

A Standards-Aligned Educator Guide for Grades 5 – 8

# NOT AN EASY WIN

## About the book:

Nothing's gone right for Lawrence since he had to move from Charlotte to Larenville, North Carolina, to live with his granny. When Lawrence ends up in one too many fights at his new school, he gets expelled. The fight wasn't his fault, but since his pop's been gone, it feels like no one listens to what Lawrence has to say.

Instead of going to school, Lawrence starts spending his days at the rec center, helping out a neighbor who runs a chess program. Some of the kids in the program will be picked to compete in the Charlotte Classic chess tournament. Could this be Lawrence's chance to go home?

Lawrence doesn't know anything about chess, but something about the center—and the kids there—feels right. Lawrence thought the game was over . . . but does he have more moves left than he thought?

**Age Range:** 10 and up

**Grade Level:** 5 - 8

**Publisher:** Random House Books for Young Readers

**ISBN-10:** 0593175212

**ISBN -13:** 978-0593175217

★ “A wise and wonderful story” - *Booklist* (starred review)

★ “Essential” - *School Library Journal* (starred review)

★ “Stellar” - *Kirkus Reviews* (starred review)

★ “Compassionately told” - *Publisher’s Weekly* (starred review)

## About the Author:

Chrystal D. Giles is a champion for diversity and representation in children’s literature. Chrystal made her debut with *Take Back the Block*, which received multiple starred reviews, was a Kirkus Reviews, School Library Journal, and an NPR Best Book. Her latest middle-grade novel, *Not An Easy Win*, which has already received multiple starred reviews is available now. Chrystal lives outside Charlotte, North Carolina, with her husband and son. Learn more about Chrystal and her many projects at [chrystaldgiles.com](http://chrystaldgiles.com).



## Pre-Reading Discussion:

- Consider the illustration, created by [Xia Gordon](#), on the cover of the book. Describe the boy's expression. How is he feeling? How do you know?
- Identify the silhouettes featured at the base of the illustration. Consider what these images of chess pieces might have to do with the story.
- Interpret the meaning of the phrase, “ To win, you have to make a move.” Determine how the phrase corresponds with the book’s title *Not An Easy Win*.
- Predict what this novel is going to be about.

## Post-Reading Discussion:

*Back home, Pop always had music playing in the background, and now I could almost hear him in the background rhyming with it. It's weird how music can do that – take you right to another place (19).*

- The story opens with Lawrence engaged in a physical conflict at his middle school. Though Lawrence is adamant the consequences are unjust, he is expelled. Identify with Lawrence’s position. Describe a time when you felt unjustly criticized.
- The term *self-discipline* means will-power, self-control, and restraint. Ma tells Lawrence, “Life is hard, and we’ve had a double dose of hard lately” (pg. 4). Explain how someone can develop self-discipline in “hard” situations. Tell why developing types of skills would be beneficial.
- Lawrence describes the “scratched up” iPod as the “...only thing Pop had left behind that was usable” (pg.19). Can memories of a loved one be usable? Explain your answer.

"To do well with chess, you'll have to develop logic and reasoning" (pg. 80).

- The word *logic* means insightful, critical, and rational. The opposite of *logical reasoning* is confusion, disorder, and uncertainty. Determine how the rules of a game could teach life skills such as these.
- Lawrence's first impression of Twyla was that she, "...filled up the whole room with her sureness" (pg. 39). Could it be that becoming a master of the game of chess helped Twyla to develop a sense of authenticity and confidence? How so?
- The word *intention* means aim, purpose, and resolve. Mr. Dennis teaches Lawrence to intentionally "...think about the game in three parts: the opening, the middle game, and the endgame" (pg. 144). Tell how this approach to the game of chess is an example of logic and reasoning.

"You and Deuce have more in common than you know" (pg. 89).

- The word *nemesis* means rival, adversary, and archenemy. Is it fair to say that, throughout most of the story, Deuce served as Lawrence's nemesis? Explain your answer.
- An *antagonist* is a competitor, one that can be hostile to someone or something. Because he didn't like new kids, Deuce became Lawrence's antagonist from the first moment they met. Feeling targeted as the new kid in school, Lawrence often engaged in physical conflicts. Examine reasons why both boys' initial reactions to unfamiliar people and settings was to fight.
- Analyze the impact of having an incarcerated parent had upon both Lawrence and Deuce. How does this impact the perception of others toward them?
- Discuss how the earbuds initiated a shift from Lawrence and Deuce as rivals to becoming friends. Determine the influence Pop and his love of music had in the development of their relationship.

"Sometimes we go through things in life in order to pull someone else up with us" (pg. 157).

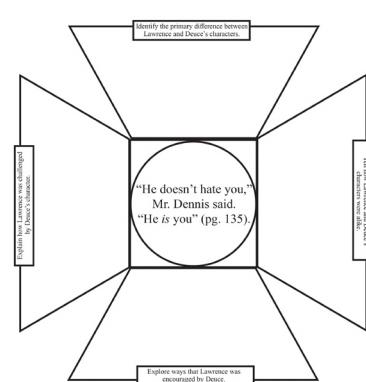
- What does it mean to "pull someone else up"?
- Make a connection between the quote about and the title of the book, *Not An Easy Win*. Explain how understanding that life is not easy can be helpful to others.
- Tell how, in the end, Lawrence used logic, reasoning, and friendship to "pull" Deuce up.
- In the Author's Note, Chrystal Giles identifies with Lawrence's issues of growing up "...with a parent who was absent and often incarcerated" (pg. 241). Consider how writing *Not An Easy Win* is the author's way of pulling up young readers by helping them discover ways to deal with life's challenges, much like Lawrence did in the story.

## PINWHEEL PERSPECTIVES: CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Throughout the story, Lawrence and Deuce's relationship changed from being competitors to companions, adversaries to confidants, and from being rivals to allies. Instruct students to use the spaces provided on the Pinwheel Perspective: Character Analysis template to explore the motivations behind each shift in character. Encourage students to use references from the text to write an informative essay explaining what Mr. Dennis meant when he told Lawrence, "He is you" (pg. 135). Have students share their work with the class.

Explore the following topics:

- Identify the primary difference between Lawrence and Deuce's characters.
- Tell how Lawrence and Deuce's characters were alike.
- Explain how Lawrence was challenged by Deuce's character.



## COMMON CORE STATE ANCHOR STANDARDS ALIGNMENT

Reading: CCRA-R.1, R.2, R.3, R.4, R.7, R.8, R.10

Writing: CCRA-W.1, W.4, W.5, W.7, W.9

Speaking & Listening: CCRA-SL.1, SL.2, SL.4, SL.6



## PINWHEEL PERSPECTIVES: CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Throughout the story, Lawrence and Deuce's relationship changed from being competitors to companions, adversaries to confidants, and from being rivals to allies. Instruct students to use the spaces provided on the Pinwheel Perspective: Character Analysis template to explore the motivations behind each shift in character. Encourage students to use references from the text to write an informative essay explaining what Mr. Dennis meant when he told Lawrence, "He is you" (pg. 135). Have students share their work with the class.

