

A TEACHER'S GUIDE FOR SAINTS OF THE HOUSEHOLD

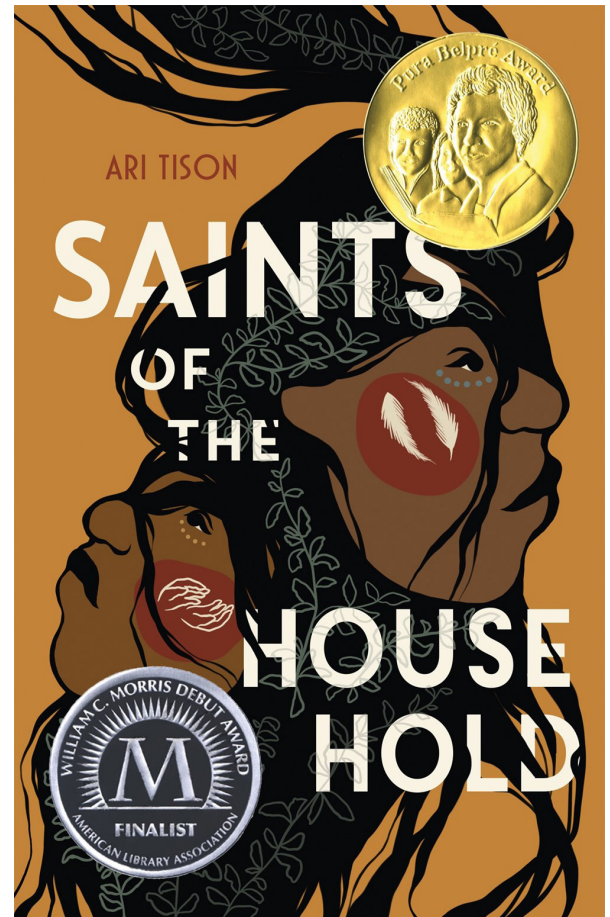


SAINTS OF THE HOUSEHOLD is a haunting contemporary YA about an act of violence in a small-town—beautifully told by a debut Indigenous Costa Rican-American writer—that will take your breath away.

Max and Jay have always depended on one another for their survival. Growing up with a physically abusive father, the two Bribri American brothers have learned that the only way to protect themselves and their mother is to stick to a schedule and keep their heads down.

But when they hear a classmate in trouble in the woods, instinct takes over and they intervene, breaking up a fight and beating their high school's star soccer player to a pulp. This act of violence threatens the brothers' dreams for the future and their beliefs about who they are. As the true details of that fateful afternoon unfold over the course of the novel, Max and Jay grapple with the weight of their actions, their shifting relationship as brothers, and the realization that they may be more like their father than they thought. They'll have to reach back to their Bribri roots to find their way forward.

Told in alternating points of view using vignettes and poems, debut author Ari Tison crafts an emotional, slow-burning drama about brotherhood, abuse, recovery, and doing the right thing.



Ages 14 - 18 ISBN: 9780374389499 e-book ISBN: 9780374389482



ARI TISON is a Bribri (Indigenous Costa Rican) American and African descended poet and storyteller and an award-winning author and poet for children and adults. She is the author of the YA hybrid novel *Saints of the Household* (FSG) which was the winner of the Walter Dean Myers Award, the winner of the Pura Belpré Award, and was a finalist for the William C. Morris Award.

Saints of the Household was a Junior Library Guild Gold selection and chosen as a Best Book of the Month by Amazon, Best Book of 2023 by Kirkus Reviews, School Library Journal, New York Public Library, BCCB, and Chicago Public Library along with receiving starred trade reviews from Kirkus, BCCB, and SLJ.

Ari lives in the Twin Cities where she is on faculty at Hamline's MFA in Writing for Children and Young Adults. Ari belongs to the Bribri people, an Indigenous people group of contemporary Costa Rica.



AN IMPRINT OF MACMILLAN CHILDREN'S PUBLISHING GROUP

SAINTS OF THE HOUSEHOLD

BY ARI TISON

CHAPTER 1 (JAY)

1. The novel begins in the aftermath of Jay and Max’s altercation with Luca. How do their peers receive Jay and Max when they return to school after the fight? In the opening verses, what is the significance of Jay’s reference to how others perceive him and his brother as the “angry brown boys”? (p. 4)
2. During their counseling session, Jay and Max express to their counselor that they are angry and claim they don’t understand why. However, Jay reveals to us (the reader) that this is not true—they do know why they are angry but choose not to share it with the counselor. Why would Jay and Max be keeping this information hidden from their counselor?
3. Consider the first interaction Jay and Nicole have after the fight with Luca. How does it differ from how Jay thought their first post-fight encounter might go? What do we learn about Nicole, and how is she positioned as an important character in the story during the opening verses?
4. Grandpa Fernando emerges as a guiding force in Jay’s life, and we learn that his grandpa anchors his teachings and guidance to his Bribri ways of being and knowing. What do we learn about Jay and his connections to his ancestry and ancestors in the poems “Grandpa Fernando,” “Language Lessons,” and “A Story of Our Names”? (pp. 19, 21–22)
5. Extension Activity: Investigate the historical and contemporary contexts of the Bribri within the broader context of present-day Costa Rica.
6. In the poem “Firsts,” we learn what led to Jay’s father’s transformation into an abusive husband and father. How might Grandpa Greer’s response to Jay’s father’s pleas have contributed to this transformation? How does Jay see Grandpa Greer compared to Grandpa Fernando? What connections can you draw between Jay’s experiences with his father and the events with Luca in the woods? (p. 26)
7. In Jay’s description of Luca, we learn about their similarities. Why could this be significant?
8. How does Jay support Nicole during a tough time in her life? Why does Max say that they may all have “generational trauma” (including Nicole)? (p. 39)
9. By the end of the first chapter (written from Jay’s perspective), we learn about Jay’s awareness of his growing and changing body. How do these changes shift his perspective when it comes to his relationship with his father, as well as his relationship with the world around him?



CHAPTER 2 (MAX)

1. What do we learn about Max in this chapter, which is written from his perspective?
2. Consider Max's internal dialogue before approaching Melody. What are some things that stand out to you during this dialogue?
3. Why does Melody's reception of Max surprise him?
4. How is Melody establishing herself as a comforting presence in Max's life?

CHAPTER 3 (JAY)

1. Jay and Max take "shifts" to protect their mother from their father's violence. How does the responsibility that Jay and Max take on impact their lives?
2. What is the significance of Jay's father having his mother quit all her jobs and "keeping" her at home?
3. Jay recalls when his father would take him and Max to his construction job sites. What aspects of Jay's father's relationship with power emerge from this memory? What else do we learn about Jay's father?
4. Nicole is Anishinaabe, and in this chapter, we learn more about her connections with her identity and ancestry, as well as the ex-boyfriend she left behind when she moved from Minneapolis to Deer Creek. What is the significance of her Anishinaabe identity, and how can that help us understand Nicole better?
5. Extension Activity: Investigate the historical and contemporary contexts of the Anishinaabe within the broader context of the present-day Great Lakes region of the United States and Canada.
6. How does Nicole try to help Jay shift his perspective of himself from "damaged" to "worthy"?
7. Max misses his group counseling session with Jay. What happens during the counseling session that gives important clues about what might happen later in the book?

CHAPTER 4 (MAX)

1. What does Max mean when he says that he's always been safe from his father in his art?
2. What does Max mean when he says his dad is "all over" his art? (p. 96)
3. Why does Max say that Jay's "danger" is that he "cares"? (p. 97)
4. How is Max protecting himself and his joy by not sharing with his brother how he's spending his time?



CHAPTER 5 (JAY)

1. How is the relationship between Jay and Max changing?
2. What are some things that Jay learns and expresses about Max?
3. What more do you learn about Jay's mom in this chapter? Consider how Jay describes her body language and response to his invitation to stream a movie.
4. What are some parallels between Nicole and Jay's moms that are revealed in this chapter?
5. What tensions does Jay experience between his school life and home life? How does viewing the world through a Bribri perspective shape how he sees schooling?
6. Extension Activity: Research the book Nicole is reading, *Braiding Sweetgrass* by Robin Wall Kimmerer. What are the similarities with *Saints of the Household*?
7. How is his father's abuse impacting Jay's life?
8. What are some critical turning points in this chapter?

CHAPTER 6 (MAX)

1. What are the narratives that Max is constructing about Jay? How do they compare to the narratives that Jay has created about Max?
2. What are some unique aspects of Max's relationship with Grandpa Fernando?
3. How is Max using art to protect himself? How is his life changing, and how are the people around him responding?
4. How are the tensions between Max and Jay growing up to this point of the book? How might they be able to rebuild their relationship?
5. How is Max using art as a release?

CHAPTER 7 (JAY)

1. How does Jay's portrayal of media and social media help shed light on how it could be both helpful and a hindrance?
2. How does Jay use Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera's relationship as a metaphor for the events impacting his life?
3. Jay longs for his father's love in several parts of the book. What are some of these expressions of longing? How do they reveal that two opposing wishes can be simultaneously valid?
4. How does Luca's visit to the 7-Eleven further escalate the tensions with Jay?
5. How do the people around Jay support him during the aftermath of his encounter with Luca?
6. In the poem "Back," Jay takes action after an incident. How does everyone's life change after this turn of events?



CHAPTER 8 (MAX)

1. Why is Max reluctant to share with Melody what's happening at home?
2. How does the community rally to support the Ortiz family?
3. Max paints Melody again, this time in her home. What are the dynamics in Melody's family's home? How does it impact Max?
4. How does Max perceive Jay and his presence around their house?

CHAPTER 9 (JAY)

1. How do Jay and Nicole support each other?
2. How does the video footage of Luca's confrontation with Jay at the 7-Eleven change things?
3. How has Jay's life changed in the absence of his father?
4. How does Grandpa Fernando help Jay navigate through his sadness?
5. How do Grandpa Fernando's comments to Jay connect with Max's statement in chapter 1 about generational trauma? (p. 39)

CHAPTER 10 (MAX)

1. How is Max and Melody's relationship shifting in this chapter?
2. Why does Grandpa Fernando tell Max to be "careful with secrets"? (p. 195)
3. Max talks about community and needing each other. How does this stand in contrast to his actions throughout the novel?
4. How does Max respond upon seeing Melody at the school dance? Why does he react this way?
5. Max and Jay's relationship takes a big turn in this chapter. How might it further change their dynamic?

CHAPTER 11 (JAY)

1. There are several Bible references throughout the novel. What does Jay imply when he asks Max if the two of them have become "Cain and Abel"? (p. 216)
2. How does Jay demonstrate his awareness of societal perceptions as he leaves his house following the altercation with Max?
3. How is Jay coping with his complicated feelings?



CHAPTER 12 (MAX)

1. Max and Melody reach a pivotal moment in their relationship. What prompts Max's reaction, and how does Melody offer reassurance?
2. What motivates Max to provoke Melody by making comments about her trailer home?
3. What questions and self-reflections arise for Max following his interaction with Melody?
4. How does Max's visit to his dream art school, Minneapolis College of Arts and Design, contribute to his healing process?

CHAPTER 13 (JAY)

1. How does social media help expose Luca to the rest of the school?
2. How does the school community support Jay during the revelations about Luca?
3. How does seeing Max's painting influence Jay's perception of Max and shed light on Max's relationship with Melody?
4. How does Jay's gardening deepen his sense of self and connection to his Bribri culture?
5. Throughout the story, a recurring topic has been Jay's reluctance to prioritize himself or be perceived as "selfish." How does his conversation with his counselor empower Jay to prioritize his needs and well-being?

CHAPTER 14 (MAX)

1. How is Max's art evolving?
2. How does painting serve as a form of release or catharsis for Max?
3. What observations can you make about the shapes of the poems in this chapter?
4. What do you believe motivated the author, Ari Tison, to structure the poems in this way?

CHAPTER 15 (JAY)

1. How does assisting with "un-wintering" Grandpa Fernando's cabin serve as a metaphor for Jay's transformation throughout the story?
2. What does Jay mean when he says, "Today my church is the backwoods of Grandpa's cabin"? (p. 280)
3. How does this chapter depict Jay returning to his teenage self, free from the "adult" burdens he previously carried throughout the novel?
4. How does Grandpa Fernando help Jay repair his relationship with Max?
5. How is Jay finally seeing Max?
6. What are the connections between chocolate and the Bribri?
7. Reflect on Jay's exchange with his mother about the map and his interaction with Nicole. How is Jay's perspective on his future changing?



8. What is the importance of Jay’s visit to his father in prison, and how could it impact Jay?
9. How is everything aligning for Jay, Max, and the other key characters in this story?
10. The novel concludes with Jay viewing Max’s artwork in a Minneapolis gallery. What does Jay mean when he describes the painting as “our gold”? (p. 309)

THEMES AND NARRATIVE

1. Explore the themes in this story, including identity, connections to the land, masculinity, community, and power. Which themes do you want to explore further, and why?
2. Examine the cover art of *Saints of the Household*. What do you notice? How does the cover art compare to the images you might have created in your imagination about Jay and Max?
3. What are some reasons Tison gave a title to every verse in Jay’s chapters but used ellipses (...) to open and close all of Max’s verses?
4. What are the parallels that exist in the book between the characters (for example, Luca and Jay; Nicole and Jay and Max’s mom)?
5. After the book ends, what directions could Jay, Max, and Nicole’s lives take? How might their relationships, aspirations, and personal growth evolve in the years ahead?
6. What is the significance of weaving words and phrases in Bribri throughout the story? How can it help us to better understand the characters in the story?
7. Reread the story in the poem “The Two Men and the Mystical Eagles.” (p. 41) What does it say about Jay and Max’s journey of healing and justice? What are the parallels between the book and this ancient story?
8. How does *Saints of the Household* illustrate the power of community and connection to the land in the healing process?

SAINTS OF THE HOUSEHOLD by Ari Tison

READER’S GUIDE by Luz Yadira Herrera

Luz Yadira Herrera is an educator and author born in Mexico and raised in Los Angeles and New York City. She is an assistant professor of bilingual education at California State University, Dominguez Hills.

