Emerging Artist Awardee at the Carol R. Brown Creative Achievement Awards. Cameron's poetry explores the complexity of race and the body for Black Americans today. He teaches middle school English language arts and social studies at his alma mater. He is also "one of ours," inducted into Sigma Tau Delta as an undergraduate.

For more information, visit cameronbarnett.net. Photo by Joshua Franzos.

QUESTIONS: *The Drowning Boy's Guide to Water* (2017)

The Drowning Boy's Guide to Water is Cameron Barnett's first published collection of poetry. In it, Barnett explores the themes of race, identity, and resilience, all while navigating a complex world.

- How do the intergenerational narratives and historical allusions in the collection help develop your understanding of Barnett's belonging and distance?
- How does the symbolism of water fluctuate between representing danger and powerlessness and embodying possibility and renewal?
- What techniques does Barnett use to weave his personal experiences with broader socio-political/historical commentary?
- The title poem closes with the advice: "When you are drowning, don't forget to practice good form." How should we read that line and the lines that follow? Do individual examples of racial

profiling, family interactions, and coming-of-age experiences within the collection illuminate inequality in contemporary America?

- In the collection, resilience is shown not just as survival technique but also as an opportunity for transformation. Can you point to examples where the collection traces the author's journey from trauma to healing while acknowledging ongoing struggles?



MAKING CONNECTIONS

- In both *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* by Benjamin Alire Saenz and *The Drowning Boy's Guide to Water* by Barnett, the act of swimming provides an opportunity for personal revelation. How do the revelations in these two texts compare?
- Can any parallels be drawn between how Barnett and Saenz explore intergenerational trauma and its consequences?
- Do Barnett and Saenz challenge traditional understandings of masculinity in their texts? If so, how?
- Can you see any links between the way Barnett and Aristotle work to find their own "voice" in these texts?
- Does Barnett find an authentic community in which to grow; Does Aristotle?
- Discuss the connections between Barnett's "Post-Racial America: A Pop Quiz" and Sharon Olds' poem "[The One Girl at the Boys Party](#)." To quote Barnett: "Check your math against the result...!"

COMMUNITY RESOURCES

[NAACP](#)
[NCTE \(National Council of Teachers of English\)](#)
[Black History Month](#)
[Big Brothers, Big Sisters of America](#)
[The Trevor Project](#)
[Suicide Prevention Resource Center](#)
[Little Free Library](#)

LITERATURE AS PRAXIS

- Barnett says "Everything black about me is an heirloom." What campus activities might allow you and your fellow students to discuss identity as 'an heirloom'? Does this echo Alice Walker's discussion of identity and heirlooms in her story, "[Everyday Use](#)"?
- In "Oceans are the Smallest Things," Barnett discusses self-harm and sexual assault. How can you make students on your campus more aware of the resources available to them that promote positive mental health? What resources are available for victims of sexual assault?
- How does literature provide an opportunity to discuss potentially difficult situations? Has your exposure to literature resulted in increased empathy with the diverse communities around you? How can books about social issues help your chapter create or implement a service project inspired by or built around books?

ADDITIONAL READINGS

Maya Angelou, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969)
Cameron Barnett, *Murmur* (2024)
Toni Cade Bambara, "The Lesson" (1972)
Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (1952)
Bernadine Evaristo, *Girl, Woman, Other* (2019)
Harper Lee, *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960)
Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (1987)
Okechukwu Nzelu, *The Private Joys of Nnenna Maloney* (2019)
Ijeoma Oluo, *So You Want to Talk about Race?* (2018)
Colson Whitehead, *The Nickel Boys* (2019)