



Scum

James C. Dekker

Interest level: grade 7 and up

Reading level: 3.0

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AR Quiz # 126436

Book Summary

Megan and her father know that Danny, Megan's older brother, is selling drugs, but still they are stunned when two detectives knock on their door with news that Danny had been shot and killed. Megan's mother falls apart while her father does his best to try to find out who killed Danny, calling the police detective every day and relentlessly questioning people in the bar where Danny was shot. When Megan talks to Titch, a kid who was working in the bar on the night Danny was killed, Titch gets killed as well. No one cares that Danny is dead; no one except Danny's family, and even they must eventually choose to let go of Danny's death.

Prereading Idea

Crimes involving seemingly random murder continue to increase in number; many go unsolved. Ask students to investigate recent news articles in their city and locate an article discussing an unsolved murder. On a 3x5 card, ask students to write the main details: location; time of day; race, gender and age of victim; weapon used; and any other pertinent facts. Then ask students to graph and analyze the factual information, looking for trends in the data.

Connecting to the World—Writing and Research Ideas

When families lose a child in tragedy, the grief they suffer is often different than losing a family member who has lived a full life and died of natural causes. Ask students to study the stages of grief and how, as in this story, people often handle their grief in different ways. Have students use the information they gather and prepare a brochure to be used in local trauma centers or cancer facilities to comfort and inform families dealing with grief.

Danny's case will become a cold case file or an unsolved murder because it will not be solved in a timely manner. However, even murder cases that result in convictions are often fraught with delays and appeals. Have students work in groups of 3 to 4 to investigate the steps involved in securing a murder conviction and actually assuming that the convicted person spends time in prison. Groups may want to select to present their research in various formats such as flow charts, timelines, charts, graphs or other visual aids.

Danny was very much a character in the story even though he was dead from the beginning of the book. Ask students to write several journal entries through Danny's voice using their imagination and what they know about Danny's character and the role he played in his family. The journal entries could be pieced together to make one book for a classroom journal.

Connecting to the Text—Elements of the Novel

Point of View

This story is told completely from Megan's point of view. She says on page one, "Here's a day I'll never forget." Megan then relates the events surrounding her brother's shooting and what it means that he was "known to the police." What other character in the book could have told the story? How would the story have changed if Danny or one of his parents told it? Ask students to pick a scene and rewrite the scene from one of these points of view. Ask students to use dialogue and to set the scene using the character's voice. Then ask the students to read their rewrites to the class.

Conclusion

Megan's family is left falling apart. The reader knows that Megan and her father are going to be alright. They have accepted who Danny was and decided to move through the pain of his loss. But what about Megan's mother? With a partner, ask students to write a brief, but plausible outline of what they predict might happen based on what they know about Megan's mother. From the outline, students should write the conclusion in one or two pages and then read the alternate endings to the class.

Connecting to the Students—Discussion Questions

1. Megan's mother is shocked when the detectives give the family the news that Danny has been shot in a bar at 3:00 in the morning. She is even more shocked to learn that he is "known by the police." What does this say about her relationship with her son? Does she know more about Danny's activities than she lets on to Megan and her father? What evidence in the book supports your answer?
2. Danny's father is nothing if he is not persistent. Why is no one willing to speak to him at the bar where Danny was killed? What is Megan's reaction to the reception her father receives from the people in the bar? Is it a normal reaction? Why or why not?
3. When Megan realizes that her family is not "back to normal," she leaves school upset. Why does she take the bus to the bar where Danny was killed? Why is Megan so angry at Titch? Why does Titch get in trouble?
4. Megan knows that Titch knows something and that he is embarrassed for not telling her what he knows. Why is she so persistent in hounding him for information when Titch is obviously not going to tell her anything?
5. Because Detective Rossetti continues to tell him the police "have nothing to go on," Megan's father finally decides to offer a reward to try to prompt an informant to come forward. Why is Megan's mother so opposed to the reward? After they decide to retract the offer of the reward, do they give up on finding the killer? Why or why not?
6. The bartender tells Megan that Titch was a great kid with dreams and that he is dead because of "scum like Danny." What did Danny have to do with Titch's death?
7. Did Megan finally change her feelings and attitude toward Danny? What did she come to believe about her brother?

Writer's Craft

Dramatic Irony

Ask students to define dramatic irony and then to find examples of it in the first two chapters of the book. How does this help build suspense? Ask the students to make a list of information that the author allows the reader to know about Danny that his mother does not know.

Author Biography

James C. Dekker is a first-time author and a new voice in teen fiction. He lives in Toronto, Ontario, and, as far as he knows, is not known to police.