

AN EDUCATOR'S GUIDE FOR CLASSROOM USE



The Walter Award Honor–winning author of *Root Magic* returns with a terrifying story in the Southern Gothic tradition, inspired by the Hoodoo practice of hair burning.



ABOUT THE BOOK

At night, Roddie still dreams of sitting at his mother's feet while she braids his Afro down. But that's a memory from before. Before his mom died in a tragic accident. Before he was taken in by an aunt he barely knows. Before his aunt brought him to Dogwood House, the creepiest place Roddie has ever seen. It was his family's home for over a hundred years. Now the house—abandoned and rotting, draped in Spanish moss that reminds him too much of hair—is his home too.

Aunt Angie has returned to South Carolina to take care of Roddie and reconnect with their family's Hoodoo roots. Roddie, however, can't help but feel lost. His mom had never told him anything about Hoodoo, Dogwood House, or their family. And as they set about fixing the house up, Roddie discovers that there is even more his mother never said. Like why she left home when she was seventeen, never to return. Or why she insisted Aunt Angie always wear her hair in locs. Or what she knew of the strange secrets hidden deep within Dogwood House—secrets that have awoken again, and are reaching out to Roddie...



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Eden Royce is a writer from Charleston, SC, now living in the Garden of England. She is a Shirley Jackson Award finalist for her short fiction for adults. Her debut novel, *Root Magic*, was a Walter Dean Myers Award Honoree, an ALA Notable Children's Book, a Mythopoeic Fantasy Award winner, and a Nebula Award Finalist for outstanding children's literature. She is also the author of *Conjure Magic*. Find her online at edenroyce.com.

PHOTO BY TIM HENSEL



A LETTER FROM AUTHOR EDEN ROYCE

DEAR READER,

I've had several people ask me why I've written a haunted house novel for kids. "The world is already scary! Why would you want to add to it? How can a creepy book benefit kids?"

Well, I'm glad you asked.

The Creepening of Dogwood House isn't only a haunted house book. It's a book about fighting for your place in the world, about learning how to remember your loved ones, and about how the real scary thing in life is starting all over again when you really don't want to.

I wrote this book because kids, even those younger than Roddie, need to know it's okay to be scared. Not only okay, but it's normal. It's normal to worry about brand-new situations. Normal to be afraid of the unknown. Normal to have to have fear, whether it's of a monster or of a huge, creepy house, or of living without a cherished loved one who is no longer with you.

Spooky books can show young readers that it's possible to face the big, scary things—even if it's hard. Adults have lots of juggling in their everyday lives. It's sometimes hard to remember that kids do as well, such as school, family, friends—or the lack thereof—and all the ups, downs, joys, and heartaches growing up brings.

I wrote *The Creepening of Dogwood House* to let kids know that even if tragedy strikes, there's still a way to find a place for themselves. Even when it seems like everything is going wrong, there's still something to fight for. That things will get better, if they only keep pushing through the darkness.

I hope Roddie's story of grieving, starting over, and fighting for his new family will resonate with you, and will find a place in your hearts and on your shelves. Thank you so much for reading.

With sincere appreciation,
Eden Royce



PRE-READING ACTIVITY

Have students respond to the following prompt: **What is a story that you learned from someone in your community?** It could be from a family member, someone who takes care of you, someone you look up to, or someone who is your teacher. What do you think is the most important part of the story they shared with you? Why might sharing stories be an important part of community?



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

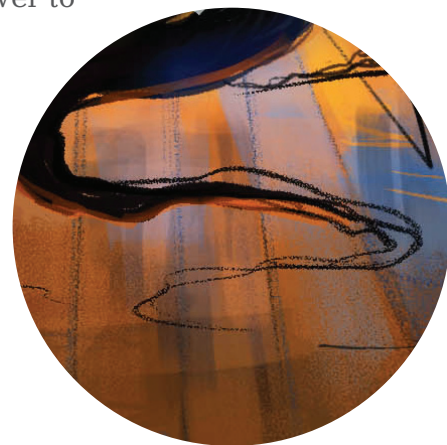
- 1** Discuss this book's opening. What's the significance of both the story and Roddie being introduced with a dream?
- 2** Roddie remembers his mom telling him that "adulthood comes faster than you think, and it lasts the rest of your life." **[Page 5]** How does this statement apply to Roddie throughout the novel? In what ways does he want to or need to act like an adult? In what ways does being a kid help him?
- 3** Aunt Angie calls herself a "fixer." **[Page 184]** Describe a fixer in your own words. Now consider who are the other fixers in the story? Pick any character (living or passed) and describe the ways in which they are a fixer.
- 4** Early on, Roddie is certain his aunt and uncle won't be able to believe him when he describes what he's seen happening in the house. What changes his mind or why does he decide to tell them anyway at the novel's conclusion?
- 5** In what ways do places, not just people, have memories? What role does place memory play in the text (consider, for example, Dogwood's changing floor plan)? How does it affect the plot as well as your understanding of the characters?
- 6** Readers only get to know Layla through the memories of others (Roddie, Aunt Angie, and even the house). In a story in which memory plays a major role, what do you make of Layla as a "remembered character?"
- 7** "Gotta keep pushing through the dark, baby. Keep going no matter what." **[Page 11]** Roddie remembers these words from his mother many times throughout the story. While this advice certainly applies to Roddie's supernatural challenges, what else (and who else) does this advice apply to in the story?



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- 8** Consider what Erik tells Roddie about grief. **[Page 159]** What do you think of his comment that “kids need special handling sometimes” and his decision to be more direct instead? Consider also Roddie’s initial reaction of disappointment that he wouldn’t be back to normal in a year or so. Given what Erik shares with him about grief and loss, what is Roddie’s new understanding of healing?
- 9** This novel fits nicely (or creepily) into the genre of Southern Gothic, particularly with regard to the role of the story’s setting. Describe the effects that the hot South Carolina country and Dogwood House have on the plot and characters. Consider the ways the setting itself is a character in the story.
- 10** Bridgeweaver is described as a hateful being, who enjoys wielding the power, not only to inflict suffering but also to compel others to inflict harm. What connections can you draw between Bridgeweaver and the human power to cause suffering and harm?
- 11** Hoodoo is a set of ethnoreligious practices that, among other things, heavily emphasizes honoring one’s ancestors. Roddie learns how important Hoodoo has been in his family, going back to the beginnings of Dogwood House and even further. What do you think is the significance of Roddie communing not just with his ancestors (like Jackie) but also with the house itself in this story that centers Hoodoo?
- 12** “Not all of that history is positive, but still it isn’t something we should hide or erase.” **[Page 30]** Choose a moment in the story or one of the characters that you think connects to this quote and explain why. Be specific!
- 13** Roddie wonders if good memories are worth the bad. **[Page 237]** Aunt Angie says “we can’t leave behind the bad memories if it means losing the good.” **[Page 255]** What are they each saying? Describe the meaning of these statements in your own words. How does the mutual importance of good and bad memories play out in the high stakes of the novel?
- 14** Choose a part of the text that provides foreshadowing for a later event or situation. (For example, when Erik says “there’s always a solution. Sometimes you won’t like the solutions, but they are there.” **[Page 82]**)
- 15** Consider the novel’s title. What do you think “the creepening” refers to? Use specific examples from the text to support your ideas.





EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

"Not all that history is positive..." [Page 30] (But It All Matters)

Expand and enhance a unit using *The Creepening of Dogwood House* by connecting the novel's details to the collections and resources at the National Museum of African American History and Culture, such as the [NMAAHC Learning Labs](#). Or consider pairing the novel with one of the relevant texts from the NMAAHC Reading Resources book lists, such as the [Power of Place](#) and [Cultural Expressions](#) lists. And of course, if possible consider a visit (real or virtual) to a museum or a local heritage site (like the [Gullah Geechee Heritage Corridor](#)) for your class.

All (Un)Known School Rooms

In small groups, students will work together to create a floor plan of their school—assign each group a different area. Students should take accurate measurements, draw their floor plan to scale (math skills or floor plan apps can help here), label each space, and note all windows and doors. Make a copy of all the floor plans and have students trade so no group has the floor plan they themselves created. Students will then make changes to the new floor plan (different labels, mysterious rooms, etc.) to "creepen" the school.

Weave a Weaver

Have students work in pairs or individually to create a portrait of the Bridgeweaver with found objects. String, paper scraps, beads, feathers, rocks, leaves, and more are great materials for students' collages. Students should try to capture the descriptions of the Bridgeweaver given in the text as much as possible. But that leaves plenty of room for creativity to make their portrait as frightening as possible!

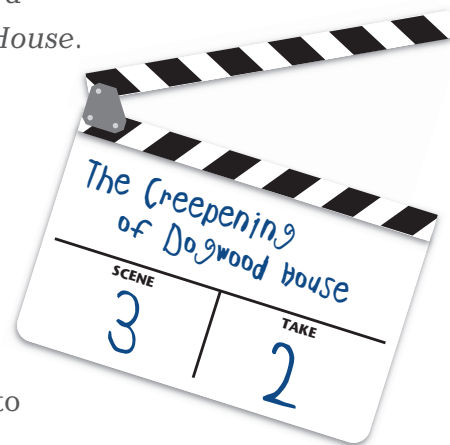


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Lights – Creepy – Trailer!

Have students work in two or three large groups to create a one-minute book trailer for *The Creepening of Dogwood House*. Watch some similar gothic book trailers as a class for inspiration, and allow each group to decide on live-action, animated/drawn, still-shot, or other filming methods (consider what your classroom/school resources and time constraints best support). Groups should divide up the work of scripting and storyboarding, art/props creation or digital staging, voice performance and acting, and camerawork and editing. Screen the trailers or post them to the school/library's social media to recommend the novel.



Hoodoo You Know

Have students make a list of five questions they have about Hoodoo. Questions in hand, students will research answers from authoritative sources, starting with the accompanying essay in this guide. For more help with authoritative sources, students should work with their school or public librarian for help. Students will then write a brief report about what they learned (did they find answers for their questions or not?) and how their expanded understanding of Hoodoo connects to their understanding of the novel.

These educational activities were written by Anastasia Collins, MA, MLIS, librarian, youth literature scholar, anti-oppression educator. Follow them at [@DarkLiterata](https://twitter.com/DarkLiterata).



THE ROOTS OF HAIR AND HOODOO

by Sara Makeba Daise

The creation and evolution of Hoodoo, much like the manifestation of Gullah Geechee culture and identity, is greatly informed by the natural environments enslaved Africans and their descendants inhabited, and the wisdom, understanding, and spiritual practices they brought with them to North America. Beyond the Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor and surrounding areas, Hoodoo has origins in the Southwestern and Northeastern United States as well. In each of these regions, Africans, and later African-Americans, developed a unique technology that has been intentionally passed down through generations.

What is Hoodoo, exactly? Some practitioners consider Hoodoo a religion. Others see it as a set of daily communal and cultural practices. And even others describe it as simply "what we do," without considering it Hoodoo at all. Though personal opinions vary, there are some indisputable facts. Enslaved Africans and their descendants developed Hoodoo as a means of survival, resistance, liberation, and spiritual and communal continuity in the midst of chattel slavery.

Like the childhood stories Aunt Angie recalls and shares with Roddie, Hoodoo is largely an oral tradition. Often knowledge of rituals was passed down within families. Griots, djelis, or storytellers have always been of great importance in African diasporan

cultures. Elders and family members intentionally share pertinent knowledge with the next generation. Sometimes the stories may be scary, or even difficult to take seriously. In other instances, some families may be leery of sharing an awareness of Hoodoo with others. Black communities made intentional efforts to protect sacred information from those who'd seek to demonize, appropriate, and exploit Hoodoo's power.

Aunt Angie introduces Roddie to the custom of hair burning. Young Gullah Geechee and Black Americans were taught to carefully discard their shed hair. It was believed that without doing so, a bird would collect the hair and make a nest out of it. This would cause the individual whose hair was used to get terrible headaches. Children throughout the South and Northeast were encouraged to destroy their shed hair to avoid unnecessary pain. In *Dogwood House*, this story takes on new wings with the Bridgeweaver.

This belief comes from a shared African understanding that parts of a person's essence are contained in their hair.



Map of Gullah Geechee Heritage Corridor
Credit: Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor Commission



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The relationship between African-Americans and their hair is significant, and discernment is used when allowing others to touch it. Items containing a person's DNA were regularly destroyed with the intent of protecting one's self from the nefarious intentions and actions of others. Another related Hoodoo tradition is to cover one's footprints in the ground behind them. It is believed someone could use that dirt to cause the individual harm.

Ancestor veneration is an integral aspect of Hoodoo. Many Indigenous cultures believe that life does not end at death. The spirits of deceased loved ones continue to exist, offering comfort, protection, blessings, and understanding to their living family members. This was Roddie's experience when his ancestor Jackie visited and helped him better understand Dogwood House. By working with the spirit of his great-great grandmother, as well as the notes his mother had left behind as a young girl, Roddie learns more about Hoodoo, his family history, and himself. He uses the pretzels, and his flint and steel in order to escape the Bridgeweaver's world and save his family. In doing so, he honors another Hoodoo tradition of resourcefulness.

Today, African-Americans are reclaiming the spiritual traditions of their elders and ancestors. Taking pride in what was once demonized by white supremacist narratives, young Hoodoos are uncovering and evolving these sacred practices for their survival, liberation, and upliftment. Naturopathic medicine, sacred circle dancing, communicating with animals, and birth and funeral rites are among the practices that continue.

In the 21st century, many people have answered the call to restore and elevate the significance of Hoodoo in African-American culture and the larger pantheon of African Traditional Religions. Utilizing social media, oral histories, and literature, Hoodoo collectives and societies are being created and sustained. Hoodoo elders are being revered for their wisdom, courage, and the resilience it takes to maintain this important aspect of African American culture. Like Roddie, Aunt Angie, and Uncle Erik, Hoodoos of today are remembering old customs while creating their own.

This essay was written by Sara Makeba Daise (she/her/hers), a fifth-generation Gullah Geechee woman and Cultural History Interpreter from Beaufort, South Carolina. She holds a B.A. in Communication with a minor in African American Studies from the College of Charleston, and an M.A. in Public History from Union Institute & University. An Afrofuturist and multi-dimensional creative, her work invites you to your Being-ness across time and space. You can follow her online: [@saramakeba](https://twitter.com/saramakeba) / saramakeba.com



RESOURCES TO LEARN MORE ABOUT GULLAH GEECHEE NATION AND PEOPLE

ORGANIZATIONS

Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor

The Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor is a National Heritage Area established by the U.S. Congress to recognize the unique culture of the Gullah Geechee people.

Gullah Geechee Initiative Foundation

The Gullah Geechee Initiative Foundation, Inc. is a non-profit organization established to provide services and programs for young people who live primarily on St. Helena Island, SC.

BOOKS



Conjure Island

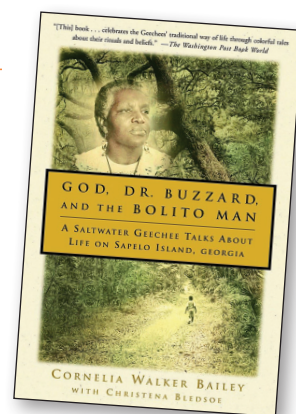
By Eden Royce. Walden Pond Press, 2023.

From the award-winning author of *Root Magic* comes the story of a girl who leaves home to spend the summer with a great-grandmother she's never met—only to discover she runs a school for Southern conjure magic. There is also a free Educators Resource Guide for this book that offers background on Gullah Geechee culture and heritage.

God, Dr. Buzzard, and the Bolito Man: A Saltwater Geechee Talks About Life on Sapelo Island, Georgia

By Cornelia Walker Bailey and Christena Bledsoe. Anchor, 2001.

Equal parts cultural history and memoir, this book recounts a traditional way of life—that of the Geechee Indians of Sapelo Island—that is threatened by change, with stories that speak to our deepest notions of family, community, and a connection to one's homeland.





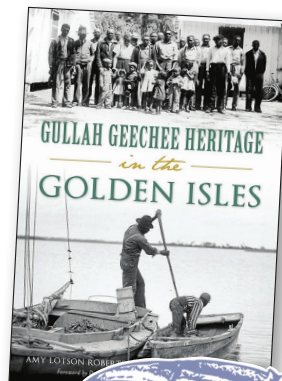
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Gullah Geechee Heritage in the Golden Isles

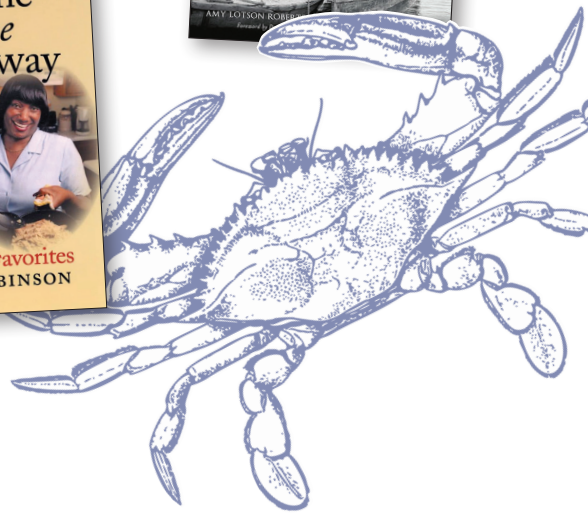
By Amy Lotson Roberts and Patrick J. Holladay, PhD. Arcadia Publishing, 2019.

The Golden Isles are home to a long and proud African American and Gullah Geechee heritage. The authors explore the rich history of the region's islands and their people.



Gullah Home Cooking the Daufuskie Way: Smokin' Joe Butter Beans, Ol' 'Fuskie Fried Crab Rice, Sticky-Bush Blackberry Dumpling, and other Sea Island Favorites

By Sallie Ann Robinson and Gregory Wrenn Smith. University of North Carolina Press, 2003.



Root Magic

By Eden Royce. Walden Pond Press, 2021.

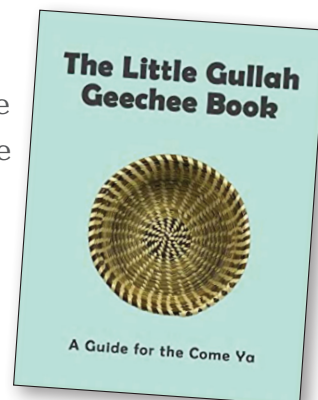
Debut author Eden Royce arrives with a wondrous story of love, bravery, friendship and family, filled to the brim with magic great and small. *Root Magic* is a Walter Dean Myers Honor Award Winner for Outstanding Children's Literature and a Mythopoetic Fantasy Award Winner. There is a free Educator's Resource Guide for this book that offers background on Gullah Geechee culture and heritage.



The Little Gullah Geechee Book: A Guide for the Come Va

By Dr. Jessica Berry. J. Berry Collective, LLC, 2020.

There is a hidden treasure on the tongues of Low-country natives. The melodic rhythm of the Gullah Geechee language still rings strong from the South Carolina inland regions to the Sea Island coasts. This pocket-guide to the Gullah Geechee history, culture and language offers a brief introduction to a United States gem.



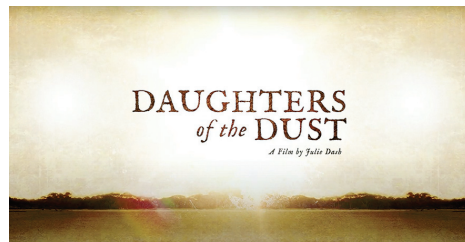


FILMS AND VIDEOS



Daughters of the Dust (1991)

An independent film written, directed and produced by Julie Dash that is the first feature film directed by an African-American woman distributed theatrically in the United States. Set in 1902, it tells the story of three generations of Gullah women as they prepare to leave their ancestral home.



"From Whence We Came": Gullah Geechee Watch Night + Emancipation Celebration

A video created by the Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Commission of a celebration that is over 150 years old: the Watch Night service commemorating the date of January 1, 1863 when enslaved people in the Low Country, the Sea Islands and throughout the United States emerged from bondage as a result of the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation.

Gullah Geechee—the me I tried to flee: Ron Daise at TEDxCharleston

Gift yourself with the impact of your own culture, says educator and historian, Ron Daise, and enrich the lives of others around you.

Gullah Homecoming — Sierra Leone & Gullah People Reunite

A 1989 documentary about the discovery of connections between Gullah Geechee people and the people of Sierra Leone.



Gullah Roots

Follow leaders of the South Carolina and Georgia Gullah Geechee community as they experience a homecoming in Sierra Leone.



BACKGROUND

African American Charleston

A series of articles related by theme that describe the history of African American presence in Charleston, South Carolina. According to the website: "The stories shared here are a varied blend of personal observations, recollections and perspectives shared by our local contributors, a beautifully complex collection of voices."

Interactive Map of Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor

This interactive StoryMap was developed by the Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor Commission in partnership with the Queens University of Charlotte History Department.

