Rise of the Halfling King (Tales of the Feathered Serpent #1)
Teaching Guide

• Pre-Reading Information
• Reading Questions
• After-Reading Activities and Questions
• About the Author & Illustrator
• Book Reviews
• Common Core Standards

Rise of the Halfling King (Tales of the Feathered Serpent #1)
Author: David Bowles
Illustrator: Charlene Bowles
Publication Date: Sept.1, 2020
64 pages | Middle Grade Fiction
Paperback: 978-1-947627-37-6, $12.95
eBook 978-1-947627-38-3, $11.95
Curriculum guide written by: Heather Matthews, Julia Watts, Liz Garcia, Caitlin Metheny, and Amy Maples.
Pre-Reading Information

**Synopsis:** Sayam, a halfling boy, has a destiny that he must fulfill. First, however, he needs to hatch! Join Sayam, his grandmother (a witch), and his monkey Maax as they seek to fulfill Sayam’s fate while fighting a giant snake and besting a stubborn king and a sneaky sorcerer at three tests!

**Interest Level:** Grades 3-6

**Curriculum Standards:** A list of applicable Common Core standards appears at the end of this guide.

**Themes:** Maya mythology, following your destiny, facing challenges

**Content-Specific Vocabulary:**

*Graphic novel vocabulary*

- Panel — A single frame or box in which actions or words occur.
- Speech balloon — A shape like a bubble, with a pointed tail that is near a character’s mouth. A speech balloon indicates words spoken by a character. The shape of the balloon may indicate emotion.
- Gutter — The blank space between panels.
- Emenata — Punctuation marks or icons that represent what a character is thinking, usually found in a speech bubble.
- Caption — Boxes of text that contain information like setting, descriptions, or other ideas that are not said by a character. They could also be transitional (moving the scene forward, or to a new setting).
- Sound effect — Words that indicate a sound, that are sometimes found inside speech balloons, but not always. Often, the word is an example of onomatopoeia, such as “wham,” or “crack.” Font, color, and size of the sound effect may indicate important information about the word and what it is representing.
**Yucatec Mayan Words/Phrases:** Note that in the Yucatec Mayan language, “x” is pronounced as “ish” if it is at the beginning of a word, and “sh” if in the middle or end of a word.

- **Uxmal** — a city in the Yucatan peninsula. Pronounced “oosh-mahl.”
- **Puuc hills** — a system of hills in the Yucatan peninsula. Pronounced “pook.”
- **X’men** — a witch. Pronounced “ish-mehn”
- **Kabah** — a city in the Yucatan peninsula, south of Uxmal, where Almah lives. Pronounced “ka-bah.”
- **Loltun** — a location in the Puuc hills, where the Aluxes live. Pronounced “loh-too-n.”
- **Alux** — a mystical elfin being. Pronounced “ahl-ush.”
- **Aluxes** — mystic elfin beings. Pronounced “ahl-ush-ehs.”
- **Satsun** — a magical stone that witches use. Pronounced “saht-sun.”
- **Alom** — a Maya sky god. Pronounced “ahl-ome.”
- **Sakbe** — a limestone road. Pronounced “sahk-beh.”
- **Ixcchel** — a Maya goddess of the moon, love, and medicine. Pronounced “ish-chel.”
- **Chaak** — a Maya rain god. Pronounced “chaak.”
- **Xkukikan** — a city. Pronounced “ish-kook-ee-kahn”
- **Metnalxan** — A giant snake who usually lives in the Underworld. Pronounced “meht-nahl-kahn.”
- “Elen!” — Yucatec for “Burn!” Pronounced “Ay-lain.”
- “Léembalnen!” — Yucatec for “Shine brightly!” Pronounced “leem-call-nehn.”
- “Suunen” — Yucatec for “Return.” Pronounced “soon-aan.”
- **Ah Kun Kan** — Yucatec for “the Serpent Charme.” Pronounced “ah-coon-can.”
- **Bobatil Ju’un** — Yucatec for “the book of prophecy.” Pronounced “bohb-ah-teel you-on.”
- **Ceiba tree** — a type of large tree found in the subtropic Americas. Pronounced “say-bah.”
- “Siniko’ob Ko’otene’ex waye!” — Yucatec for “Ants, come here!” Pronounced “see-nee-
koh-ohb koh-oh-ten-eh-esh wah-yeh.”

- **Cocoyoles** — An type of fruit, similar to a coconut, found in Mexico. Pronounced “koh-koh-yoh-less.”
- “Taak’nen” — Yucatec for “Adhere!” Pronounced as “tah-ahk-nen.”

**Academic Vocabulary**

- Prophesy — a prediction about someone’s future that will become their destiny.
- Kilometer — a unit of measurement, equal to 0.62 of a mile.
- Shaman — a religious leader; specifically, a religious leader that acts as a bridge between the natural and supernatural worlds, and can often access spirits.
- Chief advisor — the head of a group of advisors, or people who help rulers make important decisions.
- Hearth — the area in front of a fireplace.
- Halfling — a person who is half human and half something else.
- Green magic — magic that deals with the earth and nature.
- Denizen — someone who lives in or occupies a space.
- Revered — to be respected or admired.
- Vassals — a person who works on and lives on land which is owned by a king or other ruler.
- Infernal — having to do with the underworld.
- Dwarf — someone small in stature; short.
- Staggered — to walk unsteadily.
- Enlightenment — to have knowledge and understanding.
- Humility — being humble.
- Blight — a disease that causes plants to die.

**Teacher Considerations:** Brief horror montage and images of mummies.

**Anticipation Guide:** The author of this graphic novel, David Bowles, wrote another book about Mesoamerican mythology, titled *Feathered Serpent, Dark Heart of Sky: Myths of Mexico*. The story told here is of the dwarf king of Uxmal, a Maya myth. This story is set in an ancient Maya city, located in current Yucatan, Mexico. Information that may benefit your students to know is a brief history of the Maya civilization. Resources like History.com, Brainpop.com, or Britannica.com will give rudimentary information. Introducing the culture via background information will help situate your students in the culture, and give them sufficient background knowledge to make sense of the setting, which will impact their understanding of the story. A note about the term Maya versus the term Mayan — “Maya” is used as a noun or an adjective, and typically used when describing people, places, or objects, whereas “Mayan” is typically only used when describing the language. There are many resources available to help you decide if the word choices you are using are correct.
Reading Questions

1) What do we know about witches? What kinds of icons or symbols do we associate with witches?

2) Examine what each character looks like and is wearing. What can we infer about the characters by their appearance and clothing?

3) Kinich Kak Ek’s throne is what appears to be a two-headed jaguar. What kinds of flora and fauna exist in this part of the world? Why do you think Bowles chose the jaguar as the throne?

4) Sayam hatches from an egg. When thinking about literature, what could an egg symbolize? What does the fact that he hatches from an egg tell us about Sayam?

5) Several Maya gods and goddesses are mentioned. What are each of these gods controlling, and why are they only prayed to at specific times?

6) Methnalkan is a giant snake from the underworld. When thinking about literature, what could a snake symbolize? What does this tell us about Methnalkan, the king, or the sorcerer?

7) Sayam’s friend and partner is Maxx, the spider monkey. If you were on this journey, what kind of animal would you want as your adventure buddy? What could this type of animal do that would be helpful for you?

8) When Sayam is in the underworld, he comes across mummies that he calls the “old ones.” What is a mummy? Why do people mummify their dead? How do the mummies of Mayan culture differ from mummies in Egypt?

9) When Sayam and his grandmother use magic, the magic is represented with a blue-green color. Why did the illustrator choose this color to represent their magic? What other examples of magic use this color? What other magic colors can you think of?

10) One of Sayam’s tasks is to count every leaf on a tree. This type of impossible task is popular in mythology. What other myths do we know of that asks a hero to count a large number of objects?

11) Both Sayam and Almah use clay to achieve a goal; to fix or make an object. Why did they use clay? What other uses does clay have?

Close Reading:

1) Examine pages 12-17 to look for the passage of time. The text tells us that Almah is getting older—what evidence backs this up? What do the visual cues tell us about how much time has passed?

2) In the myth, Sayam is called the Dwarf King—where can we find evidence that Sayam is a dwarf (or short in stature)?

3) Reread page 10 and the prophecy. What was the role of the Aluxes in making the prophecy come true? What could be their motivation for wanting the prophecy to come true?

4) Look for any examples of animals and the people they interact with or represent. What might these animals say about the people? What evidence backs up these assumptions?

5) Examine the three tests—counting the leaves, making the figures, and the breaking of the cocoyes (pages 44-53). The king could have set any three tasks—what could be his motivation for him to choose these three challenges?
After-Reading Activities and Questions

1) In *Feathered Serpent, Dark Heart of Sky: Myths of Mexico*, on pages 145–151, Bowles tells the story of “The Dwarf King of Uxmal,” amongst other stories. Have students read Bowles’ story, and compare the text to the graphic novel. You can ask them to complete a simple Venn Diagram or T chart. You can also seek out other regency myths from similar Mesoamerican mythologies (Aztec Empire, or Incan Empire), and ask students to compare the stories across the different cultures, looking for similarities and differences. Consider the following questions for guidance:

- What do these stories have in common?
- Why do you think these aspects are in common?
- What do these stories have that are different?
- Why do you think these aspects are different?
- During which years were each of these empires active?
- Which story came first/which story may have influenced the other (if any)?
- What can we infer about the people who believed in these myths?
- What are the benefits from reading a story as a graphic novel?
- What are the benefits from reading a story as just prose?

2) David Bowles is very involved with a social media movement called #DignidadLiteraria. After the publication of the adult novel American Dirt, many people were mad that the portrayal of Mexican people was hurtful and inaccurate. Many people, like David, called for books about many different cultures of people to be published, and for those books to be written by a member of that culture, so that the stories and characters are more accurate. The #DignidadLiteraria movement is best described on their website as “a network of committed Latinx authors formed to combat the invisibility of Latinx authors, editors and executives in the U.S. publishing industry and the dearth of Latinx literature on the shelves of America’s bookstores and libraries. #DignidadLiteraria believes in the social and political power of wholly authentic Latinx voices and that it is the duty of the publishing industry and literati to use their full power and privilege to elevate these voices.” Challenge your students to consider what is important in order to portray accurate characters and stories within a culture (like Mexican culture). Then, bring them to a library and have them seek out books with characters from this culture (or bring books to them). Ask them to seek for these important items of character and story. Consider the following questions for guidance:

- How are characters of XX culture described?
- What kinds of stories are told about characters who belong to XX culture?
- What events are happening to these characters?
- What kinds of authors are writing about XX culture?
- Who should be writing about XX culture?
- Why are these people NOT writing about the XX culture?

Consider showing examples of #DignidadLiteraria from Twitter, Instagram, or other social media. Many authors contributed to this movement with their own opinions on the matter. Ask your students if they agree or disagree with specific statements, and why. This can be formatted as a discussion or a debate, as well as a text analysis. It is discouraged to have students seek out examples of this hashtag on their own, as social media can contain a variety of problematic vocabulary, such as cursing. It would be recommended to find and curate examples on your own, and present them to the students.

3) The story of a heroic character typically follows the same stages. Joseph Campbell called this the “monomyth,” or “the hero’s journey.” Campbell describes the 17 stages of the monomyth, in order, as follows: the call to adventure, refusal of the call, meeting the mentor, crossing the first threshold, the belly of the whale, the road of trials, meeting with the goddess, the woman as temptress, atonement with the father/abyss, apotheosis, the ultimate book, refusal of the return, the magic flight, rescue from without, crossing of the return threshold, master of two worlds, and freedom to live. Not every hero hits every single stage, but most heroes hit most of these stages, and typically in this order. Searching online will yield a graph of the monomyth as seen in the next page, as well as more information about each stage.
Break students into pairs or small groups. Provide each pair or small group with a “hero’s journey” circular chart. Ask students to go back into the graphic novel, finding examples of each stage (if an example for each stage exists), and place each example with the stage it represents. Have students consider the following:

- Which stages were left out, and which stages were completed?
- Would having all of the stages have made this story better or worse?
- Can your students creatively write a new stage into Sayam’s story?
- What other heroes follow Sayam’s general storyline?

4) Using the terminology for comics and graphic novels, have students create a 8 panel comic that retells a story from their own culture. Consider having students create an 8-box foldable (fold a 8.5”x11” piece of paper in half vertically. Keeping the paper folded, fold it again in half vertically. Unfold the paper, and then fold it in half horizontally. The end results should be 8 equal sized boxes). Using this piece of paper, have students sketch out 8 panels that tell a story. They can create a final draft on a clean piece of paper, with full color. Ask students to use examples of each of the vocabulary terms from above.

For further insights into comics terms and processes, consult Scott McCloud’s books, Understanding Comics (1994) and Making Comics (2006).
Interdisciplinary connections

*ELA:* You can modify the 8 panel comic assignment to fit any text. You can use it as a summary assignment, or assign different chapters/acts of a text, and bind all of the student examples into a study guide or a class text. Explore the ways to use this visual format in a variety of texts — poems, dramas, speeches, etc. This can be especially useful for text with tough language or difficult concepts (like Shakespeare), and you can encourage your students to modernize the text in their comics. Showing examples of other graphic novels (such as the Bone series by Jeff Smith, El Deafo by Cece Bell, American Born Chinese by Gene Luen Yang, anything by Raina Telgemeier, the Amulet series by Kazu Kibuishi, Dog Man by Dav Pilkey, etc) may help to encourage your students to recognize different art styles and story-telling modalities. You may also want to discuss why novels like The Diary of a Wimpy Kid series do not count as a graphic novel, to give your students an idea of what their assignment should and should not look like, and to create clear boundaries of what is and is not a graphic novel or comic.

*Math:* On page 46, we see an example of the Maya numerals. Math problems can be created using this numeric system. Consider the Maya calendar (and the prediction(s) that it made), namely that the world would end in December, 2012. What mathematical problems could account for this error?

*Art:* Sayam and Almah use clay in the story. Create clay (or buy some), and make Maya-style items. Almah fixes a hole in a jug, and Sayam makes a statue. Can we do either of these tasks with our clay? What happens when clay is fired? If you have a kiln, this could also be a science topic, and you can discuss temperatures of baking within a kiln, glaze colors, and other topics.

*Home economics:* Sayam and the king use cocoyoles in a challenge. Look into popular foods within the Maya culture (like chocolate), or seek out recipes passed down in the Maya culture. Ask students to complete cooking tasks using authentic methods (like using a mortar and pestle to grind). You can also have students create traditional Maya recipes that are popular around the world, such as guacamole or tamales, and have students learn how these foods developed and spread worldwide.
Social studies: There are many social studies tie-ins.

Print out a map of ancient Mesoamerican cultures. Using a contemporary Mesoamerican map, have students locate and draw the ancient locations onto contemporary maps. What do you notice about these locations? At the end of the book, several locations are specifically named. Mark these on the map as well. What were their purposes? Do they still stand? If so, what are their purposes now?

Look at topography and resources like access to water, forests, mountains, etc.—what was or is near these features? Why would these things be near these resources?

Examine polytheistic religions, both early and contemporary. Define polytheism. What other religions are polytheistic? What do these religions or cultures have in common, and what is different? Why do some religions have many gods or goddesses, and some only have one? How are the myths of polytheistic religions different or similar to those of monotheistic religions?

The line of kings in this story is handed down via prophecy. How were lines of kings passed down in ancient Aztec culture? How were lines of kings passed down in ancient Incan culture? How were lines of kings passed down in ancient Maya culture? How are lines of kings typically passed down in current times? What other lines of kings have been passed down with prophecy? Is using a prophecy a good way to decide who should be king? Why or why not?

Ask your students to research how the Maya people live in contemporary times. Stress the fact that the Maya people still exist, despite the fall of the Maya empire. Questions could be regarding effects of colonialism, contemporary dress/music/celebration/religion, finding where the Maya people might live now, comparing the current Maya to the Maya from older times, or comparing the Maya to other current groups of Mesoamericans (or any other ethnic group). Items of interest for your students could be to compare Mayan words/phrases to Spanish words/phrases, comparing traditional to modern clothing styles, constructing a timeline from the Maya empire to contemporary times, or looking at issues of tourism that affect the people who live near cultural sites.
David Bowles (author) is a Mexican-American author and educator based in South Texas. He has written fourteen books. His middle grade novel-in-verse, They Call Me Güero, has been the recipient of numerous honors, such as the Pura Belpré Honor and the Tomás Rivera Mexican American Children’s Book Award, as well as being named to the Bluebonnet Award Masterlist.

Charlene Bowles (illustrator) is a comic artist and illustrator living in Texas. She graduated from the University of Texas–Rio Grande Valley in 2018. Rise of the Halfling King is her debut graphic novel and her work has also been featured on the covers of the award-winning Garza Twins books. She is currently developing many of her own comic projects.

**Note about the series:** *Rise of the Halfling King* is book 1 in the Tales of the Feathered Serpent, a series of books featuring ancient Mesoamerican tales. David and Charlene Bowles, a father-daughter duo, worked together to produce the first book. David will be teaming up with different up-and-coming artists for each new installment.
Common Core Anchor Standards

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.W.1: Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.W.4: Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.W.9: Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.L.6: Acquire and use accurately a range of general academic and domain-specific words and phrases sufficient for reading, writing, speaking, and listening at the college and career readiness level; demonstrate independence in gathering vocabulary knowledge when encountering an unknown term important to comprehension or expression.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.1: Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.2: Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.5: Analyze the structure of texts, including how specific sentences, paragraphs, and larger portions of the text (e.g., a section, chapter, scene, or stanza) relate to each other and the whole.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.7: Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse media and formats, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words.1

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.9: Analyze how two or more texts address similar themes or topics in order to build knowledge or to compare the approaches the authors take.
This curriculum guide was developed by a team of doctoral students at the Center for Children’s and Young Adult Literature (CCYAL) in the Department of Theory and Practice in Teacher Education at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. The CCYAL demonstrates a commitment to diversity in part by helping classroom teachers successfully integrate high-quality books featuring underrepresented characters, cultures, and settings. For further information or specific requests, please visit https://ccyal.utk.edu