

# The Carnegies



## The Carnegie Shortlist 2025 Shadowing Resources



# *Play*

## Luke Palmer

Content warning: drug-taking and trafficking, drinking, strong language, implied sexual assault, death, misogyny, homophobia, toxic masculinity, neglect.

### About these resources

All of these resources are designed to be completed in small discussion groups, ideally your school's Carnegie Shadowing Group. However, they can easily be done individually. Instead of talking about the tasks, you can write down and keep a record of your ideas.

## Before Reading

**10-20 minutes**

- Discuss what you think *Play* will be about based on these extracts. You should structure your discussion around the questions below.
  - What other novels do you think it will be like?
  - What genre of novel do you think it will be?
  - What sense do you get of where and when it will be set?
  - If you had to identify three likely themes, what would they be?

1. Orange pulses register on the inside of my eyelids. There's a smell of deodorant and burning. And green, of course. You can always smell the green on nights like this, thick and sweet. And the laughter has a smell too – a kind of welcoming, warm smell, like dinner on the table when you get home.

2. I stare back for a full five seconds before I have to look down. 'Yes, Sir,' I mutter in unison with Johnny, then we file back into the room. I walk straight back to my seat, pick up the chair, throw myself into it.

My pens and pencils are still laid out in neat rows on my desk.

One by one, I snap each of them in half.

3. This is my game.

Always do everything you're asked to do, as well as you can. That's it.

And if it sounds pretty simple, that's because it is.

A lot of people don't understand just how simple it is. And as long as you're doing what people want you to do, no one asks you any questions. They just let you get on with stuff.

4. I invented two games this year.

The first one was because of all the cans we had lying around. The Comeup and the other ones too – whatever people were drinking. What you do is hold your empty can a little bit above the base – about a third of the way up, maybe – and you squeeze the opposite sides of the can between your thumb and forefinger.

## During Reading

Warning: Don't read the questions before reading each section as they might give you too many clues about what is going to happen.

Read up to the page number listed and then answer the questions. You will probably need to spend about 5-10 minutes answering each set of questions.

*The page numbers are based on the Firefly edition of the book, first published in the UK in 2023.*

### Read to the end of page 64

- What are your impressions of the three different narrators, Mark, Luc and Matt? What is distinctive about each character? What are the relationships like between them?
- Whose voice do you think narrates the first unnamed section of the book? How does this differ from the other sections? What's the effect of not providing a name?
- What do you notice about the age of the narrators as the sections move on? What age do you think they'll be for the bulk of the book? How do you think this will have an impact on the likely target readership for the book?
- What are your thoughts about Johnny? How does he fit into the group?
- What do you think is the significance of the book's title?
- What particularly interests you about the book so far? How do you think it will develop in the next few sections?

**Read to the end of page 123**

- How have each of the narrators developed and changed since their first narrations? What was foreshadowed in the previous sections about how they would develop?
- Have you a favourite and least favourite out of the group of friends? What do you like and not like about them?
- What are your thoughts about the adult characters in the book, particularly the boys' parents?
- What are your thoughts about the presentation of quite adult themes and issues in this book, such as sex, drink and drugs?

**Read to the end of page 192**

- How have each of the narrators developed and change in this section? What has happened in their lives to shape their behaviour? How much of their behaviour do you think is down to them, and how much down to outside forces and other people?
- What do you think about Mark's relationship with 'The Guy', Luc's relationship with Sara and Matt's relationship with Mark? Are there any significant similarities and differences in how these relationships are presented? What do you think the writer is trying to show about relationships overall?
- How does Johnny fit into the narrative at this point? As a reader, do you get a sense of how he is developing in a similar way to how you see the other characters developing? If not, then how is it different?

**Read to the end of page 238**

- What is the emotional state of each of the narrators at this point in the novel? How are their different states being presented? How do you think the problems they are each facing will be resolved, if at all?
- What different adults do you meet in this section? How is their behaviour compared to that of the young people? How much are the young people influenced by the adults?
- What are your thoughts about the presentation of drugs and drug-taking at this point in the novel? You might like to discuss your thoughts about whether or not it is an appropriate topic for a novel aimed at a young readership.

**Read to the end of page 274**

- What emotions do you think are going through Mark's head at this point in the novel? Can you see a way out of the life he is leading? If so, how?
- Why do you think the writer has decided to build the action at this point towards a party at Johnny's house? What kinds of things do you think will happen at the party? How might they help bring the novel to a conclusion?

- What do you think about the introduction of the landfill site into the storyline? What do you think Matt is building and why is he doing it?

### **Read to the end of the novel**

- Sara's message to Luc says that 'you need to make yourself a better person than you were to me'. Do you think this will happen? Are there any signs that it will or won't? What are your thoughts about this message in general?
- What are your thoughts about what happens at the party? Is this what you were expecting?
- What are your thoughts about each of the characters after the party, but before the final section, which is narrated by Johnny?
- What are your thoughts about the final section, narrated by Johnny?

## **After Reading**

### **Initial Thoughts**

Spend 10-15 minutes discussing the questions below:

- What are your overall impressions of this novel?
- Which moments stick most in your memory and why?
- Which characters do you like best and why?
- Which other novels does it remind you of and why?
- How gripping did you find the story?
- What are your thoughts about how the book was written?
- Based on reading *Play*, how likely are you to read other novels by Luke Palmer?

### **What's *Play* about?**

- Spend one or two minutes writing down a single sentence that begins: '*Play* is about ...'
- If you are working in a group, share your different sentences and discuss.
- Next read the sentences below that give further ideas about what the novel is about.
- If you are working in a group, spend 5-10 minutes ordering the sentences, from the one you agree with most to the one you agree with least.
- Finally, decide on the statement you agree with most. It can be one from the list or your own. Write down a few ideas about how *Play* relates to your chosen statement.

## **Play is about ...**

- How difficult it is to be yourself
- How difficult it is to be a young man
- Toxic masculinity
- How young people are shaped by their parents
- The different ways that there are to 'play'
- The way that lives can be changed in a moment
- The importance of friendship
- Learning to treat people with respect
- The importance of staying out of trouble

## **Exploring the novel further**

### **The narrators**

The novel is told in the voices of four different characters: Mark, Luc, Matt and Johnny.

- Discuss what is distinctive about each of their voices? Do you think you could tell who is narrating without being told who it is? To test this out, read random bits of the novel to each other. See if you can identify whose voice is being read and explain how.
- Try to write two or three sentences in the voice of each of the characters. Read out your examples to the other members of your group and see if you can identify each other's attempts at replicating the different voices.

Spend 15-20 minutes on this activity.

### **The parents**

Parents play a significant role in the lives of the four characters, even if most of them don't feature much. Write a few paragraphs exploring these questions:

- How are the different parents presented in the novel?
- Which parent or set of parents do you think are doing the best job?
- What do you think the novel as a whole is suggesting about the role of parents in the lives of young people?
- When you have finished, share your writing with others.

Spend 20-30 minutes on this activity.

## Reading the reviews

The extracts, below, are all from reviews of *Play*.

- Read all the reviews and discuss which comes closest to your own view of the book.
- Working individually, write your own paragraph expressing your views.
- If possible, share your reviews with others.

You can submit your reviews to the Carnegie Shadowing Scheme website. This can be accessed at:

<https://carnegies.co.uk/books/play/>

Give yourself 30-60 minutes to complete this activity.

A. *Play* by Luke Palmer is an absolute rollercoaster of emotions. The characters are richly drawn, the plot unpredictable, and the writing is sharp and smart. I couldn't put it down! Palmer expertly weaves in themes of friendship, growing up and masculinity, all while keeping the pace thrilling and engaging. If you're into character-driven stories that dive into the complexities of human relationships, this book is a must-read. Highly recommend!

Safiyya

B. I wasn't sure what to expect from *Play*, but I was pleasantly surprised by how much I enjoyed it! The different narrative voices felt fresh and original, and the twists kept me hooked from start to finish. I loved how he explored difficult issues that affect young people, such as underage drinking and drug-taking, relationships and adult influence. The ending absolutely blew me away. Definitely one to pick up if you're looking for something thought-provoking with an edge!

Harry

C. *Play* by Luke Palmer is a thrilling, fast-paced novel that hits all the right notes. The characters are multifaceted and relatable, and the author's writing style flows effortlessly. The plot itself is gripping, with just enough suspense and mystery to keep you turning the pages. Palmer's exploration of identity and how we are shaped by our experiences really resonated with me. A solid, well-executed story that I would highly recommend to anyone looking for a good read!

Anmika

D. I really wanted to like *Play* by Luke Palmer, but unfortunately, it didn't do much for me. The plot felt a bit predictable, and I had trouble connecting with the characters. I also don't think it was particularly suitable for a YA audience. The storylines about underage drugs, drinking and sex were inappropriate and, quite frankly, too harrowing. Give me something more uplifting and age-appropriate, please! Maybe I'm in the minority here, but this one just wasn't for me.

Priti

## Writing Activities

On your own, or with a partner, complete one or more of these writing activities to help you develop your thoughts about *Play* further.

You will need 30-60 minutes for each activity.

- The final chapter imagines different possible futures for Mark, Luc and Matt. Write a few paragraphs in the voice of one of these characters when they are 10 years older than at the end of the novel.
- *Play* deals with lots of difficult, adult themes. Imagine you are a headteacher who has received a letter from a parent asking that the novel be removed from your school's library because they don't think it is appropriate for young readers. In role as the headteacher, write a response to the parent, outlining why you think the novel should remain in the library and why you would want young people to read it.
- Write up a Q + A with the writer, Luke Palmer, in which you explore the thinking behind his novel.



# Carnegies Shadowing Resources 2025

These resources have been created by the following YLG librarian representatives: Alison Brumwell, Maura Farrelly, Kelly Greenwood, Mary-Rose Grieve, Margaret Griffin, Cassie Hands, Tanja Jennings, Jenny Jones, Ellen Krajewski, Ruth Keys, Alison King and Lizzie Ryder.

## General Ideas for all books

1. Take some time to look at the judge's criteria for the Carnegie Medal for Writing and for Illustration. Pick out one or two points and discuss them with one of this year's shortlisted books in mind. Remember, not every criteria will be relevant for every book!
2. Document your journey through the 2025 Shadowing period either on paper or in a shared digital space. You can record the books discussed and activities undertaken in each session, as well as offer a creative platform for reviews, reflection, artwork and anything else you might like to add.
3. Choose a character from one of the shortlisted books and reinvent them in the art style of your choosing. You could create your character digitally, draw them by hand, paint them or even make a sculpture. You could try creating the same character in a variety of styles - Manga, Pop Art, Disney - using different materials.
4. Create your own book trailer for one of the books, or work together to make a trailer for the entire shortlist. This could be a BookTok style pitch to sell the book to a viewer, or a more traditional thematic video.
5. Redesign the front cover or endpapers of one of the shortlisted titles. Compare yours to the original. What makes it different? Why did you make these changes?
6. Choose one of the books and reflect on the themes it presents. Could any of these themes be considered an issue of social justice? Which resonates with you most strongly? Create a leaflet or flyer highlighting one of the issues and the ways people can help, as individuals and collectively.
7. Celebrate the shortlisted books with themed food. You could bring in snacks that are inspired by the locations or cultures featured in the books, or choose foods that link to themes, illustrations or a particular character or event.
8. Recommend one of the shortlisted books using just three words. You could write these on sticky notes to put inside the book's jacket for others to find, or create a display for other readers to add to on a noticeboard, clothing line or bunting.
9. Use a jar or shoebox to create a 'book in a box' or diorama. Your box or jar should include key items which reflect the themes, plot, characters and mood of the book.
10. Host your own judging meeting where you decide which book your Shadowing group thinks is the best. Think about why you are voting for the book, link back to the judging criteria where you can and make sure the process is democratic.

## Play by Luke Palmer

1. Think about the title 'Play'. What does the word 'play' mean to you? Can it have different meanings in different contexts? Why do you think it was chosen? Do you think its meaning changed as your understanding of the story develops?
2. Think about the items in Mark's tin of treasures. What type of things does he keep? Why does he keep them? What value does he attach to them? If you had a tin to bury like Mark, what might you keep inside it?
3. Choose one of the four main characters, Mark, Johnny, Matt or Luc. Think about their journey through the story. Where do they begin? What obstacles do they face? Where do they end up? Create a playlist of music that reflects their path.
4. Write an acrostic poem using the word 'play'. Try to create something that reflects the themes of the book or captures the perspective of one of the characters.
5. Write an alternate ending for the book. What else might have happened? Where would you like to see the characters end up? How different is your ending from the one published in the book? Why do you think the author chose to close the story in this way?
6. Design a game that could be played in different settings without the need for physical resources. You might want to work through the book and consider the different games the four boys create and play over the course of the story. What are the rules? Are there any rewards? What are the consequences if you lose? Try and teach the rules of the game to others in your Shadowing group. Which is the most successful suggestion? Why does it work?
7. Create a collage split into four sections. Each section should reflect one of the main characters - Mark, Johnny, Matt and Luc. Think about the different ways you might split your canvas - are all four sections equal? Are you working with defined boundaries? What kind of colours and textures are you using? Are you featuring any words or are you working exclusively with images? Share your work with the rest of the group - how do they compare? Can you use them to create a themed display in your library?
8. Take your cue from the four boys and build yourself a den. Think about where you will build it, and what materials you might use. Does it need to be waterproof? How dark is it inside? Can you introduce some fairy lights? How will you use your den? Is it a place for solitude or a social space? Will you curl up and read there, or will you be entertaining people? Take some photos of your den and share it with us on social media, using #Carnegies2025.
9. Write a short story that begins and ends with the line 'Everyone's setting their socks on fire.'
10. Find a tin and have everyone contribute something to it. Explain the reasons for your choice before you seal the tin. Find a place to bury it and agree on a time to retrieve it.