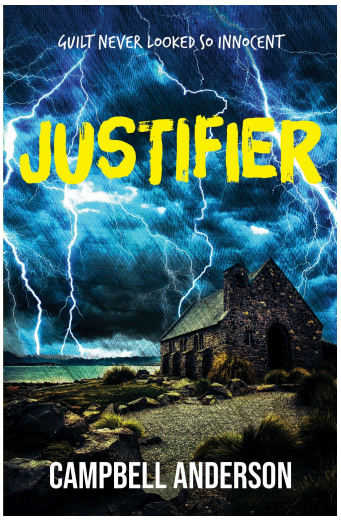
Justifier: Theme & Discussion Guide



For Facilitators:

Justifier is a YA psychological-thriller set in New Zealand's South Island. It focuses on seventeen-year-old Charlie Whittaker as he journeys down the South Island with a young boy named Abe. An unknown event has left them as the only two people in the world, and it's up to them to figure out why and how they can restore the ordinary. This Theme Guide is an introduction to the themes that are woven into *Justifier.* It is a unique glimpse into how struggles are borne out of a range of thoughts, beliefs, and influences, but also an encouragement they can be overcome.

Content warning: contains mentions of childhood trauma and violence. Recommended for ages 14+

Guilt plays a key role in *Justifier*. The roots of Charlie's guilt are revealed towards the end of the novel. At a young age, his father killed his mother in a house fire of which he survived. Charlie has ever since believed he was the reason there was tragedy in the family, so he self-titled himself the dehumanising name Abomination.

On a summer holiday in Akaroa with his Nana, he made good friends with a young boy named Koeghn. This was months after his childhood best friend moved away and they fell out of contact. Charlie is overjoyed to have a friend again. Unfortunately, Koeghn takes advantage of the fact Charlie doesn't have parents, and torments him for this. Charlie loses his temper and hurts Koeghn who dies as a result of his wounds, and is secretly buried.

Charlie takes this as confirmation he is a guilty person. In the present setting, he has a deep resentment for his school bully, Lincoln, and had made the decision to kill him as well, but then an unknown event happened that took everyone away. Charlie's guilt draws a line in the sand between himself and his relationships - with Nana, with his peers, with God, and with himself. Despite this, Charlie naturally deflects Abe's speculation about his past, believing Abe will want to expose and exploit him if they get back to an ordinary world state.

Identity is a recurring theme in *Justifier*, as Charlie grapples with the weight of his past, his motivations, thoughts, beliefs, and actions. The novel shows how all of these factors and other people we interact with can influence identity for better or for worse. *Justifier* shows that the words people say to us and about us - and likewise for ourselves about ourselves - do impact how we view ourselves. Charlie is a realistic character that many teenagers will be able to relate to - fighting the belief that what we have been through in the past shapes our future. That is true, but it doesn't mean an unhealthy pattern must continue. With the right support, we don't have to let our past get the best of us.

For Charlie, he believes his identity consists of being the 'freak' at high school, the outlier, and that there is much speculation on who his parents were. He believes that the rumours spread at school keep everyone guessing who Charlie really is, and every remark about him reinforces the belief that is a freak. Penny shows Charlie that we don't have to give in to those who hurt us; we can ignore and keep our heads held high. Charlie relates with Penny because she understands how much words and the actions of others can mess with one's head.

Masculinity is a theme weaved in throughout the novel. Siding with sound advice, I decided not to say what a 'real man' is, but showed what an unhealthy view of being a 'real man' is. Koeghn, the young boy who Charlie meets while on holiday in 1983, exposes him to what they labelled 'the real man mindset', which is based on stereotypical masculinity being one step ahead of everyone else in life - for Koeghn, that means being ahead of Charlie. Ultimately, Charlie ends Koeghn's life after being tormented. Ever since, Charlie has carried that twisted view of masculinity. In the present setting, 1992, he wants to enlist for the army once leaving school, for the sole reason of being a 'real man'. "That's where real men go to get real training and learn how to fight in the real world. To go on worldwide operations would be the peak of my army career, taking down the opposition and getting to know other like-minded guys who have real balls." It can be summed up that the centre of Charlie's crooked view of masculinity is: real men aren't afraid to deal with what needs doing, and they don't look back on their actions. He believes a real man is a justifier. Of course, he comes to learn that's not how it should be, and has hardened his heart.

Hope is the strongest takeaway from *Justifier*. Charlie at the end of the book is a completely changed person to the one we meet at the start. The great journey he underwent physically gave him the encouragement, closure, and guidance he needed to have a better emotional wellbeing restored.

Charlie's journey shows readers that their past doesn't have to define their future, and that there is hope - we have to be willing to change as a result of laying old struggles to rest.

Post-Completion Discussion Questions:

Guilt:

What is Charlie guilty of, and to what extent can it be justified?

Why does Charlie self-label himself an ‘abomination’, and how does guilt distort the view of himself?

What makes survivor's guilt unique to Charlie's story?

How is redemption shown in the novel, and does Charlie achieve it?

Is Charlie more sincere of his guilt the closer he progresses toward his goal?

What makes religion unique to Charlie's story, and how does it shape his perception of guilt?

What is Charlie running from - his past, his guilt, himself, or something else?

What are some contributing factors that intensified Charlie's guilt throughout the novel?

Hope:

What does hope mean to you, and how is it represented in Justifier?

Is hope possible for a person like Charlie - why or why not?

What does Charlie learn about hope through his journey alongside Abe?

How does Penny’s words and actions spark hope in Charlie?

Describe how Charlie's beliefs about himself and God shift during the train scene.

Why do you think the fantail continues returning, and what does it represent?

Do you agree or disagree with this statement and why? ‘You don't have to be the loaded gun you believe you're destined to become.’

Can someone live a normal life after severe trauma? Discuss with references to Charlie’s journey.

Grief and Trauma:

How do you think trauma affects memory, and how is this portrayed in Charlie’s experience?

How does Charlie view and reflect on his own trauma throughout Justifier?

Do you agree or disagree on the statement: ‘generational trauma can be overcome’? Give reasoning with reference/s.

Do you think grief is better managed alone or with the support of friends and family?

Describe how a particular moment of grief in Justifier affects Charlie’s thoughts, decisions, and behaviour.

How can being lost and finding our way home physically help us navigate the same process emotionally?

Relationships:

How does Charlie's relationship with God influence his understanding of himself, his past, and his future?

How does amnesia shape and influence Charlie's memory of his relationships with others?

How does Charlie’s perception of his parents differ from the reality of their lives?

How does the road trip with Penny help Charlie discover more of himself?

How does Charlie’s relationship with himself change throughout the novel?

Can fractured relationships or friendships be restored? Give examples from Justifier.

How does the relationship between Charlie and Abe change as the narrative progresses, and what is at the root of that?

Obsession:

Why is Charlie so obsessive with vengeance, and what does it tell you about his emotional state?

What are the stakes for Charlie finding out/not finding out the truth about his parents, and how may it change his understanding of his identity?

How does Charlie's beliefs about the world he inhabits shape his decisions and behaviour throughout Justifier?

Why does Charlie ruminate on the past - particularly in an empty world - and what does this reveal about his struggles?

How does reckless thinking impair our decision-making and common-sense? Use examples from Charlie’s journey.

Masculinity:

What are the flaws associated with the ‘real man mindset’, as Charlie and Koeghn call it?

How does a stereotypical perception of masculinity change how we behave and respond to difficult situations?

What do you regard as a healthier view of masculinity personally?

Discuss any dangers or benefits to being exposed to the concept of masculinity while young. Give references from Justifier to support your answer.

Do you think that a vision of what we want to be like can be idolised/worshipped?

Charlie:

How can teenage readers relate to aspects of Charlie's character?

What are Charlie's beliefs about the ‘real man mindset’?

How does Charlie view the way he was when younger?

What causes Charlie to self-justify doing harm to Lincoln?

What do you think beginning-of-novel Charlie would tell end-of-novel Charlie?

What do you think is Charlie's fear, and what is at the heart of it?

Why does Charlie think he is incapable of being Abe's guardian before embarking on the road trip?

Abe:

Discuss some of the child-like traits Abe has in comparison to his overly-mature side?

Why did Abe lull Charlie into false security by masking himself as Lieutenant Ra?

Do you think Abe is a control freak for scaring Charlie, or just a kid wishing he could dictate everything?

Why is Abe determined to help Charlie find out the truth about his parents?

What do you think lies at the base of Abe's intrigue of Charlie's character?

How does Abe's care of Charlie shift as the narrative progresses?

Penny:

How does Penny impact Charlie's life, and what effect does she have on him?

Describe how Charlie relates to Penny's experiences of bullying and ‘running away from the world’?

Is Penny purely a reason for Charlie to keep moving forward with Abe or something more?

What can you gather about Penny's character through her poem ‘Meet Me At Tomorrow’?

Compare Charlie's mistrust of Penny when he first meets her in the windmill as opposed to his trust in her once they journey together?

What kind of closure does Charlie receive from Penny during their final scene together?

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