Educator's Guide

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ABOUT THE BOOK

After centuries trapped in the Underworld, Simon escapes his eternal sentence, only to materialize naked in a modern middle school bathroom. He's rescued by Zeke, a wealthy but lonely outcast who helps the boy from ancient Greece navigate the bewildering 21st century. As Zeke discovers the power of true friendship, their lives are upended when the god of the Underworld, Hades, sends a relentless demon girl to drag Simon back to the depths. Now, the duo must face the wrath of a god to protect their school and Simon's freedom. Is their bond strong enough to defy the Will of Hades?

Photo by Mayma Anderson

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Gary D. Schmidt is the bestselling author of *The Labors of Hercules Beal*; *Just Like That*; National Book Award finalist *Okay for Now*; *Pay Attention, Carter Jones*; *Orbiting Jupiter*; the Newbery Honor and Printz Honor Book *Lizzie Bright and the Buckminster Boy*; and the Newbery Honor Book *The Wednesday Wars*. He is also co-author, with Ron Koertge, of *A Day at the Beach*. He lives in rural Michigan.

Photography by Herb Rabbit

Ron Koertge is the author of many acclaimed novels for young people, including *Stoner & Spaz* and *Shakespeare Bats Cleanup*, and most recently is co-author, with Gary D. Schmidt, of *A Day at the Beach*. A two-time winner of the PEN Award, Ron lives in South Pasadena, California, where he is currently the city's poet laureate.

Also by Gary D. Schmidt and Ron Koertge!

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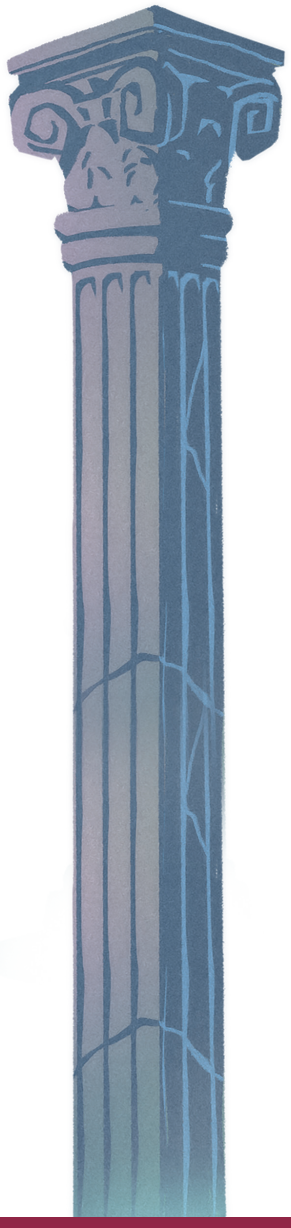

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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Reread Chapter 1 (pp. 1-13). Discuss aspects of Simon's character that are revealed in these pages, such as awareness, empathy, and kindness. How do these character traits help Simon navigate both Hades and the real world? What other examples of Simon's character stood out to you? How do you feel about Simon?

2. After Simon died, he took only a small sip of water from the River Lethe, thus preserving most of his memories. Discuss the importance of memory to Simon. How does his memory of his life in Athens, as well as his life in Hades, bring him both pleasure and pain?

3. When Simon first encounters Zeke, Zeke is being bullied by Rowan and his crew. Simon compares their taunting voices to "a sour chorus, nasal and piercing, like harpies that rip the flesh (p. 28)." In Greek mythology, harpies were winged, part-bird, part-woman creatures. How can being bullied "rip the flesh" of the victim?

4. The value of friendship is an important theme in *Styx and Stones*. What qualities does Zeke possess that allow him to be a good friend to Simon? Simon, although thousands of years older than Zeke, connects with Zeke upon their first meeting, noticing foremost Zeke's compassion. What is compassion and why is it an important ingredient in a friendship? How does Simon demonstrate his friendship to Zeke?

5. Discuss this following passage, found on page 90: *Who knows how long they [Zeke and Simon] sat together? But after a long time, Simon knew this: Aristotle had been right. Friendship is a single soul in two bodies. He had never understood this as completely as he did now.* What does this metaphor mean to you?

6. Persephone is a morally ambiguous character, which means her motivations and actions are not strictly good or bad, but a mix of both. Discuss this duality in her character and offer examples of how she is both caring and sensitive, but also dismissive and cruel. How and why does her unhappiness relate to her cruelty? How and why does her caring nature win out at the end?

7. Simon is many things, but most importantly he is kind. Discuss examples of Simon's kindness. How does his caring and kindness for the other inhabitants of the Underworld, especially the shades, inspire them to advocate for his freedom? After Charon lowers his lantern to Diogenes, he says, "What the kid would want (p. 75)." Why would Simon want Charon to give Diogenes his lantern? How does kindness and affection change Cerberus? How does offering kindness and affection to Cerberus change Persephone? Discuss the following question on page 202: *And what does kindness do, except make the one who offers it, and the one who accepts it, more and more themselves?*

8. Grief is a pervasive subject throughout the story, and one that affects many characters. How do Simon, Zeke, and Persephone experience grief? What helps each character accept and move on from the pain of their losses? Simon is sobbing from grief when he says to Zeke, "I'd forgotten how hard and how wonderful it is to be alive (p. 90)." Explain what you think Simon means.

9. During his time in the real world, Simon marvels at things that most people take for granted. Discuss Simon's joy with being alive and offer examples from the story. In Chapter 12, Simon marvels at the beauty around him: "He'd forgotten, but now, every day in this world, every moment of every day, he remembered: how astonishing it was to be alive (p. 145)." What are things that you notice in the natural world that astonish you?

10. At the story's conclusion, Zeke and Lucinda are missing and remembering Simon. Lucinda says, "He made me want to be different, too…Just not like I was. Like, not watching TikTok for six hours. Not calling up Harper and gossiping about someone in class. Not letting Rowan copy my papers anymore. Not buying a sweater so someone would see me in it and then taking it back. Those are things Simon would never do (p. 226)." Simon changed Zeke and Lucinda for the better. In what ways has he changed you?

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EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

On Location.

The authors of *Styx and Stones* weave vivid imagery, descriptive language, action, and suspense into their story. Imagine you are a filmmaker tasked with bringing *Styx and Stones* to the big screen. After reading the book, develop a script for your screen adaptation and then film it! In small groups, consider what major scenes from the book you should include, and what scenes will need to be cut, and then write a short script of a key chapter. Create a storyboard of the script, which will be the visual "road map" you will follow when you begin shooting your film. Finally, film your book trailer. Each group should focus on a different chapter, including selections from the beginning, the middle, and the end of the story. When all work is completed, have a screening of all book trailers. Don't forget the popcorn!

The Elysium Hall of Fame.

Throughout the story, Simon shares his many experiences and conversations with some of the most important people in history: philosophers, poets, writers, musicians, faith leaders, scientists, freedom fighters, and others. Socrates and Aristotle, Archimedes, Siddhartha, Galileo, Shakespeare, John Lennon, Homer, Emily Dickinson, Maya Angelou, Bashō, Li Bai, and Walt Whitman are some of the people referenced in *Styx and Stones*. Create an Elysium Hall of Fame by researching the people referenced in the book. Each student will research one person, including their birth and death dates, significant works and/or accomplishments, and how they changed the world. Each student will create a visual representation of their subject, such as a painting or drawing, a slide presentation, or a diorama. Set aside as much time as is necessary for all students to present their projects.

Friendship is…

Zeke is at Simon's side as grief overtakes him: *Who knows how long they sat together? But after a long time, Simon knew this: Aristotle had been right. Friendship is a single soul in two bodies. He had never understood this as completely as he did now.* Think about what friendship means to you. Along with the rest of your classmates, work together to create a public service advertisement campaign to promote *friendship*. Write a series of short, snappy slogans that celebrate friendship. Each slogan should begin with the words *Friendship is*. Create posters with the slogans as centerpieces and place them around the classroom.

The Color Blue.

On pages 106 and 107, Simon wakes up in the pool room and marvels at all the shades of blue illuminated by the sunlight: *All the blue in that room—the walls were cyan and navy, the curtains turquoise, the rug midnight blue, the tiles aquamarine. On the west wall, a painting of divers arcing into a shimmering, sapphire-blue pool*. Consider a color that appeals to you. With only that color—and its shades and tints—create a small painting of a subject of your choice. If possible, work in conjunction with an art teacher to begin this project, as you will need to learn how to mix colors and create shades and tints. Create a classroom gallery to display the work. As a writing extension, write an artist's statement describing the process and experience.

Guide created by Colleen Carroll, literacy educator, content creator, author of the How Artists See series (Abbeville Kids), and Director of Curriculum & Instruction at an independent school in the NYC area. Learn more about Colleen at www.colleencarroll.us.

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