

web links

www.shuttacrum.com

Shutta Crum's website

www.itvs.org/strangerwithacamera

"Stranger with a Camera," a website detailing this story's real-life inspiration

www.coaleducation.org

Coal-mining sites for teachers and students

www.friendsofvista.org

The Friends of VISTA (Volunteers in Service to America) website

www.gi.grolier.com/presidents/aae/side/waronp.html

The War on Poverty (A Grolier Encyclopedia article)

www.memory.loc.gov/ammem/fsahtml/fahome.html

WPA information, Dorothea Lange and Walker Evans photographs from the Library of Congress

www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/hsb/about/history.htm

Head Start: a short history of the program

SPITTING IMAGE

by Shutta Crum
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by Shutta Crum

READER'S GUIDE

"Finding your place in the world isn't that easy. Sometimes you have to push out and clear a space you can claim for yourself. And sometimes, when you're not even thinking about it, a space just opens up and you walk in and meet the outside world that's come looking for you. That's what happened to me when we ran into the Hiram Hardware store that day."

—from Spitting Image

Twelve-year-old Jessie K. Bovey has a lot to worry about. She doesn't know who her father is; her old biddy of a grandmother keeps interfering in her life; her best friend, Robert, desperately needs new glasses that his family can't afford; and mean Dickie Whitten teases Robert until Jessie has no choice but to punch him out.

When some New York City reporters show up in Beulah County to research a story about the War on Poverty, Jessie sees a way to solve one of her problems. She can charge money for showing the reporters around town so they can take pictures of the "local color" and use it to help pay for Robert's glasses. But her plan backfires spectacularly, and Jessie learns some big lessons—and some big secrets as well.

A small Kentucky town and its quirky inhabitants are vividly evoked in Shutta Crum's warm, atmospheric coming-of-age story, which handles multiple serious themes with a light touch.

★ DISCUSSION

Anger Management: Why do you think Jessie is so angry all the time? How is she working to control her anger? Why does she want to control her anger? Do you think she will succeed? Why or why not? ★

Community: The author says that Baylor is a “close-knit” community. What does that mean? What are some examples the author uses to demonstrate that? How does the newspaper portray Baylor? Would you like to live in a close-knit community? Why or why not?

Families: All families have issues that are dealt with, or need to be dealt with. Discuss some of the families in *Spitting Image* (i.e., the Boveys, the Whittens, the Ketchums, the Weavers, and Lester’s family). What are some of the family issues that each is dealing with?

Friendship: How are Jessie and Robert alike? How are they different from each other? What causes Jessie’s mother, Mirabelle, and Warren to be such good friends? What do you admire about people who are your friends? What do you look for in a friendship?

Heredity: We are all endowed with certain traits from our parents and grandparents. Jessie tries to sort out her feelings about this. Where does her smile come from? Her eye color? Other aspects about the way she looks or acts? Think about yourself. Where might you have gotten your smile? Your hair color? Jessie worries that she might have “bad blood” in her. Do you think that she is destined to behave in certain ways because of heredity?

Poverty & Stereotypes: Sometimes people make assumptions about others that are based solely on shallow or quick observations. For example, some of the people in Baylor have stereotypes about “up North do-gooders.” Can you list some of them? What other examples of stereotyping can you find in *Spitting Image*? How does stereotyping lead to trouble? Is it ever helpful? ★

When stereotypes are broken, people can often see others in new ways. Do you think the newspaper reporter and photographer were able to see poor people in a new way? What do you think they learned about the people of Baylor? ★

Prejudice & Racism: Jessie’s mother and her friend Warren suffered ill treatment because of racism in the 1950s. At the time of Jessie’s story, the 1960s, does racism still exist in Baylor? Why do you think so, or not?

EXTENSION ACTIVITY

Research and collect copies of photos from the Works Progress Administration like those by Dorothea Lange and Walker Evans. What do you think the photographers were trying to accomplish? Did they succeed? Discuss your emotional reaction to these pictures, or write a story using a person from one of the photographs as a character.

FROM THE AUTHOR ★

When I began to think about writing a novel for older readers, I had in mind an image of a girl and her grandmother. I knew what kind of person the girl should be. I knew what kind of person the grandmother should be. But I did not know what kind of story my book should be. What could I have these two people do? I had characters, but no story!

Months later I learned of a true incident that happened in Letcher County, Kentucky, in 1967. A Film Board of Canada photographer, Hugh O’Connor, had been filming the poverty in the area under the auspices of the U.S. government. He was shot and killed by a local landlord. The man who killed him was sentenced to only one year in prison. ★

My local PBS station aired a documentary film about the case, “Stranger with a Camera.” It explored the issues of shame and dignity, and talked of how people felt when they became the poor ones pictured in the media for the entire world to see. Suddenly I knew what my story should be! And I would set my story in my native Kentucky, a place I have a great love and respect for.

I was born in southeastern Kentucky, in Paintsville, in 1951. It was coal-mining country. A lot of people who lived there were poor. Although we moved to Michigan when I was still a baby, I spent many happy summers down home as I grew up. I loved going there. I loved the smell and shape of the mountains, the great food, and the laughter of the good people who were proud of accomplishing so much with so little.

I hope you enjoy Spitting Image!

—Shutta ★

PRAISE FOR SPITTING IMAGE

*“Truly memorable characters abound . . . knitted together in an absorbing plot with an uplifting ending. A remarkable first novel.”

—*School Library Journal*, starred

“Best of all, though, is Jessie’s family story . . . told with truth, tears, laughter, and real surprise.” ★

—*ALA Booklist*

“An engaging and believable narrative voice . . . The tender touches of the loving characters embrace both Jessie and the reader.”

—*Bulletin of the Center for Children’s Books*

“Feisty, thoroughly appealing narrator . . . engrossing reading . . . authentic, resounding voice . . . humorous . . . heart-wrenching . . . an affecting portrait of memorable characters in trying times.”

—*Publishers Weekly*