

Miss Lorraine and Her Fireball

By Maya Johnson

Illustration by Scott Gandell

Curriculum developed by Kate Kesner



OVERVIEW

Quick-Glance 10 Points for Usage Guide

Student Population	
Age/Grade-Level Appropriateness	* 16+/10 th +
Genre/s	* Personal essay
Length	904 words (3-minute read)
Content Advisories	* References to alcohol * Reference to homophobia

One-Sentence Summary	A writer and college student reflects on how their uncle's girlfriend offended their family and showed the writer a new way to live.
Lesson Planning	
Topics & Key Themes Overview	<p>Topics:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Respectability * Familial expectation * Gendered expectations <p>Themes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> * The conflict between being oneself and fitting in (authenticity versus respectability) * The conflict between parents' desires for their children and their children's desires for themselves * How we enforce societal norms on each other
Historic Events/Time Periods for Study	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Jackson State Killings (1970) * NYT Piece on Black Mississippi Activists After Freedom Summer: 1970 * Marriage of Billie Ert & Antonio Molina; 1972 * <i>Bishop v. Starkville Academy</i>: 1975 * 1977 Houston Anita Bryant protests * National Women's Conference of 1977 * <i>Castañeda v. Pickard</i>: 1978 * Village Station police raid: 1979 * Reagan's Neshoba County Fair "states' rights" speech (1980) * <i>Vietnamese Fishermen's Association v. Knights of the Ku Klux Klan</i>: 1981 * <i>Gay Student Services v. Texas A&M University</i>: 1984
Complementary Texts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Novel: <i>The Deep</i> by Rivers Solomon * Image Gallery: <i>A Cajun Courir</i> by Thea Traff. Photographs by William Widmer.
Author & Artist Information	<p>Maya Johnson is an award-winning fiction writer currently working on a BA in Writing and Literature at University of California, Santa Barbara.</p> <p>Scott Gandell is the Art Curator at Locavore Lit LA. He is also a Board Member of The Society of Illustrators of Los Angeles.</p>
Key Common Core Standards	<p>Grade 9-10 Common Core Standards:</p> <p>CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.L.9-10.4</p> <p>CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.L.9-10.4.A</p> <p>CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.L.9-10.4.C</p> <p>CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.4</p> <p>CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.3</p> <p>CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.3</p> <p>CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.3.B</p>

	<p><u>CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.3.D</u></p>
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Author Biography

Maya Johnson is an award-winning fiction writer currently working on a BA in Writing and Literature at University of California, Santa Barbara. Born and raised in sunny Long Beach, California, they currently reside in the party town of Isla Vista where they've published stories such as "Good Hair" and "Consumption." With five roommates and an eccentric cat, Johnson is well accustomed to chaos, from there comes their best works. Currently, they find themselves delving into the complexities of artificial intelligence and queer love in the form of a novel. A lover of fashion and botany, they find beauty in the perverse and unconventional.

Artist Biography

Scott Gandell wears many hats. He descends from a long line of creatives and business professionals. His experience is as diverse as the subjects he illustrates. He is a proud alumnus of Art Center College of Design in Pasadena. (https://www.gallerynucleus.com/artists/scott_gandell)

SYNOPSIS

A writer and college student, Maya Johnson, looks back at the time their uncle brought a woman home who did not meet Maya's religious family's expectations. Maya reflects on their family's struggles and devotion to respectability, as well as Maya's own desire to live as authentically as the woman their uncle brought home.

CURRICULUM

Pre-Reading & Themes Activity Options

Topic

10-Minute Warm-up Activity:

Option Number One: Every family has different expectations, and every person is influenced by the environment they grew up, whether they choose to conform or rebel against it. What do you think it was like for your guardian or guardians growing up? Doodle or journal your answers.

Option Number Two: Think about a time you met an outsider in your home, school or community. What were your first thoughts about them? How did the people around you react? Did you express similar opinions to the people around you to fit in? Doodle or journal your answers.

Main Ideas

10-Minute Partner Discussion: Describe a time when you or someone close to you was looked down upon, excluded, or encouraged to change for not following social norms. What motivations do you think were behind their judgement by others?

5-Minute Follow-Up Writing Activity: Write about a time when *you* judged someone for not following social norms. Do you regret it? Why or why not?

Passage-Specific Themes:

Partner Discussion:

Talk to the person next to you about the following passages from “Miss Lorraine and Her Fireball”.

“This was around the time that Mama and Daddy started going to that old bowling alley in Carson that did karaoke and sold fried chicken wings. On Thursday nights they’d roll out with Andre and T-Ray, because my dad’s only real friends, and my mom’s by extension, are his brothers. They’d come home drunk and laughing at recordings of Mama singing, ‘you’d better call Tyrooonneee.’ By the morning she’d be too embarrassed to watch them.”

- What does this passage tell us about Maya’s parents?

“Here lies my grandparents’ unfulfilled dreams of prestige and respectability, half-baked and left to fester in the fields of Mississippi or Texas, or in dirty Santa Monica bathrooms in desperate need of cleaning.”

- Question #1: Tone in writing is the mood implied by an author’s words. How would you describe the tone in the text above? How does the author’s word choice contribute to the tone? Which words are especially impactful?
- Question #2: Writers often order their stories’ events to achieve maximum emotional impact. Why do you think Johnson included this sentence on her grandparents’ unfulfilled dreams in the middle of the story instead of the beginning?

Complementary Text

From *The Deep* by Rivers Solomon:

In The Deep, the main character Yetu was once the Historian, the member of her community of wajinru, or mermaids, who holds all memories too painful for the community to bear. She runs away from her community because she cannot hold the whole burden of their past. In the below excerpt, she finds a new way forward.

“Yetu felt the minds of every living wajinru. Their struggles were so familiar to her. ‘Join us,’ said Amaba, begging. ‘I would sooner die than let you suffer this alone. You begged me to understand, and I never did. I never could. Now I know, my child. I know, and I will not see you bear it without your amaba, without your kindred.’

“But maybe she didn’t have to. Maybe, instead of taking the History from them, she could join them as they experienced it. Just like with the Remembrance, she could guide them through the remembering so it didn’t overtake them with such violence. They could bear it all together.

“Usually, after the Remembrance, the historian waited nearby, empty of memories, but what would happen if they stayed? What could happen if someone with experience stayed with the wajinru past the moment of completion? Could she wrangle them back toward consciousness, without taking the memories back? Could they live out their days all sharing the memories together?”

- In “Miss Lorraine and Her Fireball,” Maya feels weighed down by their parents’ and grandparents’ expectations, drawn partially from disappointments they experienced in their own lives. How is Yetu’s experience with her community’s memory similar? What does Yetu’s ability to share the burden say about how Maya could move forward?

Universal Themes:

Write down your responses to the following question for 5 minutes. Then discuss with the class Socratic Seminar-style.

- How is “respectability” (the state of being proper, correct, and socially acceptable) determined in your communities (school, family, extracurricular, cultural, religious, etc.)? Is respectability harder for some individuals to achieve than others?
- Do you think respectability is important? Why or why not?
- How have definitions of respectability changed over time? What is an example of a strong social norm that didn’t exist five or ten years ago? What are the benefits and disadvantages of this norm?

Key Vocabulary

Level One	Level Two	Level Three
seedy	fester	respectability
half-baked	impartiality	masquerades
		instigator

Vocabulary Activity Options – Small Group Activities

- 1) Look up the word “fester.” How does this choice of word contribute to the overall tone of Johnson’s work?

- 2) What does the word “masquerade” make you think of? Draw what ideas, objects, or actions it brings to mind. Then look up the definition. Were your ideas closer or further from the definition you expected? Discuss with your small group.

“A Cajun Courir,” by Thea Traff



Participants in a Courir de Mardi Gras, or Fat Tuesday Run, gather under a large tent before the run begins.



The captain recites the rules of the run.



The runners make their way down a muddy country road.



Runners kneel down in the muddy front yard of a neighbor to beg for gumbo ingredients.



A “vilaine” and “the capitaine” stand on a country road. Together, they work to keep the participants in line throughout the day.



A runner pauses on a country road.



A runner drinks a beer in a rice field.



Runners chase a chicken across a front lawn.



A runner holds the captured chicken.



A participant in the sits on the edge of a truck bed.



Runners celebrate the end of the Courir.



A mask lies in the mud after the end of the Courir.

Louisiana’s Cajun country, home to a collection of towns settled by French Canadians in the late eighteenth century, lies in the expansive swamp and prairie region between New Orleans and the Texas border. Each year, on the day before Ash Wednesday, several Cajun towns host Courir de Mardi Gras, a ceremonial run that is believed to have its roots in Medieval French begging customs.

Participants travel the countryside on horseback and on foot, soliciting ingredients for a communal gumbo that is prepared at the end of the run. The most coveted foodstuffs are live chickens, which are tossed into the air by residents and chased down by runners along the way. The elaborate costumes, crafted by participants, were traditionally intended to mock aristocrats; the *capuchons*, or crowned hats, for example, originally satirized the headpieces worn by noblewomen in Medieval France.

Last Tuesday, in the middle of a sleet storm, the photographer William Widmer took part in a run outside Eunice, Louisiana. This *courir* was established eight years ago as an alternative to larger runs that have been overtaken by visiting non-residents. Widmer was permitted to photograph while he ran, but the community asked that its location, and the names of the community members, remain undisclosed. While the cold weather caused the festivities to be cut short, it was, as Widmer told me, “welcomed in a certain way. The first ten minutes everyone was soaked, but the costumes, masks, rain, and mud all reinforced a sense of community.”

All photographs by William Widmer. Thea Traff is a photo editor at The New Yorker.

- 3) View the images and text above. The word masquerade comes from the Latin *masca*, or mask. (Think *máscara* in Spanish or what we call one of our most common beauty products in English, mascara). Many cultural traditions include masks, from Carnaval to Kabuki, from masked balls to Halloween. Why do these traditions exist? What do you think is expressed during these events that is not expressed in everyday life?
 - a. Follow-Up Question: Why do you think the runners in the courir in the above images wanted to be part of a smaller, more local run?

Post-Reading Class Discussion Options – Full Class Discussion

- 1) Masks have often been considered metaphors for personas, or the ways we act or behave for social acceptance or to feel a sense of self-worth. Do you believe it’s important to act in similar ways around multiple groups of people, or is it okay to present in different ways? Why? What parts of ourselves are not exhibited around other people, and what parts of ourselves are only accessible through interaction with other people?

Text-Dependent Question Options

- 1) In “Miss Lorraine and her Fireball,” Maya states “Last week I flirted with two guys who I didn’t even remotely like at a frat party my friends took me to. The first time was to get in. The second, to get alcohol. The third to get in the girl I actually wanted to see and kiss her on their lawn. The fourth time was just for fun.” In what ways do you feel that Maya is being true to themselves by rebelling against their parents? In what ways are they not?

- a. 10 minute follow-up writing activity: write about a time you did something you've never done and felt proud of it. Then write about a time you did something you've never done and felt disappointed, confused, or ashamed.
- 2) Maya writes that their family has conflicting accounts of their cousin Elijah's trip to Vegas. Maya as the narrator says "what happened changes depending on who you talk to. If you ask Tiana, who always seems to be the main instigator in that group, she did nothing wrong, but Elijah smokes the devil's lettuce now and so you can't really trust his word. If you ask Elijah, who's Collins the pastor's son, he'll probably say she was acting like a whore to get free drinks and embarrassing them. If you ask Aliyah, you'll get perfect impartiality, but she still didn't invite Tia to the wedding. But, of course, Aliyah has an image to uphold. She's the one who did everything right: went to a prestigious Christian university where she met her basketball-playing husband, married rich and is currently living happily ever after."

Is Aliyah *actually* "perfectly impartial"? Cite a phrase or two from the text.

Writing Exercises

Narrative

In "Miss Lorraine and Her Fireball," Maya tries to wear purple lipstick to school, but their mother wipes it off. Later they describe how their mother was chastised by their father for wearing lipstick Maya had chosen.

In 350-800 words, describe a time when you were criticized in a way that felt unjust. Was the person who criticized you also chastised for the same behavior? If so, what lessons do you think they learned from it? If not, what insecurities do you think you were triggering in them?

Descriptive

"Miss Lorraine and Her Fireball" quickly turns from a telling of Miss Lorraine's behavior at a party to a reflection of the writer's own thoughts about familial expectation, gender expectations, and how they are "supposed" to behave as a black person.

In approximately 500 words, describe an incident, real or imagined, in which your family encounters an outsider. What is the setting? Your living room, a hockey stadium, a farm on the outskirts of town? What does the outsider want, and what does your family want? Do you have the same goal or different ones? This can be any genre of story.

Analysis

Take a look at some of the historical events that took place when Maya's uncles and parents were growing up. Which stick out to you? How do you think they may have generated an atmosphere of fear in which Maya's parents and uncles felt the need to be respectable to survive? How do you think these events contribute to the fear Maya's parents and uncles have for the younger generation?

Finally, what are some instances of hope during that time period, and today? You may wish to briefly research before responding.

Activity Options

Classroom Activity One

In “Miss Lorraine and Her Fireball,” Miss Lorraine acts as a figure onto which Maya can sort out their feelings and be inspired to live more freely.

Ten-Minute Free Write:

Write the story from the point of view of Miss Lorraine. Describe what she witnesses around her, what she does and why, and some of the thoughts going through her head as she attends Maya’s family’s party.

Classroom Activity Two

Five-Minute Quick Write: Write from the point of view of Maya’s father. Why do you think he told his wife to wipe off the lipstick their child chose for her? Do you think his actions were justified? Why or why not? What about if he told her what makeup to wear more than once?

Follow-Up Activity: Discuss with small groups for five minutes, and then with the whole class.

Five-Minute Quick Write: What if the roles had been reversed? If Maya’s mother had told their father not to wear something because she thought it looked clownish? Would that behavior be justified? What if she repeatedly told him this?

Home Activity

Ask a guardian or older friend or family member about how they’ve expressed themselves throughout their lives. Has it been through fashion, music or conversation? Something else? Have their modes of expression changed throughout their lives?

Take notes on your interview.

Bonus: In a ten-minute free-write, write down what surprised you, if anything, about your interviewee’s response.

Guest Speaker

Option One: Invite the author, Maya Johnson, to speak to the class about their story and their experience as a writer and college student. Ask them to lead a writing workshop.

Option Two: Invite the artist, Scott Gandell, to speak to the class about his artistic inspiration and process. Ask him to lead an art workshop.

Field Trip

Free Onsite Activity:

Visit the current exhibition of Garrett Bradley: American Rhapsody at the Museum of Contemporary Art (152 N. Central Ave, Los Angeles, CA 90012).

How did the exhibit challenge other narratives you've seen of what it means to be black in the United States? What do you think was the artist's intent in capturing joyful moments of black history? Draw pictures or take photos of those things.

Follow-Up At-Home Activity:

Look at your pictures and/or drawings and free-write your impressions. Now consider what is important to document next.

COMMON CORE STANDARDS REFERENCE

This story and its exercises are appropriate for 9th-12th grade. Ninth- and tenth-grade standards are cited.

Vocabulary Activity OptionsCCSS.ELA-LITERACY.L.9-10.4

Determine or clarify the meaning of unknown and multiple-meaning words and phrases based on *grades 9-10 reading and content*, choosing flexibly from a range of strategies.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.L.9-10.4.A

Use context (e.g., the overall meaning of a sentence, paragraph, or text; a word's position or function in a sentence) as a clue to the meaning of a word or phrase.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.L.9-10.4.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, or its etymology.

Post-Reading Class Discussion OptionsCCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.9

Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

Text-Dependent Question OptionsCCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.3

Evaluate a speaker's point of view, reasoning, and use of evidence and rhetoric, identifying any fallacious reasoning or exaggerated or distorted evidence.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.4

Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in the text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the cumulative impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone (e.g., how the language evokes a sense of time and place; how it sets a formal or informal tone).

Activity OptionsCCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.3.D

Use precise words and phrases, telling details, and sensory language to convey a vivid picture of the experiences, events, setting, and/or characters.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.3

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.9-10.3

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.9-10.3.D

Use precise words and phrases, telling details, and sensory language to convey a vivid picture of the experiences, events, setting, and/or characters.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.3.B

Use narrative techniques, such as dialogue, pacing, description, reflection, and multiple plot lines, to develop experiences, events, and/or characters.