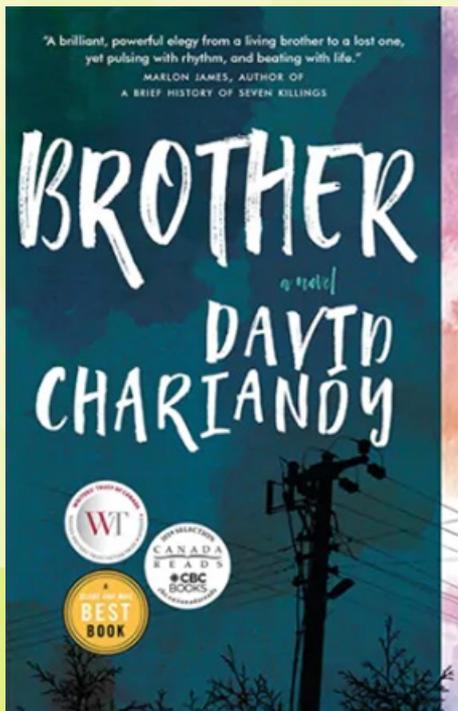


Book Background: **BROTHER** by DAVID CHARIANDY



David Chariandy's *Brother* explores questions of masculinity, family, race, and identity as they are played out in a Scarborough housing complex during the sweltering heat and simmering violence of the summer of 1991.

Note to teachers:

This document contains spoilers!

If you intend to read only the book excerpt provided on curio.ca with your students, this document gives a fuller picture of the book content.

If you intend to read the whole book with your students, you may wish to remove spoilers before sharing the document with students.



Visit www.curio.ca/canadareads to read an excerpt from *Brother* and watch David Chariandy discuss his book.



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LITERACY STRATEGY

If you are using this backgrounder directly with students, have them review the document for new vocabulary. They can highlight new words and research their meaning.



Book Description

Brother is the story of a young man named Michael living in the east Toronto suburb, Scarborough. The story picks up with Michael living with his mother in a Scarborough housing complex called The Park. The book implies that the mother is dealing with some sort of loss and that her mental health is suffering because of this trauma. Early on, a character named Aisha, who

Michael knows from childhood, reveals that Michael's older brother, Francis, died 10 years ago. At this point Michael is 28, caring for his mother and getting by on long hours of shift work.

From here onwards, the story flashes back and forth through time to when the Michael and Francis were growing up in the community of mostly new immigrants to Canada. Their childhood is typical of children in 1990s Scarborough. They experience poverty, witness gun violence and endure intimidation from the police. Their mother works long hours to make ends meet.

Francis runs with a crew of boys who hang out at Desirea's, the local barbershop, and spin hip-hop

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records with hopes of getting into the music industry. Jelly is Francis's closest friend and a talented DJ.

After a failed attempt to enter a DJ contest and a scuffle with a security guard, Jelly and Francis head back to the shop when the police come in. There is a confrontation and as one of the cops is assaulting Jelly, Francis is shot trying to protect him.

When the act of violence that led to Francis's death suddenly comes into focus, the source of the "complicated grief" experienced by Michael and his mother is revealed. At the same time, however, there are glimpses of recovery and resilience at work, and the book ends with Michael's mother — long silent in the wake of her son's killing — asking Jelly, Francis's best friend, to turn up the music.



Primary Characters

Francis – Michael's older, tougher, cooler brother. Francis is attractive, strong and has a reputation in the neighbourhood for being someone you don't mess with. He's fiercely protective of Michael, his mother and anyone else he loves. In subtle ways throughout the book, it's implied he's in a relationship with local DJ Djeli (Jelly). Although we know early on that Francis is dead, it's not until towards the end of the book that we learn he was killed by police while protecting Djeli in a standoff at the local barbershop where the boys hang out.

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Michael – The main character in *Brother* and younger brother of Francis. A Trinidadian, Indo/Afro-Caribbean youth living in Scarborough in the 1990s. Sensitive, awkward and unsure of himself growing up, Michael followed Francis around and wanted to do whatever he did in an attempt to be cool. Throughout the book, the older version of Michael is dealing with grief over the loss of his brother, but puts his mother's unstable mental state ahead of his own feelings and ambitions.

Francis & Michael's mother – A Trinidadian immigrant and single mother working multiple jobs to make ends meet. She worries about her boys falling in with the wrong crowds and tries her best to keep them safe in their sometimes rough neighbourhood. She is

devastated by Francis's death. Her reluctance to deal with her grief leads to her eventually having a breakdown and being hospitalized.

Aisha – Michael's first love, Aisha is a multi-talented scholar and writer who left the neighbourhood behind in young adulthood, but returns to The Park as an adult after her father dies of cancer. Aisha and Michael reunite, and she stays with him and his mother while she's in town. She organizes a celebration of Francis's life as a way for everyone to grieve his loss and have a sense of closure.

Jelly/Djeli – One of the local kids in the neighbourhood who is very close with Francis growing up. Djeli is described as being very poor, but is a talented young

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DJ who hopes to make a name for himself. When he enters a competition to open for a touring act Francis gets into a fight trying to protect him. This sets off the chain of events that leads to Francis being shot and killed by police at the barbershop where they hang out. It is implied that Jelly and Francis were romantically involved, explaining why Francis was so protective of Djeli.

Key Themes

 **LOVE** – The book deals with different types of love. From the self-sacrificing love of Michael and Francis’s mother, to the fiercely protective love Francis has for his family and friends, to Michael’s love for his mother as he struggles to help her deal with her

“complicated grief” over her son’s death. The book also deals with a kind of love and attachment the boys feel for their neighbourhood and group of friends.

 **LOSS** – The focal point of *Brother* is the loss of Francis and the impact his death has on all of the book’s main characters. Until the end of the book it’s clear that Michael, his mother and Jelly/Djeli have not really dealt with Francis’s loss, and even once they begin to do so it’s obvious that his absence will continue to affect all their lives moving forward. Aisha is also dealing with the loss of her father to cancer and is trying to process that.

 **GRIEF** – Grief is another main theme of this story. Aisha sets up a party at Michael’s house as a way of

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them all to grieve the people they've lost and to celebrate their lives. It doesn't go as planned due to an accident, but by the end of the story they are all on the path towards being able to find closure through acknowledging their grief.

 **HOPE** – The theme of hope is a significant throughline in the book. There is the hope that Michael and Francis's mother felt coming to Canada for a chance at giving her children a better life. Francis and Jelly dream of a career in music but their hopes are dashed when they don't win the competition and get into a fight with a security guard. Michael's experience leaves him dejected, feeling like hope is useless and there is no real way out for people like him.

 **POTENTIAL CUT SHORT** – With Francis's death, his limitless potential as a creative, caring, loved and loving young person is brutally cut short — like that of other young people whose lives are claimed by gun violence and police violence.

 **MENTAL ILLNESS** – Michael's (and Francis's) mother suffers a mental and nervous breakdown after her son's death. Unable to come to terms with it, she retreats into herself and doesn't seek help. Late in the book, she wanders off, gets hit by a car and is sent to the hospital.

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About the Author

David Chariandy is an author and educator from Scarborough, Ontario. He has written two works of fiction and one nonfiction. He lives in Vancouver and teaches in the department of English at Simon Fraser University.

Other Books by the Author

- *Soucouyant* (2007)
- *I've Been Meaning to Tell You* (2018)

Awards & Accolades

Brother:

- Won the Rogers Writers' Trust Fiction Prize (2017)
- Won the Toronto Book Award (2018)



Notable Quotes from Reviews

“Chariandy handles some of the most emotional issues of our time — the casual indignities of being a poor child of immigrants, the impervious power-posturing of police in the black community, murders dismissed as lawful — with care and wisdom. The result is seething and persuasive.” – The Guardian

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“*Brother* is filled with moments of swagger and bravery, of recklessness and love that sparks against the dull pain of tragedy, which is foretold in elegiac descriptions of the landscape.” – The Globe and Mail

“Beyond the superbly written setting and characters, what is most striking about *Brother* is Chariandy’s brutally honest depiction of the prejudice, violence, and lack of opportunity faced by the denizens of the Park, and so many other neighbourhoods like it. The children of Trinidadian immigrants, Michael and Francis are just two of a cohort whose parents have sacrificed their homelands, their dreams, and even their lives in the hope of improving the lot of their kids. But the children have dreams of their own, which are shot down — sometimes literally — by a society

that is far from colourblind, that undermines all but the most determined or lucky (who are held up as ‘exceptions’).” – Hamilton Review of Books

“The prose is beautiful and unflinching without giving way to sentimentality: ‘I know now that by the age of fourteen, you feel it. You spot the threat that is not only about young men with weapons, about *gangs* and *predators*, but also the threat that is slow and somehow very old. A mother lecturing you about arrival and opportunity while her breath stinks of the tooth she can’t just for the moment afford the time or money to fix.’” – Kirkus

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CBC Links

- Book Page: www.cbc.ca/1.4246382
- Author Page: www.cbc.ca/1.4715990
- How David Chariandy brought his novel *Brother* to life: www.cbc.ca/books/1.4310129
- David Chariandy writes his truth for his 13-year-old in his latest book: www.cbc.ca/1.4676505
- Why David Chariandy loves editing: www.cbc.ca/1.4499748
- Truth versus protection: David Chariandy negotiates how to talk to his daughter about race and belonging: www.cbc.ca/1.4636665

- Why David Chariandy wrote about 'the resilience, the imagination, the sheer intelligence' of Scarborough: www.cbc.ca/1.4300655

Other Links

- Reading Guide from the publisher: 
www.penguinrandomhouse.ca/books/26281/brother-by-david-chariandy/9780771021060/reading-guide
- Teacher Guide from the publisher: <https://randomhouse.app.box.com/v/Brother-Teachers-Guide>



Watch David Chariandy discuss his book: www.curio.ca/canadareads

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Critical Thinking Questions

Students will need to read the excerpt from *Brother* found at www.curio.ca/canadareads and may need to do some research to help them craft a response.

1. David Chariandy's book is called *Brother*. Which brother do you think he's referring to — David or Francis?
2. David Chariandy shares much in common with his characters — he grew up in Scarborough in the 1990s as the son of a Trinidadian mother and South Asian father. Is it important to you that a writer has this type of connection to the content of their book?
3. The barbershop is an important place where the young people in *Brother* come together. Where, in your community, do you congregate with your peers? What does this location reveal about you?
4. David Chariandy grew up in Scarborough in the 1990s and told a story of his community. What is a story in your community that you think needs to be told?
5. Many sacrifices are made by people who immigrate to Canada. What responsibilities do Canada and Canadians have to these newcomers to ensure that their sacrifices were not made in vain (i.e. wasted)?

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6. Read the excerpt of the novel *Brother* at www.curio.ca/canadareads. What signs can you infer that show Michael holds dark feelings about his neighbourhood? About his mother?
7. Michael is a deeply introverted character throughout the novel. What are the benefits of independence and keeping to oneself? What are the drawbacks?
9. Michael and Francis spend much of their childhood without parents — their father does not live with them and their mother is often working. What role do parents or guardians play in your life?
10. Aisha is the most traditionally accomplished character in *Brother*; she leaves the neighbourhood for university and achieves real success in her professional life. Many of the characters in the book are intelligent and talented in their own ways but are never celebrated for it. Why are some talents recognized and others ignored?
11. Food and cooking play a big part in the novel. What are the foods that represent you? Your culture?
12. *Brother* is very distinctly a book about Scarborough. Is a book that is particularly about one place a book that all of Canada should read? Can something so specific also be universal?

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Inquiry Activities

1. Students could research the rap, hip hop, and DJ culture of the 1990s and compare it to that of a genre of music you listen to today.
2. Teachers could invite a local leader active on the issue of policing, particularly the relationship between racialized communities and police, to visit the classroom for a discussion with students. Students could pose questions to find out more about the issues and how their individual and collective actions might make a difference. Teachers could also consider inviting a local police officer as a follow-up guest so that students could pose similar questions. Many schools have a school liaison officer who could serve as a ready resource. (*PLEASE NOTE: It's important to ensure that your classroom guests and your students are comfortable with this arrangement.*)
3. Students might interview their classmates or peers throughout the school who are first- or second-generation newcomers to Canada and ask them to share the challenges and successes they have experienced.
4. Students might research community resources available to those struggling with mental health challenges.