

A Review of *Black Bottle Man* by Craig Russell

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Russell, Craig. *Black Bottle Man*. Great Plains Teen Fiction: 2010. 174 pages.

Craig Russell's *Black Bottle Man* packs a poetic punch of love, loss, and adventure, sprinkled with those pesky aspects of the human condition we all end up face to face with at one time or another. The story follows Rembrandt, a young man from a small farming community, on his odyssey toward the redemption and reconciliation of his family members after two of his aunts make a deadly deal with the Black Bottle Man. The age-old battle between good and evil, and doing what is right when right isn't what is easy, gets revamped in a setting that moves between depression-era hobo camps, modern big-city streets, and contemporary scenes involving terrorism and even mental illness.

The story is told from the point of view of two characters, Rembrandt and Gail, from two entirely different backgrounds and lifestyles, yet who share the familiar weight of responsibility that comes with serving a higher purpose. We meet Rembrandt as an elderly vagabond making his way from shelter to shelter as he provides insights into the realm of homelessness and loneliness. Gail is a former teacher attempting to carry the burden of surviving a school shooting. They appear to share almost nothing in common and as the story progresses, their connection largely remains a mystery. Both characters provide us with narratives that switch between present and past perspectives, providing readers with insightful opportunities to learn how they grow into the heroes they eventually become.

Allusions to Julius Caesar and Greek mythology throughout the novel provide high school students with opportunities to make connections between the ancient heroes of the classical literature they tend to (begrudgingly) study, and the modern-day, troubled champions our story presents us with. As such, the novel encourages students to question their definitions of heroism, while simultaneously challenging their notions of family, home, and true love. With *Black Bottle Man*, Russell gives teachers the chance to thoughtfully engage their teenage students in considering how our society shapes our idea of what is moral and right, when our ability to make those decisions for ourselves can often thrive in individualism.

If there are any challenges that could arise from teaching this novel, they are likely to deal with the spiritual and religious themes embedded into the storyline. After all, the Black Bottle Man turns out to be Satan himself and there are mentions of biblical passages, characters, and conspicuous Christian beliefs that move the story along to its ending. While teaching the novel might not be seen by most as an attempt to preach the gospel, there is always the possibility of students feeling singled out, left out, or even pressured to accept religious values that are not their own.

In a time when our students are likely to get up from their desks, pull out their mobile devices, and allow themselves to be absorbed in the trivial centrality of the media, a story like this one gives us the chance to emphasize how important it is to remain aware that there are always two sides to every story—and sometimes more than that. Our perceptions should not be deemed judgements, and our decisions always come with consequences.

Author Biography

Jessica is a senior at Wichita State University (WSU) majoring in Secondary English/Language Arts Education and minoring in Linguistics. She has worked as a paraprofessional for USD 259 and is

excited to begin teaching after graduation. She is fascinated by language and communication, and she hopes to inspire future generations to discover and develop their own voices. In her free time, she enjoys reading lengthy novels, playing word games, and writing. Above all, she loves making memories with her young son and partner, and plans to spend the summer cherishing family and soaking up as much sunlight as she can before student teaching in the fall. She can be reached at jrrodriguez1@shockers.wichita.edu.

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