



FilmEd Classroom  
Films to Engage Students in  
Meaningful Conversation

FILM GUIDE

# GRAB MY HAND: A LETTER TO MY DAD

## GRADES 6-8

Camrus Johnson & Pedro Piccinini | United States

ANIMATED SHORT FILM | CREATIVE NONFICTION | 5:08 MINUTES | 2019

Subtheme: Empathy, Connecting, Grief and Loss

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PART IV

## BEHIND THE SCENES

LEARN ABOUT THE FILMMAKERS & FILMMAKING PROCESS

**GRAB MY HAND: A LETTER TO MY DAD** is by Camrus Johnson, who wrote the story, and Pedro Piccinini, who designed the characters and the backgrounds (the **settings**) and animated the film.

## CONSIDER THE FILMMAKERS' STYLE & TECHNIQUES

Pose the questions below before showing the film once again and let students take notes while they watch.

- What do you notice about the animation in **GRAB MY HAND**? Did you like the style of the drawings? Have you seen other animated films that look like this one? What was special or unique about the animation in this film?
- How would you describe the colors of the film? (You can also use the images above to prompt responses.) How would you describe the mood of the film based on just the colors? How did the colors make you feel?

- Watch the film without any sound. How are the different parts of the story told through images and colors? What symbols or visual metaphors are used throughout the film?
- Play the film, but have students close their eyes as they listen. What sounds did you hear? How would you describe the sounds and music included in the film? How do the sounds and music make you feel? How would you describe the mood based on the audio alone?

## CONSIDER THE FILMMAKERS' UNDERLYING MESSAGE

Films are made by filmmakers who have something they want to say, which might be inspired by their own experiences or something they've encountered in the world.

Therefore, a film often has an underlying message, or multiple messages.

Explain that there are no wrong answers to the questions below. Works of art, including film, can be interpreted in many different ways.

- Why do you think Camrus Johnson wanted to tell this story?
- Why do you think the filmmakers chose to tell the story in this way? (Here you can reference the answers to the previous set of questions.)
- What lessons or feelings do you think the film's creators might want you to take from the story?
- Why do you think they might have chosen to use **animation** instead of **live action** to tell this story?
- Camrus Johnson is also the narrator of this film. How does knowing this add to or change the way you feel or think about the film? How do you think the film might have been different if another actor had narrated the film?

## ABOUT THE FILMMAKERS

### CAMRUS JOHNSON

Camrus Johnson is co-director, writer and narrator of **GRAB MY HAND: A LETTER TO MY DAD**. He wrote the film for and about his own father. Camrus also works as an actor and a producer, and can be seen playing Luke Fox on the TV show **BATWOMAN**. He says that video

games are what inspired him to become an actor. He's currently working on writing a graphic novel as well as a feature film.

## **PEDRO PICCININI**

Pedro Piccinini is the co-director and animator of the film **GRAB MY HAND: A LETTER TO MY DAD**. He is originally from Brazil and currently lives in Brooklyn, NY. In addition to making films, he creates illustrations and comics.

## **Q&A WITH CAMRUS JOHNSON**

Let students know that while the filmmakers might have had a message or idea in mind, we are all welcome to interpret the film in our own way.

### **What inspired you to make this film? Why was it important for you to tell this story through film?**

I've been realizing more and more as I get older that men, especially Black men, have been wrongfully expected to keep their emotions hidden and in check. Because of that, we tend to not know how to communicate how we're feeling sometimes. And even though I'm an actor and my job is to be emotionally fluid and know how to show how I'm feeling when I'm feeling it, I still found it hard to talk to my dad about how we were feeling when his best friend was in the hospital.

I'm sure the distance was a factor, and us talking on the phone and not actually seeing each other's faces was too, but either way it felt like there was a "manly" wall that we were holding up in front of each other. We were "being strong" for each other, when in many cases the best way to heal is to stop pretending that we don't need to.

I've learned through acting, writing, and art of all genres that storytelling is the easiest way for me to say how I'm feeling. So instead of just asking my Dad if he was okay and telling him how sorry I was that he was going through this, I wanted to show him. And I wanted him to see it and hear it in the exact way that I felt it in my heart.

### **Why did you decide to tell this story with animation?**

There were a few reasons actually. It was partially convenience because my animator/co-director, Pedro Piccinini, and I were already working on an animated short film concept, so when the idea for **GRAB MY HAND** came up I was already teamed up with an incredible artist that understood me, creatively.

But also, from working with Pedro on the first project, I came to fully realize how much I enjoyed storytelling in the animated space. The art, the colors, and the fun of the animated world make for such a wonderful way to pull someone in; so much so that they don't even know that they're learning a lesson until it's too late. I thought that retelling the story of my dad and his beautiful friendship with his best friend while sort of hiding my message to him about how much I love him underneath it would best be told with the help of animation.

**Since film is based on your personal experience, is it ever hard or sad to watch the film? What was it like working on a film that was so personal?**

I've seen it so many times now that it just makes me happy to watch it, because I think less of the film's message and more of the way that my dad, friends, and the audiences of the festivals reacted to hearing it. Working on the film was scary because I wasn't sure how my dad was going to react to it, or my entire family for that matter. I didn't want to cross any lines or pry by turning their relationship into a story - even if it was only intended for my family's eyes. But thankfully they reacted to it even better than I expected! They see it as a sort of never-ending memorial for my uncle/my dad's best friend, and that makes me deeply grateful.

**What was the most challenging part of making this film?**

Recording the monologue in the hospital moment. That was based off of what my dad actually said to my uncle but I dramatized by actually crying why recording it (which I'm not sure he actually did) and adding the "*Gate Check*" - turning into a whole monologue. I wasn't sure how emotionally connected I wanted to get because I was afraid of it coming off corny or forced, so it took many takes until I finally got to a place that I felt was right.

**Tell us about your experience with the film once it was complete.**

Well first my dad watched it with me when he came to visit me in Vancouver, Canada - he had no idea I was working on it or what I was about to show him. We watched it together, he cried a lot and just kept saying "*This is amazing*" until we hugged. It was really, really beautiful. Then I sent it to my aunt and she wasn't sure about it so it took her a couple of days before she was ready to watch it, then she finally did and sent it to my cousins who connected to it as well.

The plan was to end it there - the people that I made it for saw it. I thought maybe I'd put it in a couple tiny festivals just to get my animator some love for his hard work, and while waiting to hear back from the 3 or 4 that I submitted to, I showed the film to a few friends just so they could see what I had made and to my surprise they all cried. So once I realized that people outside of my family connected to the film, I submitted it to more festivals and to my greater surprise it has now been to 51 festivals to date and won 16 awards so far. I'm very happy with how far it's come and how much further it will go! ■

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