

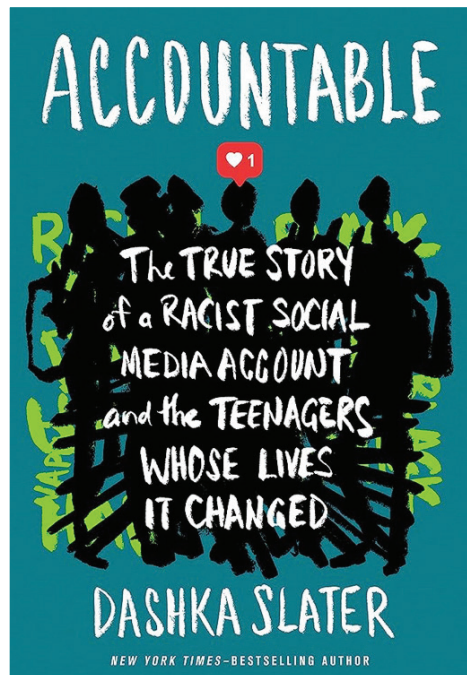
Reading ^{with} Relevance

Building INDEPENDENT READERS and THINKERS

A TEACHER & CAREGIVER GUIDE FOR

Accountable

A book by Dashka Slater



Recommended for:
Grade Levels
9-12

About the Book

Accountable is a book of creative nonfiction, exploring a series of events that started in 2017—when high school students in the small Bay Area town of Albany discovered a private Instagram account used to post explicitly racist images targeting people of color throughout the school community. The fallout and ensuing tensions rocked the affluent, liberal town and swept national news headlines. The book traces the perspectives and experiences of many of the teenagers involved, including those who were directly targeted by the posts, those who created the account and its content, and the bystanders who followed the account. The author, Dashka Slater, spent four years researching the events to provide an incredibly nuanced account of what took place, piecing together details from court documents, sworn declarations, police reports, text messages, diaries, photographs, videos, social media posts, letters, emails, and public testimony, as well as firsthand observations and interviews with many of the people involved. In retelling the story from multiple perspectives, *Accountable* asks readers to examine questions of justice, healing, empathy, and accountability.



About the Book's Author

Dashka Slater is a writer, poet, journalist, novelist, and children's author. She lives in Oakland, CA. Her last young adult book, *The 57 Bus*, was an award-winning *New York Times* Best Seller, earning the Stonewall Book Award, which recognizes exceptional merit relating to the gay/lesbian/bisexual/transgender experience.

About the Authors of This Resource

Reading with Relevance is a nonprofit collective of educators on a mission: sharing and scaling the program we've built for (and with!) our students. Our resources guide young people through the process of reading culturally relevant, socially and emotionally rich literature, breaking high-interest, diverse books into a series of thoughtful lesson plans. Each lesson is designed to support educators to explore the social and emotional themes of the day's reading, inspiring students to read deeply, think critically, talk openly, and write reflectively about topics that matter. Learn more about our program and access our full teacher's guide for this important book at readingwithrelevance.org.

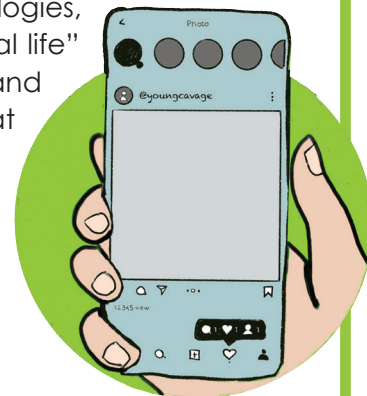


Social and Emotional Themes Explored in the Book

- Harm & Trauma
- Impacts of Social Media
- Hate Speech & Edgy Humor
- Anti-Black Racism
- Gender Norms & Expectations
- Justice & Accountability
- Reconciliation & Forgiveness
- Self-Reflection
- Depression & Suicide

A Note on Social Media for Teachers and Caregivers

There are certainly significant generational differences in how young people and adults interact with social media, and the role it plays in their lives and identities. As the young people in your life are likely active social media users, it is important to understand that for many young people, social media permeates all areas of life. It serves as a source of news, entertainment, education, and gossip; it serves as a source of medical advice and mental health diagnosis; and for many, it serves as the primary space for social connection, including both romance and conflict. Users can be engaged in communication with other users—some whom they have never actually met—at all times of day and night. These ubiquitous communications, sometimes unbeknownst to even the closest adults in a young person's life, can have a significant impact on their mindset, well-being, focus, and safety. Whereas older users might perceive a clear distinction between social media and “real life,” younger users often perceive no such distinction; social media is real life. With its vast range of virtual spaces, social media should be understood not simply as a supplement to the corporeal world, but as a fully developed world unto itself. The world of social media includes its own languages, histories, mythologies, references, celebrities, and belief systems. For some, the blurring of lines between “real life” and social media can distort their sense of self, identity, and perception of reality, and disrupt their academic success. As you read and discuss with your students, be aware that their understanding of social media might differ significantly from your own. Throughout the book, readers witness the ways that social media exacerbates the social and emotional challenges faced by teenagers in today's world. By exploring these themes with the young people in your life, you can support them not only in becoming critical, conscientious, and responsible social media users, but also in taking care of their own mental and physical well-being.



Engaging Discussion

These questions have been designed to support you through the process of thoughtfully unpacking the social, emotional, and social justice themes addressed in *Accountable*, and may be used in a variety of ways, including: reading check-ins, classroom discussion, small group conversations, and short answer writing.

Parts 1-3: Pages 1-96



- What is the author's message in the prologue?
- Why is teasing considered "guy stuff"? What consequences could this have?
- Why does Charles' friends' laughter mean so much to him? Can you relate?
- Look back at The Rules of Instagram (pgs. 41-43). What about the internal workings of social media, or the business model at the heart of the service, surprised you?
- What makes symbols like the noose so powerful?
- Rosie betrayed one friend to help out another. What would you have done in Rosie's shoes?
- Why are the @yungcavage images so harmful? Even if the targeted girls didn't see the pictures, what harm does content like this cause?
- Do you think that people should be held responsible for the accounts they follow? Is it fair for the account followers to be perceived as racist?
- How do you think that school and police officials should have handled the situation after the initial discovery of the @yungcavage account?

Parts 4-7: Pages 99-186



- What do you think about Ms. Geoghegan's comment that schools are ecosystems?
- Wyatt was the only account follower who called out the @yungcavage account's offensive posts. Why do you think he continued to participate in something he knew was wrong?
- What is your opinion about the school's recommendation to expel Charles? Do you think this is the right call?
- Do you agree with Jillian Guffy that social media desensitizes young people? How can this be harmful?
- Reread the four kinds of justice on pgs. 147-148. What resonates with you about these different approaches? Which do you think might help this situation?
- Why do you think the school decided to give everyone the same punishment? Do you think that the students who followed the account should be lumped together, or do you agree with Wyatt's dad that everyone should be treated individually based on their level of involvement?
- What stands out to you about the chapter "The Bystander Effect" (pg. 171)? What keeps people from responding to harms that they witness online and in the world?
- Aishatu Yusuf explores the difference between punishment and accountability on pgs. 185-186. What do you think about her statement that responding to "pain with pain" allows the cycle to continue?

Parts 8 & 9: Pages 189-276



- The author explains, "The more removed the boys behaved, the more furious the girls felt. The more furious the girls got, the more awkward and distant the boys became" (pg. 199). How did this cycle get in the way of a successful mediation session?
- How might the mediation have felt different if the account followers would have simply taken responsibility for their involvement?
- What impact does the protest have on the students who are participating in the mediation session?
- A teacher says that school leaders "let angry, hurt, confused kids be in charge. And that's why it went so horribly wrong" (pg. 225). How do you think the day gets so out of hand? What went wrong, and who could have prevented it?
- Who does shaming benefit? Is shaming working in the case of the @yungcavage followers?
- What do you think of the assertion that racism is learned from family? What responsibility do these families hold for their children's actions?
- Reread "What the Body Remembers" on pg. 256. What stands out to you about this vignette? How does it make you feel to read this mother's perspective?
- Lewis says that the account followers "idly opened a box of cursed American artifacts" and that their parents "were too eager to stuff everything back in its box and shut the lid" (pg. 268). What do you think about this? Do you agree? What do you think is motivating the parents' push for reconciliation?

Part 10: Pages 279-357



- What are some of the coping mechanisms the girls use to handle their emotions? How do the different coping strategies create a wedge between the girls?
- What did you learn about the teachers' perspectives? Did it surprise you to learn how confused the teachers were about how to handle this situation?
- Do you agree with Andrea that the community reactions to the account followers are justified?
- Should the account followers' parents sue the school district? What about the parents of the kids harmed by the account? Are lawsuits strictly about money or is there an element of morality (right vs. wrong)?
- Do you think all speech should be free? In particular, should there be limits around bullying and hate speech? And should free speech protections be different for children and adults?
- The author says, "Even after everything that had happened, [Ana and Charles] still had the same ability to talk openly with each other" (pg. 347). What do you think about this? Did this surprise you?
- In your opinion, should bystanders be punished? Should we have a legal responsibility to be an upstander?

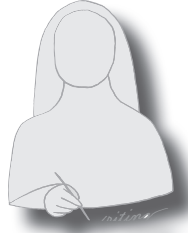
Parts 11-15: Pages 361-454



- Do any of the actual scientific findings about racial difference on pg. 371 surprise you? How does the way we're taught about science influence our perceptions of race?
- Based on what you've read, do you think the Instagram posts were purely for entertainment, or did the boys really believe the content?
- When you come across information on the internet, what do you look for to know that it is reliable? How do you prevent yourself from being misled by false information?
- How do you feel about what happened to Patrick at the Solano Stroll? What does the misidentification of the Black teenagers by the woman who broke up the altercation suggest about her? What does it suggest about Albany?
- Ana's mother can't understand why the families that sued the school district seemed to think that their children's suffering was worth more than her child's suffering. What do you think about this? Can you understand why the girls' parents are so outraged about the settlements?
- Do you agree with Andrea and Ana that the account followers' apologies seem hollow after receiving financial settlements?
- Eliza's boyfriend, Matt, asks Charles: "Have you ever considered that maybe you seek attention in unhealthy places?" (pg. 409). How would you respond if someone asked you this question? Are there ever times when you seek attention in unhealthy ways?
- How does the 2020 murder of George Floyd impact the account followers and its targeted students?
- Do you think the use of social media to publicly call out people who interact with racist content is effective or productive? What effect does this kind of strategy have?
- How do you feel about the way the author chose to end the book with Andrea's leap? What might her leap represent? What is the author's message in the prologue?
- The author chose to title her book *Accountable*. What have you learned about accountability from your reading? Why do you think this book is an important read for teens at this moment in history?

Reflective Writing

Accountable explores several important social and emotional themes: harm & trauma, impacts of social media, hate speech & edgy humor, anti-Black racism, gender norms, justice & accountability, reconciliation & forgiveness, self-reflection, and depression & suicide. Throughout your reading, help students think about, discuss, and share their thoughts on these critical themes by reflecting on how each is developed in the book. This will prepare them to write reflectively on one or all of the following topics.



Topic #1

- The author opens the book with a profound question by renowned author, educator, theorist, and social critic, bell hooks: "How do we hold people accountable for wrongdoing and yet at the same time remain in touch with their humanity enough to believe in their capacity to be transformed?"

How does *Accountable* address hooks' question? How has the book influenced your thinking about punishment, accountability, and their connection to justice?

- » Define punishment and accountability. How do they differ? What purpose does each serve?
- » Present and explore examples of punishment, accountability, and healing from the book. What impact do these examples have on those targeted by the account, those involved with the account, and the community at large?
- » The author says, "True justice requires *listening*, with curiosity and compassion, to the human stories behind the headlines" (pg. xiii). How did this book help you see the humanity and complexity of its characters?
- » In the case of the @yungcavage account, was justice served? Was the punishment fair? Was accountability demonstrated?

Topic #2

- Teenagers are no strangers to humor that is intended to push the boundaries of acceptability. The shock value of racist, sexist, antisemitic, and homophobic jokes makes them appealing, despite—or maybe because of—the potential risks and consequences.

What does *Accountable* teach us about edgy humor?

- » How do you define offensive humor? What are the standards and who gets to define which beliefs are harmful?
- » In what ways can a joke cause harm, even if the person making it doesn't intend to be offensive?
- » How should offensive humor be addressed? What does it look like to "not tolerate" harmful beliefs—like racism, sexism, antisemitism, and homophobia—in humor? Who is responsible for interrupting offensive humor?
- » Cyberbullying and offensive humor is rampant in middle and high schools across the country. What can schools do to prevent this kind of harm from happening?

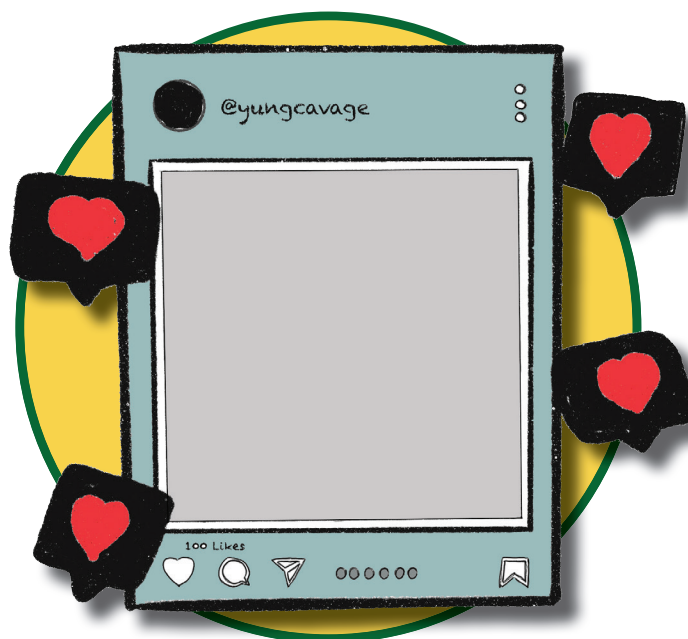


Topic #3

- Throughout *Accountable*, readers witness the ways in which social media exacerbates the social and emotional challenges faced by teenagers in today's world. The increased virtual interconnectedness teenagers experience through social media can be positive, but it also brings with it an increased exchange of harmful ideas and exposure to harmful content. The anonymity of the internet allows for widespread hate speech and targeted cyberbullying with minimal accountability—users might feel comfortable with certain behaviors online that they would not feel comfortable with in “real life.” *Accountable*, however, demonstrates what can happen when those worlds collide.

What does *Accountable* tell us about the risks and dangers of social media?

- » What did the book teach you about who is behind the creation of harmful digital content? What are their true motivations? How does learning this impact how you feel as a social media consumer?
- » What can be done to reduce the harm that is caused through social media? How might content be regulated? What do you imagine stands in the way of regulating social media?
- » What is the responsibility of an account follower, or a social media bystander, to address the harm they see online?
- » How has the book affected the way you think about social media? How might the book change the way you decide to navigate or engage with the digital world?



Name: _____

Friend

Charles

Friend

Charles

Although the posts made on the @yungcavage account were clearly offensive, none of the boys spoke up against them. Imagine what might have happened if one of the boys had called out the problematic content. Given what we know about the boys' social group, also consider how Charles may have responded. Write a dialogue in which one of the boys calls Charles out for the images he posted.

Interrupting Harm

Name: _____

Argument: The students' First Amendment rights were violated by the school district.

YES: Summarize the Plaintiff's Argument

NO: Summarize the Defendant's Argument

Argument: The school district does not have the authority to punish students for the @yungcavage account, which was created outside of school.

YES: Summarize the Plaintiff's Argument

NO: Summarize the Defendant's Argument

Argument: The school district created an unsafe environment for students involved in the account.

YES: Summarize the Plaintiff's Argument

NO: Summarize the Defendant's Argument

My Ruling: Are the plaintiffs legally entitled to compensation?



The arguments in the students' lawsuits have been presented to Judge Donato—it is now up to him to decide how to rule. Today's activity asks you to imagine that you are the judge. Consider the arguments being presented, and issue your ruling.

You Be the Judge

Name: _____

**Impacted
by the Account**

Andrea

Ana

Lydia

Kerry

Rina

Sita

Lolia

Tiana

Brutsri

Billie

What actions,
motivations,
choices,
conversations, and
plot points stand out
to you about each
character?

Accountable introduces a complex web of characters at Albany High School; throughout our reading, we are asked to analyze their respective involvement with the @yungcavage scandal, including their actions, motivations, personalities, and mindsets. Use this Character Map to keep track of each character as the story unfolds, considering what the author tells us explicitly about the characters, and what is revealed indirectly through their behaviors, dialogues, and interactions.

Character Map

Account Creators & Followers

Charles

Patrick

Murphy

Greg

Steven

Otis

Wyatt

Jon

Riley

Eren

Gabriel

Lucy

Leighton

What actions, motivations, choices, conversations, and plot points stand out to you about each character?