

CBLDF Discussion Guide

Superman Smashes the Klan

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Given their visual nature, comics are easy targets for would-be censors. CBLDF's Discussion Guides are tools that can be used to lead conversations about challenged graphic novels and to help allay misconceptions about comics.

Synopsis

Tommy and Roberta, along with their parents, Dr. and Mrs. Lee, encounter a range of challenges after they relocate from the Chinatown neighborhood of Metropolis: Dr. Lee's new co-worker challenges his qualifications, Mrs. Lee struggles with a language barrier, and the kids feel simultaneously sensationalized and ostracized by some of their neighborhood peers. When the Klan zeroes in on the Lee family by burning a cross in their yard, the Lees find support from a sympathetic police inspector, as well as Clark Kent and Lois Lane. But when the Klan escalates their campaign by kidnapping Tommy, Superman knows it's time to use his powers for the same reasons as always: to fight for what's right and protect those who need him.

Themes

Identity, community, family, good vs. evil, racism, xenophobia

Reasons Challenged

May incur resistance by those uncomfortable with community conversations about racial tension and the history of racial violence in America

Suggested Age Range

Middle school and up

Discussion Questions

Remembering

1. Why does the Lee family leave Chinatown?
2. What does Roberta say she misses about her old neighborhood?
3. In what ways do Roberta and Tommy disagree about how to best adjust to their new setting?

Understanding

4. What are some of the early signs that the Lee family isn't welcomed by some people in their new neighborhood?
5. What is the first contributing factor to the disagreement between Tommy and Chuck at baseball practice? How did it get worse?

Applying

6. Superman identifies with Roberta's statement, "I always kind of suspected that I don't belong." Do you remember ever feeling this way, or knowing that someone you care about felt this way? Describe how you felt.
7. What are some of the best things about the neighborhood where you live? What would you change about your neighborhood?

Analyzing

8. Jimmy Olsen believes he is doing the right thing by kicking Chuck off the baseball team because racism shouldn't be allowed. How did this decision affect the story? What is another way he could have handled the conflict?
9. How does Chuck's Uncle Matt challenge Chuck's understanding of what happened at baseball practice? How does he trick Chuck into thinking that the Klan isn't hateful?
10. Why might Mr. Lee seem slow to believe that his family has been targeted by a terrorist organization because of their race?

Evaluating

11. Superman comics have always taught us that even superheroes have weaknesses. What are some characteristics of the main characters in the story that present specific challenges to them?
12. People of color and other marginalized groups experience discrimination every day, but burning crosses are rarely involved. Why did the author choose to focus on a well-known hate group rather than focusing on everyday acts of bias and discrimination? How do these kinds of prejudice interact?
13. Sometimes, people speak out against mean or outright hateful things said to the Lees, like when the priest who helps run the baseball team tells Chuck, "Watch your words." But other times, racist comments and slurs are left unchecked. Find an example of the second situation. How could someone have spoken up to stop this hostility? Why didn't they do so?

Creating

14. The baseball team in the story is organized by faith group leaders who want to bring their community together. List some other ways communities can support diverse populations and respond to discrimination when it happens.
15. How can students respond to racial hostility safely and effectively? What are some ways schools can support students of color and other groups who may feel targeted? Draft a letter to a leader in your school community explaining one or more of your ideas.

Activities

Poster Project

Create a poster or series of posters promoting tolerance in your community. Try finding an image or phrase from *Superman Smashes the Klan* as your theme, such as "Watch your words," or "If you might be able to help another person, you ought to at least try."

Digital Presentation

Research the history of Superman fighting the Klan, as well as other comic book heroes who have taken a stand against hate. Prepare a series of slides (or use another digital media platform or app) to trace this history in words, images, and sound and film clips.

Narrative Writing

Write about a part of your identity, family, faith, or community that makes you feel proud. Tell about a time this had an impact on you: when you first learned about it, when someone challenged it, when it was highlighted and made you feel special, or when someone wanted to know more about it.

Persuasive Writing

Build an argument around a choice made by one of the characters. When you consider other possible choices that character could have made, did they make the best choice? Why or why not? How could they have chosen differently, and what might have happened as a result? Write a letter to that character to persuade them to make a different decision.

Illustration

In either a single panel or a series of panels, create a comic that shows someone standing up to a bully. Include color or shading, background imagery, images, and words that communicate the emotions of the situation.

Additional Reading

Superman Versus the Ku Klux Klan: The True Story of How the Iconic Superhero Battled the Men of Hate, by Rick Bowers. National Geographic Children's Books, 2012.

Take That, Adolph! The Fighting Comics of the Second World War, by Mark Fertig. Fantagraphics Books, 2017.

Let's Talk! Discussing Race, Racism, and Other Difficult Topics with Students. Published by Teaching Tolerance. Free download: <https://www.tolerance.org/magazine/publications/lets-talk>

Comic Book Legal Defense Fund is a non-profit organization dedicated to the protection of the First Amendment rights of the comics art form and its community of retailers, creators, publishers, librarians, and readers. CBLDF provides legal referrals, representation, advice, assistance, and education in furtherance of these goals.
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