

Sportin' Men

by **Gary Phillips**

Illustration by **Rosalind Helfand**

Curriculum developed by **Léna Garcia**

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OVERVIEW

Quick Glance 10 Points for Usage Guide

Student Population	
Age/Grade Level Appropriateness	* Ages 16+ * Grades 11+
Genre/s	* Fiction
Length	3,318 words
Content Advisories	* Robbery * References to drunkenness * References to drug use * References to gambling * References to sex * References to the Iraq War
One Sentence Summary	A teenage boy chooses between family and his own morals in the midst of a robbery planned by his uncle.

Lesson Planning	
Topics & Key Themes Overview	Topics * Familial pressures * Different livelihoods * Risk taking * Addiction * Sexual awakening * Opportunity in education * Hedonism
Topics & Key Themes Overview	Themes * Familial loyalty * Individual morality * Loss of loved ones * Being self-reliant * Living in poverty
Historic Events / Time Periods for Study	The Iraq War, 2003–2011 (length of the war as of this writing)

Lesson Planning	
Complementary Classic and Historic Texts	<p>* Song: “House of the Rising Sun” by The Animals: http://bit.ly/1x6NKA0 (http://bit.ly/1x6NKA0)</p> <p>* Articles: “A Very Grave Undertaking in Etymology” by Jack Smith: http://lat.ms/2wKB8W1 (http://lat.ms/2wKB8W1); “How to Play Blackjack” by Stewart Coerver: http://bit.ly/2gkSTAO (http://bit.ly/2gkSTAO)</p>
Author and Artists Information	<p>Gary Phillips is an author and teacher living in Los Angeles, CA.</p> <p>Rosalind Helfand was the Managing Editor of Literature for Life (renamed Locavore Lit LA) and is a photographer.</p>
Key Common Core Standards (found in detail following the curriculum)	<p>CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.L.11-12.5 CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.L.11-12.4.C CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.L.11-12.4 CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.6 CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.7 CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.1 CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.2 CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.1.A CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.3.E CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.3.C CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.3 CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.10 CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.11-12.3 CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.11-12.1.C CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.11-12.1 CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.11-12.1.D CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.11-12.7 CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.11-12.4 CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.5 CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.6 CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.3 CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.2</p>

Author Biography

Raised deep amid the concrete and weathered palms of South Central L.A., weaned on the images of Kirby and Steranko in comic books and Hammett and Serling in prose, **Gary Phillips** also draws on his experiences, ranging from teaching incarcerated youth to running a nonprofit started after the riots to directing a shadowy political action committee to delivering dog cages, in writing his tales of chicanery and malfeasance.

Artist Biography

Rosalind Helfand was the Managing Editor of Literature for Life (renamed Locavore Lit LA) and is a photographer.

SYNOPSIS

A teenage boy chooses between loyalty to one of his only living family members and his own morals in the midst of a robbery planned by his uncle. This short fiction story by Gary Phillips confronts adolescent issues—like sexual awakening, risk taking, and making one’s way in the world—facing a young adult who is self-reliant at an early age in a landscape of addiction, loss, and fleeting opportunity.

CURRICULUM

Pre-Reading & Themes Activity Options

Topic and Main Ideas

Mini Research Project: Research the science behind addiction. Why is addiction classified as a brain disease? How do drugs and addictive activities produce pleasure in the brain? Select one addiction—like alcohol, marijuana, nicotine, gambling, or food—to study more in-depth.

In a mini class presentation, share what you have learned. Be sure to answer the following questions as they apply to the addiction on which you are presenting:

- What draws people to the substance or activity?
- How easy is it to get addicted?
- What are its physical and mental effects?
- How prevalent is the addiction in the United States?
- What are the treatment options?

Journaling Activity: Focus on one addictive substance or activity you learned about. In a 10-minute journal entry, write from the perspective of a person who is addicted. What does your addiction do for you? How does it harm you and others? Try to be specific.

Passage-Specific Themes

Read the following passage from “Sportin’ Men”:

Junie sat on the bed and opened the box. In it was the bronze-colored medal his brother had been awarded in Iraq— posthumously, they’d called it. His name and rank were inscribed on the back of the thing. The white van with the two marines had pulled up to their apartment, and his mother had collapsed, right there on the porch. After that, though having been clean some five years, she got back on

the pipe and, as far as Junie knew, was still riding it hard. He shut the lid, tucked it in his bag and, with that in tow, left the motel room, buttoning up his jean jacket against the wind and cold.

Discussion Activity: What can we infer about Junie’s character from his decision to hold on to his brother’s bronze-colored medal?

Journaling Activity: In a five-minute journal entry, respond to the following question: How do the material items we own and value define us?

Universal Themes

Classroom Activity: Think about what it means to be self-reliant. In small groups, create a collage of the concept of self-reliance. Be sure you are able to justify why you placed each image or word on the paper. As a group, present your art piece to the class. Post the collages around the classroom.

Suggested Materials: scissors, glue sticks, printer paper, old magazines.

Key Vocabulary

Definitions are very context-dependent. Make sure that any definitions you look up or work from are the ones that most correctly fit in the context of the story.

Level One	Level Two	Level Three
bruise	gawking	ham hock
thunderstruck	smitten	hogshead cheese
embracing	deftly	shank
pawning	bosom	antebellum
bluffing	devious	foyer
queen (in poker)	belligerent	deacon
ace (in poker)	patron	gat
peep (verb)	embalmer	netherworld
	undertaker	regale
	circuit breaker	agate
	gait	reverie

Level One	Level Two	Level Three
	jive	Junebug
	withering	stiffs (corpses)
	posthumously	five-card stud (in poker)
	inscribed	
	t-boned	
	motherlover	

Vocabulary Activity Options

1. Read the following 1989 article from the Los Angeles Times, which explores euphemisms in the funeral industry: <http://lat.ms/2wKB8W1> (<http://lat.ms/2wKB8W1>)

What does an undertaker do? What is a euphemism? Why do you think the words “undertaker” and “coffin” have largely been replaced by euphemisms like “funeral director” and “casket”? What do these language shifts reveal about our culture’s relationship with death?

2. What is hogshead cheese? Why do you think so many different cultures around the world enjoy a variation on the dish? How, specifically, is it prepared in America’s Deep South?
3. In “Sportin’ Men,” Gary Phillips writes with language specific to the game of poker. Research the poker terminology in the vocabulary chart, and create a visual guidebook for a new poker player. Fold a few sheets of paper in half to make a booklet. On one side, write the word’s definition; on the other side, include a visual representation.

Post-Reading Class Discussion Options

1. What does it mean to be a “sportin’ man”?
2. How do you think Junie’s life will change after the crime?
3. Do you think Uncle Brim and Missa will get away with it? Why or why not?

Text-Dependent Question Options

1. Why is Glen Murray called Junie?
2. Where do you think the story takes place? Cite the text.
3. What is a “tell”? Reference the text to support your answer.
4. Why does Missa kiss Junie? Cite the text.

5. What does Uncle Brim's gambling tell us about his character?
6. Study the story's illustration, a photograph by artist Rosalind Helfand. What is the role of darkness—both literally and figuratively—in “Sportin’ Men”?

Writing Exercise Options

Narrative

Imagine it's the one year anniversary of the robbery. Junie is about to turn 18. Where has life taken him? Where does he sleep at night? Is he still in school or did he have to get a full-time job to make ends meet? What did he do with the thousand dollars? Has he heard from his uncle? Write a one-page narrative in which you answer these questions and tell the story of Junie's life one year later.

Descriptive

Drawing on details from the story, as well as your own imagination, describe the interior of Miss Zenobia's antebellum (pre- Civil War, neoclassical architecture style) restored colonial mansion. Write a half-page, detailed description of the home-turned-underground-casino. Use concrete imagery to convey the feeling of the place. If you'd like, you may create a visual representation of the mansion to accompany your writing piece.

Analysis

Write a one- to two-page essay on the following question: Do you think Junie should be held responsible for his role in the robbery? Why or why not? Cite the text to support your argument.

Complementary Reading Text Option

Listen to The Animals' 1964 song “The House of the Rising Sun” and read the lyrics (<http://bit.ly/1x6NKAO> (<http://bit.ly/1x6NKAO>)).

“The House of the Rising Sun” by The Animals

There is a house in New Orleans
They call the Rising Sun
And it's been the ruin of many a poor boy

And God I know I'm one
My mother was a tailor
She sewed my new bluejeans
My father was a gamblin' man
Down in New Orleans
Now the only thing a gambler needs
Is a suitcase and a trunk
And the only time he's satisfied
Is when he's on, a drunk
Oh mother tell your children
Not to do what I have done
Spend your lives in sin and misery
In the House of the Rising Sun
Well, I got one foot on the platform
The other foot on the train
I'm goin' back to New Orleans
To wear that ball and chain
Well, there is a house in New Orleans
They call the Rising Sun
And it's been the ruin of many a poor boy
And God I know I'm one

Writing Exercise

“Sportin’ Men” and “The House of the Rising Sun” both tell the stories of gambling men. What do you think Uncle Brimfeld Lee and the speaker in The Animals’ song have in common? How are they different? Respond to the questions in a 10-minute journal entry. Be sure to cite both the lyrics and the story.

Activity Options

Classroom Activity One

Divide students into pairs, and teach them how to play the card game 21, which should be played without betting. Here’s a link to a brief article which explains the rules of the game: <http://bit.ly/2gkSTAO> (<http://bit.ly/2gkSTAO>).

Classroom Activity Two

In small groups, create Junie’s family tree. Include every family member mentioned in “Sportin’ Men,” no matter whether they are dead or alive. Referencing the story—and your own imagination—write a paragraph-long biography of each family member. When and where were they born? What did they do with their life? Where are they now? Illustrate each biography. Post the family trees around the classroom.

Suggested materials: butcher paper and colored pens or pencils.

Home Activity

Write a handwritten letter to a family member or a friend. Write about whatever feels right—what’s important is that you’re reaching out. Make a copy of the letter (a quick photograph will do) to turn in, then mail or deliver it.

Guest Speaker

Option One: Invite the author and/or the illustrator to come and speak to your class about this project, their creative processes, and their current endeavors.

Option Two: Invite a drug counselor to speak with you class about their career, their treatment techniques, and their daily challenges and triumphs on the job.

Field Trip

Visit UCLA and tour the Gambling Studies Program. Learn about the individual, familial, and societal impact of gambling. Arrange to speak with program co-directors and doctors Timothy Fong and Richard Rosenthal or with a student about their own research.

Writing Exercise: In a one-page essay, explain the Gambling Studies Program project or publication that interests you the most. What have researchers learned about the psychology of gambling? What questions are they asking and why?

TEST PREPARATION COMPONENT

Writing Exercise

Predict Junie’s future at different ages. At sixteen, Junie helps her uncle carry out a robbery, then leaves the motel room to which they had all fled. We do not know whether or not Junie returns to his hometown. What do you think June is doing and where is he living at age twenty, thirty, forty, and sixty?

Write one to two paragraphs explaining why you believe Junie’s life is likely to turn out in the way you have predicted.

COMMON CORE STANDARDS REFERENCE

Pre-Reading & Themes Activity Options

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.11-12.1: Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 11-12 topics, texts, and issues, building on others’ ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.11-12.1.D: Respond thoughtfully to diverse perspectives; synthesize comments, claims, and evidence made on all sides of an issue; resolve contradictions when possible; and determine what additional information or research is required to deepen the investigation or complete the task.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.2: Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas, concepts, and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.1: Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.

Vocabulary Activity Options

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.L.11-12.4: Determine or clarify the meaning of unknown and multiple-meaning words and phrases based on grades 11-12 reading and content, choosing flexibly from a range of strategies.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.L.11-12.4.C: Consult general and specialized reference materials (e.g., dictionaries, glossaries, thesauruses), both print and digital, to find the pronunciation of a word or determine or clarify its precise meaning, its part of speech, its etymology, or its standard usage.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.L.11-12.5: Demonstrate understanding of figurative language, word relationships, and nuances in word meanings.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.1: Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.10: Write routinely over extended time frames (time for research, reflection, and revision) and shorter time frames (a single sitting or a day or two) for a range of tasks, purposes, and audiences.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.11-12.4: Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative, connotative, and technical meanings; analyze how an author uses and refines the meaning of a key term or terms over the course of a text (e.g., how Madison defines faction in Federalist No. 10).

Post-Reading Class Discussion Options

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.11-12.1: Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 11-12 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.11-12.1.C: Propel conversations by posing and responding to questions that probe reasoning and evidence; ensure a hearing for a full range of positions on a topic or issue; clarify, verify, or challenge ideas and conclusions; and promote divergent and creative perspectives.

Text-Dependent Question Options

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.2: Determine two or more themes or central ideas of a text and analyze their development over the course of the text, including how they interact and build on one another to produce a complex account; provide an objective summary of the text.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.3: Analyze the impact of the author's choices regarding how to develop and relate elements of a story or drama (e.g., where a story is set, how the action is ordered, how the characters are introduced and developed).

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.6: Analyze a case in which grasping a point of view requires distinguishing what is directly stated in a text from what is really meant (e.g., satire, sarcasm, irony, or understatement).

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.5: Analyze how an author’s choices concerning how to structure specific parts of a text (e.g., the choice of where to begin or end a story, the choice to provide a comedic or tragic resolution) contribute to its overall structure and meaning as well as its aesthetic impact.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.1: Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.1.A: Introduce precise, knowledgeable claim(s), establish the significance of the claim(s), distinguish the claim(s) from alternate or opposing claims, and create an organization that logically sequences claim(s), counterclaims, reasons, and evidence.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.2: Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas, concepts, and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.

Writing Exercise Options

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.1: Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.1.A: Introduce precise, knowledgeable claim(s), establish the significance of the claim(s), distinguish the claim(s) from alternate or opposing claims, and create an organization that logically sequences claim(s), counterclaims, reasons, and evidence.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.2: Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas, concepts, and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.3: Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.3.C: Use a variety of techniques to sequence events so that they build on one another to create a coherent whole and build toward a particular tone and outcome (e.g., a sense of mystery, suspense, growth, or resolution).

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.3.E: Provide a conclusion that follows from and reflects on what is experienced, observed, or resolved over the course of the narrative.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.11-12.7: Integrate and evaluate multiple sources of information presented in different media or formats (e.g., visually, quantitatively) as well as in words in order to address a question or solve a problem.

Complementary Reading Text Writing Exercise

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.1: Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.1.A: Introduce precise, knowledgeable claim(s), establish the significance of the claim(s), distinguish the claim(s) from alternate or opposing claims, and create an organization that logically sequences claim(s), counterclaims, reasons, and evidence.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.2: Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas, concepts, and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.

Activity Options

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.11-12.1: Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 11-12 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.11-12.1.C: Propel conversations by posing and responding to questions that probe reasoning and evidence; ensure a hearing for a full range of positions on a topic or issue; clarify, verify, or challenge ideas and conclusions; and promote divergent and creative perspectives.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.11-12.3: Evaluate a speaker's point of view, reasoning, and use of evidence and rhetoric, assessing the stance, premises, links among ideas, word choice, points of emphasis, and tone used.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.7: Integrate and evaluate multiple sources of information presented in diverse formats and media (e.g., visually, quantitatively, as well as in words) in order to address a question or solve a problem.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.6: Evaluate authors' differing points of view on the same historical event or issue by assessing the authors' claims, reasoning, and evidence.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.1: Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.

