



If My Words Had Wings

Danielle Jawando

This is Lit Book Club Discussion Guide



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About this guide

This guide has been created to help you run a book club with your students.

The aim is to help you guide their reading as well as encourage discussion and enjoyment! The purpose of the club is to move away from the 'formal' assessment for GCSE and just read the book through an inquiring and critical lens.

As If My Words Had Wings is a popular book, there are some pre-existing guides and reviews available. This guide will refer closely to these and provide links for you to refer to.

We are extremely grateful to The Scottish Book Trust for access to their guide.

The main guide you may want to print off before reading the book is:

- The Scottish Book Trust Teen book discussion guide is [here](#). This link takes you to the main page with each year's guide. You need to download with the word document or the PDF for 2024. The materials relevant to this book are on pages 29–31.

About the book and author

If My Words Had Wings was written by Danielle Jawando and published in 2024.

It is Jawando's third book and was shortlisted for the 2025 YA book prize. Jawando's other works, *And The Stars Were Burning Brightly* and *When Our Worlds Collided* have also been nominated for awards such as the Jhalak Children's prize.

Please note: Although this book is aimed at YA readers, it does cover a lot of sensitive subjects such as life at a young offenders' institute, violence, mental health challenges including depression and references to self-harm and suicidal thoughts, family bereavement, racism, injustice, recreational drug use and strong language. Read this warning to students so they are aware that these are elements which will come up as they are reading.

Possible activities:

1. Encourage students to read about the author and her motivations for writing *If My Words Had Wings*. The Bookseller website has an interesting interview with the author [here](#). The author also talks about her work and influences on her social media pages [here](#). Ask students to read the interview to get a feel for the book, the writer and her motivations. How does this make them feel about the book they are going to read? **NB – To access the interview, you are required to register for free on the Bookseller website.**
2. In her interview with The Bookseller, Jawando talks about how she wanted to 'shine a light' on the law around joint enterprise and how over half of the people in prison for this crime are children. You may want to talk about what this law is and means with your students before you start reading. There is a more student friendly guide highlighting the injustice around this law on the Liberty Human Rights website [here](#).
3. The book focuses on Tyrell (Ty) Forrester, a young man who is desperate to turn his life around after serving a sentence in a young offenders institution. Ask students to read the summaries of the books in [Appendix 1](#) of this guide. Which one do they think is more appealing and why? Which one helps them to understand the main themes and what is going to happen in the book?
4. Now students know a little more about the book and the author, does this make them feel ready to read the book? Is it important to know these things before you start reading? Ask them to think about what they look at when they are choosing which book to select – how do they decide?

Before Reading

Take some time to talk to your students about the main themes of the book and look at the title/cover to get some context.

Possible activities:

1. A good starter activity can be to ask students to look at the cover of the book and the title. Discuss what they think it might mean? What might the book be about? Do the recommendations from reviewers and the fact that Ishiguro is a Nobel Prize winning author impact their views in anyway?
2. The [Audible sample chapter](#) could be a good place to introduce the students to the opening chapter. Students could listen to this to get a feel for the book and the tone of Tyrell, the narrator.
3. You may also want to use this as an opportunity to bring up the content of the book if you haven't already done so. Remind students what the book is about and the themes/issues it raises.

Reading the book

This is obviously the main activity and your role is to facilitate the reading as and when you feel you need to. We want students to read at their own pace and enjoy the book away from the 'shackles' of GCSE but also to become more active readers and be able to pick up on themes, ask questions and discuss the book with others.

Possible ways to approach the book and discussing the book in a group setting:

1. Below is a very brief guide to how you may want to chunk up the text for reading and some of the questions you could ask.

(a) Session 1 – Introduction to Tyrell and his life inside prison (chapters 1–6)

Discussion questions:

- What do you think of Ty's life in prison. Did anything surprise you about his experience?
- Does this book challenge stereotypes about young offenders?
- Ty begins to investigate poetry more. Have you heard of any of the poets he mentions?
- Why might Ty find poetry appealing?

(b) Session 2 – Friendships, Trust and influences. (chapters 7–12)

Discussion questions:

- How do Ty's friends and friendship affect his behaviour?
- What do you think of Dadir and Malik?
- What do think about Ty's first attempt at poetry? Why might poetry have such an impact on him?

(c) Session 3 – Release and reality (chapters 13–19)

Discussion questions:

- What challenges does Ty face now he is back at home?
- What do you think of Becky?
- Is Elisha a good influence?
- At the end of Chapter 19, Ty sees Clinton. How does this make you feel? What do you think might happen next?

(d) Session 4– Pressure and family choices (chapter 20–25)

Discussion questions:

- How do Ty's family influence his decisions?
- What do you think about his relationship with his brother and his mother?
- Do you feel that Ty is turning a corner by the end of chapter 25? How do you think the book will end?

(e) Part 5– Ending (Chapter 26–28)

Discussion questions:

- How does the ending make you feel?
- What messages does the book send about justice and how we treat young offenders?
- What do you think of Ty at the end of the book?
- What does the book say about the importance of language and the spoken word
- What would you say is the most important theme?

2. If you would prefer something more open ended, you could ask students to make notes as they go along to pick up on themes, character development etc. There are some great questions for discussion in the Scottish Book Trust guide [here](#).

After Reading

Although these activities have been placed in this area of the guide, you may want to introduce some of the tables around capturing themes and character progression before students start reading to allow them to take notes. However, you may feel that this will distract them from enjoying the process of reading and would prefer to leave this until after they have read the book for the first time.

Even though some of these after reading activities may feel a little like GCSE in terms of thinking about themes/characters etc, students do not need to think about it in terms of assessment objectives! This is just to help them discuss the main areas of the book and why these are important to the plot, character development and how they made them feel.

Encourage students to talk about what they enjoyed or didn't enjoy about the book. They can be honest and admit that it wasn't something they enjoyed if they didn't - everyone has different literary tastes and this is part of reading for pleasure. Explain how they are not going to think every book they read is amazing but there is likely to be at least something which touched them or made them think even if the overall story or theme wasn't really something they happen to enjoy. Here you may want to ask them about what books/genres they might enjoy reading next. Would they like to read more like this book or move onto something completely different?

Possible activities:

1. Ask students to discuss their initial thoughts of the book. Some of these open-ended questions may help.

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 *If My Words Had Wings*, how likely are you to read other novels by Danielle Jawando?

2. The book discusses a number of poets which students may want to investigate further. There are some excellent readings online for [Benjamin Zephaniah](#), [Lemn Sissay](#) and [Caleb Femi](#). Many more were mentioned in the book and students may want to investigate this further.
3. You may also want to come back to the synopsis at the back of this guide and ask students to read them again to see how well they 'match' the book and its content now they have read it. Perhaps they could even write one of their own?

Writing a review

After students have finished reading and discussing the text, ask them to create a short review to share with Pearson. Encourage students to be creative in how they respond to the book. The purpose of the review is to share personal reactions, and it doesn't need to be a formal piece of writing. Students should feel free to focus on what stood out to them, how the book made them feel, and whether they would recommend it to someone else.

Reviews could take a variety of formats, for example:

- chat or message-style conversation with a friend, talking about the book and why they would (or wouldn't) recommend it
- a short voice note or podcast-style discussion
- video review or informal vlog
- social media-style post or thread
- or a traditional written review, if they prefer

Whichever format they choose, the emphasis should be on honest responses and clear communication of ideas, rather than length, technical accuracy, or formality. Students do not have to be complimentary if they did not enjoy the book — thoughtful disagreement and differing opinions are part of meaningful reading and discussion.

If you would like to use the Pearson templates to help students write their own review, they can be found in the 'This is Lit' resource pack on our website [here](#)

Possible activities for writing a review:

1. Ask students to read some different styles of reviews such as the ones here
 - a. [The Reading Zone](#)
 - b. [Just Imagine](#)
 - c. [Foyles](#)
 - d. [Storygraph](#)
 - e. [Goodreads](#)

Do they agree with the views expressed here? Encourage students to look at some of the different star ratings on examples in d and e and think about why people may have

opposing views to them about the book? Can they see why some may love the book and others don't?

2. There are some excellent GCSE English Language resources around writing a review and how to structure it on the BBC website which you may want to use with students. Or they can use the examples above to help them think about the style and the tone they want to adopt for their review. [BBC Bitesize](#)

Appendix 1

Summaries of *If My Words Had Wings*

1. [Simon and Schuster](#)

About The Book

Shortlisted for the **YA Book Prize 2025**

Shortlisted for the **UKLA Book Award 2025**

Shortlisted for the **Peter’s Children’s Book of the Year Award 2025**

Shortlisted for the **Diverse Book Awards 2025**

Shortlisted for the **2025 Quiz Writers' Choice Award for Best Secondary Fiction**

Longlisted for the **CILIP Carnegie Medal 2025**

A life affirming story of rehabilitation and hope after prison. The third novel from multi-award-winning Danielle Jawando, perfect for fans of Angie Thomas and Elizabeth Acevedo.

‘Jawando’s writing is incredibly raw and real; I felt completely immersed’ **Alice Oseman, author of the Heartstopper series**

When fifteen-year-old Tyrell Forrester gets caught up in a high-profile armed robbery, he's sentenced to eighteen months in a young offenders’ prison. Now he’s getting out, and he’s determined to turn his life around. Despite his release, systemic discrimination makes it difficult for Ty to truly be free. Inspired by a visiting poet while inside, Ty discovers a whole new world through spoken word and is finally finding his voice. But will society ever see him as anything other than a criminal?

2. Funky Pedagogy

Recommended by: **Stephen Dilley**/@stephenjdilley

Form and Genre: Novel

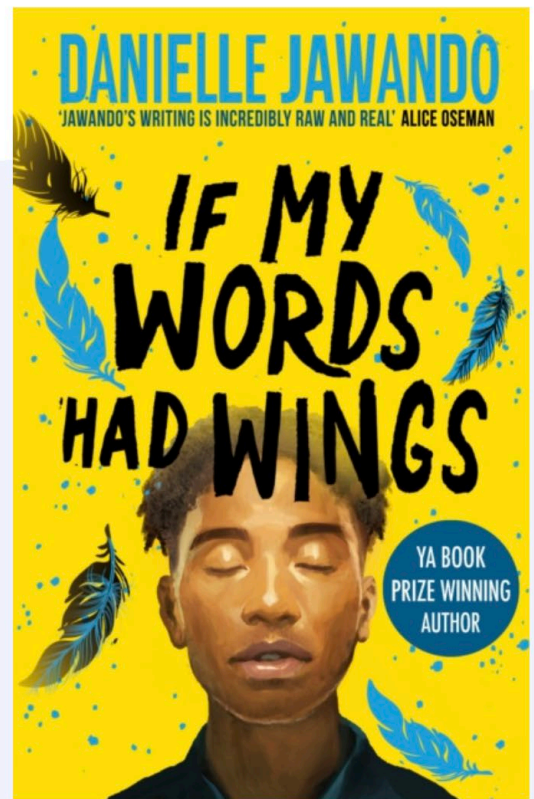
Length: 350 pages

Summary: Hard-hitting but beautifully written novel about a Black British teenage boy's experiences in prison and after his release, exploring some of the injustices in the criminal justice system and wider British society which disproportionately affect people of colour, but also showing how poetry can help people to discover and reclaim their own voice.

Age recommendation and challenging content: Contains violence, references to self-harm and suicide, recreational drug use and very frequent strong language – probably suitable for Year 9 upwards, thinking carefully about issues that might affect individual readers.

Notable reasons for recommending this book: This is an incredibly powerful novel which, like Jawando's previous novels, explores issues relating to racial justice in a British context (often students explore these issues more commonly through an American prism.) Although it is harrowing, it is also a very hopeful read, particularly because of the use of poetry.

Further information for teachers: Jawando includes references to lots of Black poets such as Lemn Sissay and Caleb Femi which readers might enjoy exploring alongside the novel.



3. Google AI – AI Overview

If My Words Had Wings by Danielle Jawando is a raw, moving YA novel about Tyrell, a teenage Black boy trying to rebuild his life after serving 18 months in a young offenders' institution for armed robbery. The story explores rehabilitation, systemic racism, and finding hope through poetry and creative writing while navigating a judgmental world and a difficult past.

Key Plot Points & Themes

- **The Struggle for Redemption:** Upon release, Ty struggles to avoid returning to a life of crime, facing stigma and challenges, but receives support from his family, a childhood friend named Elisha, and his probation officer, Becky.
- **The Power of Poetry:** While in prison, a poet named Malik introduces Ty to the power of spoken word, helping him find his voice and a way to express his hopes, fears, and emotions.
- **Systemic Issues:** The novel highlights how racial profiling and the criminal justice system disproportionately affect Black boys, with Ty facing stigma and prejudice.
- **Themes of Hope and Growth:** Despite its difficult subject matter, the novel is described as a story of hope, resilience, and transformation, with themes focusing on finding one's voice, overcoming injustice, and finding support networks.

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The book, which is Jawando's third, is known for being a powerful and "raw" look at rehabilitation and self-expression, often compared to the work of authors like Angie Thomas and Elizabeth Acevedo