



## PLAYING THE CARDS YOU'RE DEALT

BY Varian Johnson

### BOOK DISCUSSION GUIDE

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NOTE: This resource was developed by CU students for the 2021 Children's Book Festival hosted by the University of Colorado Boulder's School of Education and Boulder Book Store. It is an open educational resource and can be downloaded at [Home | Children's Book Festival \(colorado.edu\)](https://www.colorado.edu/childrens-book-festival).

#### SUMMARY:

The book *Playing the Cards You're Dealt* by Varian Johnson is about a 10-year-old boy entering 5th grade who loves to play cards. There's an annual card tournament and the main character, Anthony Joplin, wants to win the tournament. Ant, that being his nickname, has big shoes to fill when he plays in this tournament because his brothers, father and grandfathers have won in the past. So, when it comes closer to the tournament, Anthony has this worry that he

won't meet his father's expectations. If the tournament isn't enough to worry about, Ant has a cute and smart new girl, school work, friendships and drama to deal with at home.

The main themes in the book are toxic masculinity, friendship and partnership. These themes are consistently represented, especially toxic masculinity, as Ant seems to be going through his journey of discovering what it means to be a man through the book. The main plot of *Playing the Cards You're Dealt* is that Ant has high expectations from his father put on him for the upcoming spades tournament. We follow Ant through his first few days of 5th grade, where he encounters a new girl named Shirley who happens to be a great spades card game player. Ant's best friend Jamal is his partner in the spades tournament, but when Jamal gets in a fist fight with another boy at school, Ant has to find a new partner. Ant chooses Shirley to compete with, which sends a rift through Ant and Jamal's friendship. Meanwhile, Ant has discovered his father's relapse into alcoholism and gambling, and is faced with many conflicting situations in his household. Ant's father gets kicked out of the house while Ant is attempting and failing to fix his friendship with Jamal. Ant, in an attempt to make his father proud, tells him he and his brother Aron will be competing in the spades tournament and has to tell Shirley they cannot be partners anymore. The book comes to a climax at the spades tournament, where Ant has to face the ultimate conflict of encountering his drunk father. After an altercation, Ant wins the spades tournament with Shirley. This book is so interesting because it covers the topic of a young black man starting to discover what manhood means while encountering conflicting ideals of what it means to be a man from his friends and family. I find this book interesting because the message that the author is conveying is so important, especially younger students.

### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR:**

Varian Johnson is from Florence, South Carolina and was born in 1977. He then went on to earn his BS at the University of Oklahoma where he studied Civil Engineering. Later, he received an MFA in writing for children and young adults at Vermont College of Fine Arts. Johnson has written several books for children and young adults. The books include *The Parker Inheritance*, *The Great Greene Heist*, and *Twins*. Each book individually won awards or got nominated for best book. Growing up, Johnson excelled in many subjects in school. T Varian Johnson wrote *Playing the Cards You're Dealt* because he loves playing spades himself, and he also wanted to explore the feelings you get when you play the game, like feeling confident.

### **Questions:**

- 1) What are the messages that you perceived as you read this story? What does this message (or messages) mean to you?
- 2) Can you relate to any of the characters in any way? If so, who? And how?
- 3) If you were in the shoes of Anthony, how would you handle the stress of meeting your father's expectations?
- 4) How is Anthony's home life? How is he in school? Which subject does he do very well in?

- 5) Do you think his Dad's high expectations that Anthony will play spades and win affected him in school? If so, how? And why do you think it's affecting the academic side of Anthony's life?

### **Specific Chapter Questions:**

Chapter 1-7:

What clues have we been given about Ant's relationship with his dad?

Chapter 7-9:

"Ant couldn't help but notice how it was 'just a joke' when Jamal said stuff, but Shirley was a 'dumb girl' when she did the same" (p. 56). Why do you think Jamal might act this way? How do you think this makes Ant feel? Shirley?

Chapter 10-25:

Ant is receiving conflicting advice about the fight. What was the right thing for Ant to have done in the fight? Is there a right answer?

Chapter 25-36:

What are the differences you see between Ant's family and Shirley's family? How does Ant handle the differences?

Chapter 37-45:

How do you think Ant feels about all of the truths he is uncovering? Why do you think he feels he can't talk about it?

Chapter 46-48:

What are the differences between Taj (Jamal's older brother) and Aron (Ant's older brother)? How do you think these older brothers are affecting their younger siblings?

Chapter 48-52:

What do you think about the ending? Would you say it is a happy ending? A sad ending? An incomplete story?

### **Essay Question:**

Ant has a lot of different influences in his life. Pick two positive and two negative characters and use textual evidence to support how these characters influence Ant throughout the story.

Compare and contrast each character as well as provide analysis as to why they may behave the way they do throughout the story.

### **Extension Activities:**

Host your very own spades tournament! Encourage students and parents to learn the rules of the game, partner up and compete in a tournament.