

# TALKING POINTS

## CILIP Carnegie Medal Shortlist 2013



The CILIP Carnegie  
& Kate Greenaway  
Children's Book  
Awards

### In Darkness by Nick Lake

#### The title

The title *In Darkness* can be applied to the situation that Shorty finds himself in: trapped in the darkness of the rubble underneath the collapsed earthquake following the 2010 Haitian earthquake.

- Can you think of anything else that 'In Darkness' could refer to?

The tag line on the novel, underneath the title, is 'On the other side of darkness is light'. Again, this can be applied to Shorty's situation where he is trapped, but gradually starts tunnelling his way out of the darkness towards the light.

- What else could this tag line refer to? Think about these two questions in a metaphorical as well as physical sense.

#### In the beginning

The book throws you straight in to the action, with no real explanation or background information, relying on you – the reader – to grasp what is happening.

- Do you like this style or would you have preferred a bit of background information? Did you find it confusing or intriguing?
- How did you pick up on what was happening?
- Did you have any prior knowledge of the story of Toussaint L'Ouverture?

#### Characters of the book

##### Shorty

The character of Shorty starts out by telling us, 'I have no name. There are no names in the darkness cos there is no one else, only me, and I already know who I am'. He remains nameless until quite far through the novel, and when he is finally nicknamed 'Shorty' we know that this is not his real name.

- Why do you think we never know Shorty's real name?
- Do you relate to Shorty differently as a main character because you don't know his real name?

On page one of the novel, Shorty says, 'I am a killer and I have been killed too'.

- We get to know why Shorty is a killer, but what does he mean by saying he has been killed too?
- How does Shorty feel when he finds out that Biggie killed his father on Dread Wilmè's orders?

##### Toussaint

- What do you think makes Toussaint decide to lead the slaves to freedom, when his personal position outwardly seems reasonably comfortable (for a slave)?
- When the spirit of Shorty is in Toussaint, he is able to read. What difference does this make to Toussaint? What difference does being able to read make to Shorty?



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Where does Toussaint get his confidence from? Why is he so sure he's going to be successful in his quest?

- When his master says he'll be killed, Toussaint smiles and says 'No, that's not my destiny'. Why does he feel so sure? What about Shorty – does he feel that he has a destiny?

### Manman and Papa

- What do you think of each of Shorty's parents? Do your opinions of them change during the book?
- Do you think Manman did the right thing lying to Shorty about Marguerite's death? What do you think would have been different if Shorty had known the truth?

### Marguerite

- How would you describe the relationship between Shorty and Marguerite?
- What is it about Marguerite that makes people see her as special?
- What does the incident with the baby tell us about Marguerite?

### Dread Wilmè

- Is Dread Wilmè a good or bad character?
- How did you feel about him when reading the book, especially when he died?

### Biggie

- ❖ What does the incident where Shorty overhears Biggie on the phone to his mother tell us about Biggie?
- ❖ Is there any excuse for Biggie's behaviour? To what extent is it understandable, in his circumstances?

### Language of the book

The book uses quite a lot of slang words, without giving an explanation as to what each one means.

- ❖ Were you able to understand the words? How did you work out the meaning, if so?
- ❖ What, if anything, do you think that these slang words added to the feel of the book, and to your appreciation of the life that Shorty leads?

The book uses quite a lot of expletives throughout.

- ❖ Do you think that the expletives (swear words) add something to the tone of the book?

### Life after death

Shorty says '... even in Haiti where people are never really dead'. Thinking about the characters, the role of death and the role of the houngan and vodou:

- ❖ How does the idea that death is not the end affect the feelings of Shorty, both in his life and during his time in the rubble?
- ❖ How does this same idea affect the way that Toussaint thinks about life?

### The role of names

Names play an important role in the book. Shorty is not named until part way through the book, and then only with a nickname. Others are known only by nicknames, such as Dred Wilmè, Biggie and Tintin.

- ❖ What is the significance of none of the main characters having 'proper' names?
- ❖ How does it affect the way you view them?
- ❖ Why do you think Shorty wants to tell Biggie his real name, as Biggie lies dying?

Shorty says, 'You wanna name me yhimère? Too late, I already named my counsel.'

- ❖ Talk about the significance of Shorty and the others not being taking hold of a name like this. Can you think of any other examples of groups of people who have ownership of a name with previously negative connotations?

Toussaint styles himself Toussaint l'Ouverture.

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- ❖ What is the significance of him being re-named like this? Think particularly about the way that slaves were often named by their masters.

### The role of magic

Magic plays a strong role in the book, such as in the Houngan ceremonies, the vodou, the magic of the Marassa (twins) and the pwen that both Shorty and Toussaint carry.

- ❖ Do you think that Shorty believes in the power of vodou and magic?
- ❖ Do you think Toussaint believes?
- ❖ Do you believe in the magic that seems to be written as fact in the book, such as the souls of Shorty and Toussaint joining together? Did you find this plausible?
- ❖ A Houngan said that the twins, Shorty and Marguerite, would be born in blood and darkness and die in blood and darkness too. Was he right?

### Site Solèy

- ❖ Do you have a picture of Site Solèy in your head, after reading the book?
- ❖ Did you know that Site Solèy is a real place (as are the gangs)? Do some research into Site Solèy then think, based on what you have learned, about how accurate the book seems to be.
- ❖ Shorty says 'There's no such thing as children in site Solèy' – do you agree? Why does he say this?

### Darkness and light

Some of the characters in the book show both good sides and bad sides. Talk about the good and bad actions of various characters, such as Dread Wilmè, who is a gangster but also builds schools and pays for people to go to hospital (Biggie for similar reasons), Stéphanie, who brings food into the slum but is also party to gang violence and Shorty himself, who has many noble thoughts and intentions, but does also commit murder.

- ❖ Can good people do bad things? Can bad people do good things?
- ❖ Can you think of any other characters in other books from this year's shortlist who are a mixture of good and bad?

Toussaint says, of the slave owners' behaviour, 'most men would become like this if they were presented with people and told that they were not so much people as belongings, as chattel'.

- ❖ Do you agree?

### Additional talking points

Think about, and list, the points of comparison between Shorty and Toussaint

Shorty says: 'When you keep hurting someone, you do one of three things. Either you fill them up with hate, and they destroy everything around them. Or you fill them up with sadness, and they destroy themselves. Or you fill them up with justice, and they try to destroy everything that's bad and cruel in this world'.

- ❖ Shorty says he is the first type of person. Do you agree?
- ❖ Think about the other characters in the book – where do they fit into Shorty's definition?

Toussaint then uses a very similar analogy when describing three types of slaves, just a few pages later.

- ❖ What category does Toussaint fit into?
- ❖ What about Jean-Christophe?

The book tells parallel stories of modern-day and historical Haiti.

- ❖ How much of the background did you already know?
- ❖ Did the book inspire you to want to learn more about Haiti?
- ❖ How much of the book is based on fact, and how much is pure fiction?

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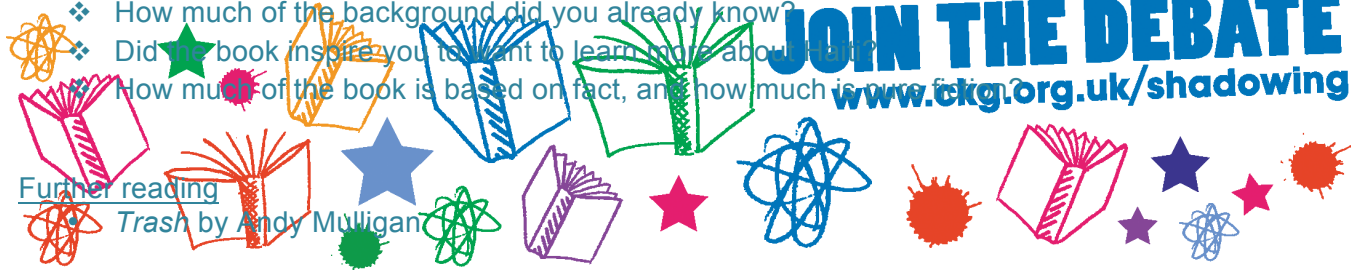
### Further reading

*Trash* by Andy Mulligan

*In Darkness* by Nick Lake

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- *Eight Days: A Story of Haiti* by Alix Delinois
- *Toussaint L'Ouverture: The Fight for Haiti's Freedom* by Walter Dean Myers

