

The Crossover

Kwame Alexander

Summary

Josh Bell, aka Filthy McNasty, is a solid basketball player. His brother, Jordan, isn't too bad himself. The twin boys, both middle schoolers, have been playing for a long time. Their dad wasn't too bad a ball player himself back in the day either — in fact, he played professionally and earned some good money and good jewelry. But he quit playing, and when Josh tries to broach the question about why his dad stopped and why his dad doesn't take up coaching, dad dodges the questions.

On the surface, Kwame Alexander's verse novel *The Crossover* looks simple. It's about a boy and his brother who play basketball. But it's a much deeper, more complex novel about the challenges that exceptionally "average" characters can have. Josh is a relatable character, with two parents who are happily married. He and his brother get along. They're passionate about the game.

But things become more complex.

Josh and Jordan make a bet with one another relating to the game, and when Josh loses the bet, his brother has earned the privilege of cutting off one of his beloved locks. A misstep, though, leaves Josh with more than one lock cut, and the resulting look is something his mother isn't too happy with. She tells him that he'll have to cut them all off. He's not thrilled about it, but he goes along with it, and when he's sent to look for a box in which he can put those cut locks, he stumbles upon a box containing not just one of his father's precious rings from his time as a ball player, but he uncovers why his father quit the game. This revelation about his father opens up a whole new world to Josh and Jordan about their father and his deep-seeded fears.

As the season progresses, Jordan becomes enamored with a new girl at school. She reciprocates, and the two of them become boyfriend and girlfriend (in the way that middle schoolers are boyfriend and girlfriend — there's no physical action and nothing happens on page here at all if there is). When this relationship begins to bud, suddenly Josh feels left out. His best friend and twin brother has entered into a new phase of life and a new experience that Josh hasn't. They spend less time together as a team and more time apart. It's a huge change for Josh, and at times, it comes across as jealousy and at other times, it comes across as grieving how his relationship with his brother once was.

There's more though. The little secret about their father's future in basketball was just the tip of what Josh discovers. As he's spending more time alone, he's been keeping an eye on his parents and learns that his dad hasn't been feeling well. In one instance, he fainted after not feeling well. While his mother keeps telling his dad to see a doctor, since his other father died young of heart disease, his father won't listen.

He's afraid of doctors.

Between explosive scenes on the court, rendered visually in the text, are the moments of quiet sadness and fear that linger in Josh's mind about his dad and the condition his dad may or may not be in. Spoiler: it's not good condition, and when the basketball season comes to its final game, one that's tense and important, Josh's dad's heart doesn't stay strong enough for him to witness it. The last few pages of this book are tough to read.

The Crossover makes exceptionally smart use of the verse format, without once feeling overdone or leaving the reader with the feeling a lot was lost because of the style. Alexander plays with the format visually in tense action scenes, and Josh's voice comes through. He loves rap and he plays around with rap himself, so the poetry and the beat of this story are authentic, natural, and memorable. This is the kind of story you'd read out loud because it lends itself to that. The speed and intensity of the game pair with the rhythm of the text.

The little details of this book stand out because of the format, and those little details tell us so much about Josh and the rest of his family. His mom is the assistant principal at his school, and he feels more pressure for himself and on the court because of that. Of course, dad's former role as a player doesn't help that. Both mom and dad are supportive in his and his brother's lives and in their passion for the game. Josh is also an average student, and even when things start getting tough for him, what's sacrificed is his behavior, not his intellect or his capacity to do well. Those behavioral changes are done in a way that make you want to hug him and tell him it's going to be all right. He's a great kid, with a great head on his shoulders, and passions that are worth pursuing.

Themes/Subjects

Family relationships
Loyalty/Dedication
Personal Identity
Stick to your Goals
Loss

Helpful Sites

[-commonsensemedia.org](http://commonsensemedia.org)
[-literaryfusions.com](http://literaryfusions.com)



Ahab, 1953

Alexander Calder

Painted metal GIFT OF BRUCE B. DAYTON AND MR. AND MRS. GERALD A. ERICKSON, BY EXCHANGE

G100

From childhood Alexander Calder enjoyed inventing mechanical toys and gadgets. In Paris during the 1920s and 1930s he encountered a new type of sculpture, pioneered by Picasso and the Russian Constructivists: assemblages of wood, metal, plastic, and cardboard, with space incorporated as part of the design. Calder began building similar abstract pieces in 1930 but gave them a new dimension--motion. Fellow artist Marcel Duchamp christened the moving sculptures "mobiles."

One of Calder's largest mobiles, Ahab is composed of three arcs made of steel rods and irregularly shaped disks that suggest natural forms. The title refers to the maniacal sea captain who pursued the white whale in Herman Melville's novel Moby Dick (1851).

Connection:

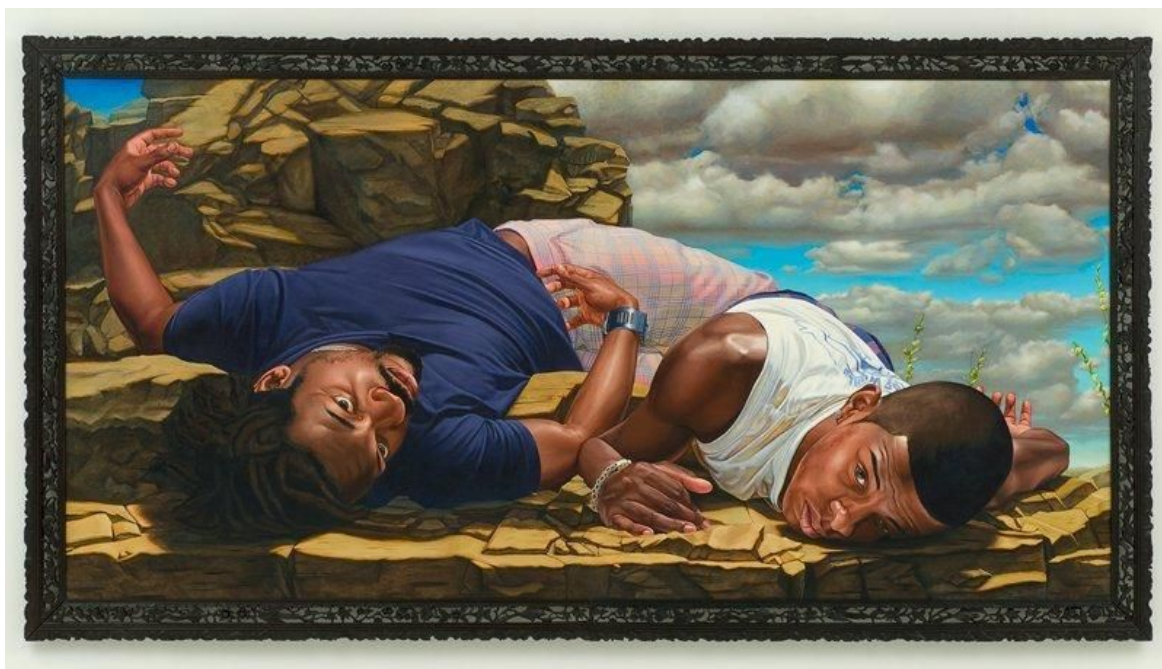
The main character of the book, from whose point of view we see the story unfold, is Josh, nicknamed "Filthy McNasty" by his Dad. Josh, at age 12, is a great basketball player, who describes himself in this way: "...my game's acclaimed, so downright dirty, it'll put you to shame.

My hair is long, my height's tall...". His long locks are a huge part of his self-identity. In the passage, "Five Reasons I Have Locks" (pp.14-15), he says that ever since he saw a clip of his dad playing, in his youth:

"...soaring through the air—his long twisted hair like wings carrying him high above the rim—I knew one day I'd need my own wings to fly."

The Calder mobile, with its black arcs of metal floating in mid-air, can be compared with Filthy's beloved locks soaring through the air as he goes in for a basket. The title, "Ahab", which refers to the "maniacal sea captain" who pursues the whale in *Moby Dick*, also has a connection: Ahab's doomed pursuit parallels the doomed locks, which Filthy has cut off as a result of a bet with his brother. Losing the locks devastates Filthy's personal identity and self perception for awhile.

(See also: "Ode to my hair", p.33, and "Missing", p.43)



Santos Dumont - The Father of Aviation II, 2009

Kehinde Wiley, Oil on canvas

GIFT OF FUNDS FROM TWO ANONYMOUS DONORS 2010.99

G310

Kehinde Wiley is best known for his large-scale portraits of black men depicted in poses that cast them as kings, prophets, and saints in the tradition of "old master" canvases, reminiscent especially of Renaissance and Baroque painting. Wiley's paintings transpose black bodies into the context of traditional European portraiture, challenging the racial marginalization of art history and questioning issues related to identity and self on a global scale.

Santos-Dumont is part of a larger body of work by Wiley called "The World Stage." For this series, the artist traveled to diverse locations around the globe, including Africa, China, India, and Brazil, where he created portraits that explore the international phenomenon of urban youth culture. Wiley met the two young men featured in this painting in a favela, or slum, in Rio de Janeiro. The subjects chose to position themselves as the two "fallen heroes" in a well-known public monument dedicated to one of Brazil's pioneer aviators, Alberto Santos-Dumont. By depicting these black men as the pioneers of Brazilian aviation, Wiley instills his anonymous subjects with a powerful and heroic identity, essentially immortalizing them in oil paint.

Connection:

Josh (Filthy) and his twin brother Jordan (JB) have a complicated relationship; the complications are a result of the fact that they are twins, entering adolescence, who are both stars of the same basketball team and learning to navigate young love, rivalries, expanding athletic skills, and respect for their parents. As they attempt to navigate these adolescent challenges, they have many stumbles and falls.

The two "fallen heroes" in Wiley's painting are posed to portray predecessors of Icarus, who like the mythological figure fell ignominiously when they attempted to fly. Josh and Jordan, like Icarus and his predecessors, have bold ambitions and the egos to match, but they need to "fall" along the way in order to learn to "rise above" their challenges.

Basketball Rule #3 (p.66) is a great quote for this connection:

"Never let anyone
lower your goals.
Others' expectations
of you are determined
by their limitations
of life.

The sky is your limit, sons.
Always shoot for the sun
and you *will* shine."

Another beautiful passage (p. 159) is Josh's apology to JB. This passage can be read as two columns, or by going back and forth as one goes down the page. The last four lines, read going back and forth, work well with the Icarus connection:

“like two stars
stealing sun,
like two brothers
burning up.
together.”

(Note: there are two sculptures of Icarus currently on view, one in G310 and one in G321).



Yoke, c. 600-900

Nopiloa (Veracruz) Stone

THE ETHEL MORRISON VAN DERLIP FUND 41.72

G260

Deflection off a player's midsection was one of the primary techniques of the Mesoamerican ballgame, during which the player's hands were used only at the beginning to put the ball into play. Because the rubber ball itself could injure or kill, significant resources were invested in equipment to protect against broken bones and damaged internal organs. Yokes made of perishable materials such as quilted cotton and wood have been preserved only in their depictions in paintings and sculptures. Stone yokes like this one were probably ceremonial representations, worn at opening and closing ceremonies, awarded as trophies, and placed in

tombs. The imagery on this particularly finely carved example hints at the complex, multi-layered symbolism and religious beliefs embodied by the ballgame. At the closed end of the yoke is a human face peering out through the jaws of a supernatural creature that combines reptile, amphibian, and feline characteristics and lives at the entrance to the underworld. At the open ends of the yoke are carved human heads that may represent the Hero Twins, ballplayers central to the creation story of the Maya and other Mesoamerican cultures.

Connection:

Basketball is serious business. And the game is central to the story; many themes are woven into the various rules of the game, as stated throughout the book. The boys' (and their father's) identity and code for life are wrapped up in, and presented in their discussions and descriptions of how they address the game of basketball.

The Mesoamerican ballgame was, literally, a game of life and death, as the losers were ceremoniously sacrificed to the gods (whether to get into this fact or not, is up to the tour guide). But the importance of the game and the fact that protective yokes needed to be worn during the playing of the game are facts that connect with the great significance that the game of basketball had to the twins. The "Hero Twins", represented on the yoke, are a neat tie-in, as well.

There are several quotes which illustrate the seriousness of the game, many would work well here. The definition of "crossover" (p.29) talks about the "deadly" nature of the move:

..."When done right,
a *crossover* can break
an opponent's ankles.
As in: Deron Williams's *crossover*
is nice, but Allen Iverson's *crossover*
was so deadly, he could've set up
his own podiatry practice.
As in: Dad taught me
how to give a soft cross first
to see if your opponent falls
for it,
then hit 'em
with the hard *crossover*."



Makonde artis
Mozambique or Tanzania
Mask, 1960s
Terra-cotta, human hair, wax
G250

“Open your ears!” is the phrase the Makonde use to describe this clay mask. Created by a woman for an all-female dance group, it’s one of the rare types of African masks both made and worn by women. Eyebrows and a beard of human hair make it appear more realistic, and indeed it has large, open ears. The command to open them was aimed at young women who had finished their coming of age rituals and were about to re-enter society, which is when the mask was danced. Listen to the elder women, they were told, and use their guidance and advice to navigate the new world of adulthood.

Connection:

Josh and JB have a powerful mom. She is the principal of the school and a source of wisdom and discipline for the boys. She is supportive and “cool” about basketball, but she makes sure that the other aspects of their lives, like education and responsibility and accountability, all are given their due share of importance. There are many passages in which his mother’s words of wisdom are imparted to Josh and in which he must use her “guidance and advice to navigate the new world of adulthood.” One notable exchange occurs after Josh breaks JB’s nose (pp. 138-141)

“Boys with no self-control become men behind bars...

...There are always consequences, Josh.

Josh, you and JB are growing up.

You’re twins, not the same person...

Boys with no discipline end up in prison...

...You’re suspended...From the team.”



Shrine head, 12th-14th century

Yoruba

Terracotta

THE JOHN R. VAN DERLIP FUND 95.84

G250

This head's tranquil demeanor and introspective gaze express what the Yoruba peoples consider a person's inner power and essential nature. It is a memorial portrait head that comes from the royal city of Ife in western Nigeria, a center of economic, religious, and political power between 1100 and 1400. Ife artists made striking heads in bronze and terra-cotta that were either part of complete figures or, like here, freestanding. The almond-shaped eyes seem to be encircled by eyeliner, a practice still believed to have empowering properties among contemporary Yoruba, while the neck is creased as though with fat, a sign of prosperity in Yoruba society. The vertical lines covering the woman's face probably reflect the traditional scarification designs used in the Ife kingdom or may represent the veil worn by the royal family.

Connection:

The label for this shrine head refers to this head as that of a "beauty queen". The label could say, in the word(s) of Josh, describing his brother's new girl friend, that the woman represented here is "pulchritudinous" (see p. 55). Alexis (aka "Sweet Tea") plays an important part in the plot development. Because of her relationship with JB, we see a real difference between the twins, and a schism develops, as Josh feels left alone, when JB spends time with Alexis. Josh also thinks maybe he would like to have a girlfriend too. There are a number of quotes to show the feelings of loss and betrayal which Josh experiences; one example is found on p. 91:

"Dad, this girl is making
Jordan act weird.
He's here, but he's not.
He's always smiling.
His eyes get all spacey
whenever she's around,
and sometimes when she's not.
He wears your cologne.
He's always
texting her.
He even wore loafers to school.
Dad, you gotta do something."

Also, consider showing Gerrit van Honthorst's *The Denial of St Peter*, to develop the theme of feelings of betrayal and being alone and the desperation that result from Josh's feelings of being deserted by JB, when he spends time with Alexis.



Eleven-headed Avalokiteshvara Bodhisattva (Jūichimen Kannon), 2012

Yūji Honbōri Cardboard, wood, plastic, pigments

THE JOAN AND GARY CAPEN ENDOWMENT FOR ART ACQUISITION 2012.32A,B

G200

Yūji Honbōri, a trained sculptor, has always been interested in using discarded materials. In 2004 he began experimenting with cardboard boxes from his local grocery store and became fascinated with the delicate, see-through quality of cardboard as viewed through the corrugation. He realized that this could suggest Buddhist notions of impermanence and ephemerality. For the last few years, he has been producing life-size works in cardboard based on famous old sculptures found at Japanese Buddhist temples. This sculpture depicts Eleven-headed Avalokiteshvara, an important bodhisattva in the Esoteric schools of Buddhism, that has 11 heads atop its own—10 bodhisattvas and one buddha that represent the 10 stages of enlightenment preceding eventual buddhahood. It is based on a well-known sculpture made in the 700s, now owned by the temple Shōrinji.

Connection:

Josh and JB's Dad, Chuck ("Da Man") Bell, is a monumental figure in their lives. He is their hero, not just because he was a star basketball player, who gave up a career on the professional circuit, but also because he is full of fun and skill and lessons about basketball and life. They look up to him, but as the story goes on, they begin to realize that their dad is vulnerable and that his health situation is precarious. Thus he is like the bodhisattva, who is more enlightened than we; but the same notions of impermanence and ephemerality that we see reflected in Chuck Bell are also reflected in this bodhisattva figure.

There are a number of quotes about Chuck's various close brushes with heart attacks, and even about his patella tendinitis (see pp.48, 76, 97-98, 201), but one of the "Basketball Rules" (p.71) sums up what ignoring his health issues meant for him:

"Basketball Rule#4

If you miss
enough of life's
free throws
you will pay
in the end."



Polaris, 1987

Martin Wong, Acrylic on canvas

THE P.D. MCMILLAN MEMORIAL FUND 2017.35

G373

Martin Wong was a chronicler of the Chinese American community in San Francisco's Chinatown and the South and Central American, Caribbean, and African American communities on New York's Lower East Side. While much of Wong's work depicts the grittier side of life in New York's East Village, *Polaris* offers an optimistic and fantastical vision. Eight children of various ethnicities sit in a circle, playing marbles, on a large map of the night sky. At the center of both the map and the canvas is Polaris, the North Star, which serves as a guide for navigation. Here the children, like the stars in the Northern Hemisphere, circle around Polaris—a symbolic beacon of a brighter future.

Connection

To Josh, JB, and their mom, Dad is the star of their existence, and their lives circle around him. When he dies, he leaves a huge void in their lives. Just as Polaris is a guide for navigation, and a symbolic beacon of a brighter future, Josh and JB's Dad helped them by brightening their lives and helping them set a course as they navigated the difficulties of growing up.

Josh sums it up on p. 229:

"...My father
Was the light
Of my world,
And now that he's gone,
Each night is starless."



Golden Bird, c. 1919

Constantin Brancusi, Bronze THE JOHN R. VAN DERLIP FUND 55.39

G377

Constantin Brancusi began making abstract sculptures at about the same time Wassily Kandinsky, his contemporary was exploring abstraction in painting. Kandinsky eventually chose to obscure the natural objects that provided the starting point for his abstractions, whereas Brancusi took natural forms to an extreme of simplification but never completely excluded them from his work. Golden Bird belongs to a series of twenty-eight marbles and bronzes exploring the theme of birds and their flight, which Brancusi executed between 1910 and the early 1950s. His inspiration for these sculptures was a Romanian folktale about a dazzling golden bird called the Maiastra, whose magical song restored sight to the blind and youth to the aged. The shiny polished bronze of Golden Bird recalls the Maiastra's brilliant plumage, and the vertical thrust of the neck suggests open-throated song.

Connection:

Brancusi's image of a majestic bird in upward motion, thrusting its neck heavenward is symbol of salvation, redemption and healing. The inspiration for the piece is Maiastra, who restored sight and youth; Brancusi has captured that "magic" through the graceful lines and shimmering golden color.

In the final pages of the book, the twins come together to shoot free throws. Their relationship seems to be healing as they share the burden and sadness of the loss of their father. The final shot, the fiftieth free throw in a row to make it through the hoop, seems to be guided by their father.

Two quotes from this passage (pp. 235 and 237) relate well to the imagery of the Brancusi sculpture:

"The next twelve shots are good.
I name them each a year
in my life.
A year with my father.
By twenty-seven, I am making them
with my eyes closed.
The orange orb has wings
like there's an angel
taking it to the hoop."

"I watch
the ball
leave his hands

like a bird up high,
skating
the sky,

crossing over us.”

Other Works of Art/Connections

G240-Family Portrait, by David Sengel: We have suggested this piece a number of times for YBTs. It works well with this book, too, as it is evocative of the prickly relationships and emotions that are involved when one is part of a family, in particular when one is an adolescent.

G380- Pulse, by Tony Cragg: This, too, has been suggested for several YBTs in the past. It has a natural connection when talking about Chuck's (Dad's) heart condition, and his large caring heart.

G213 &218- Hmong (&Miao) Apparel: The festive garb that was made by young women, to be worn in order to be attractive to young men at celebrations, can spark a connection with "Sweet Tea" who attracts quite a few of the boys' attentions in her pink Reeboks and tight jeans.

G223-Dragon and Tiger Screen: The pair of animals, which represent the earth and calm (tiger), and the sky and energy (dragon), in Asian cultures can be used to highlight the differences between the twin boys in the story. Josh is energy and quick brightness, flying through the air to dunk, and quick to react and flash with emotion. JB is sensitive and quietly focused on things, he draws into himself to deal with emotions.

G304-Washington and Monroe Reed by John Brewster: This painting of twin boys can be used to talk about what it is like to have someone else in life who mirrors your identity as you grow up.

G250-Lobster Coffin or Cartonnage of Lady Teshat- These (or any number of other pieces) can be used to discuss the second meaning of "crossing over": not just a basketball move, but crossing over to the next life.

G253-Prominence, by Honda Shoryu- This graceful, flowing basket-like form (looks like an elongated basketball net, if you use your imagination), can be used to discuss all the movement, cadence and flowing words of the text, which emphasize the moves of a graceful basketball player, going in to the net, and dominating on the court. The form actually *crosses over* itself.

