

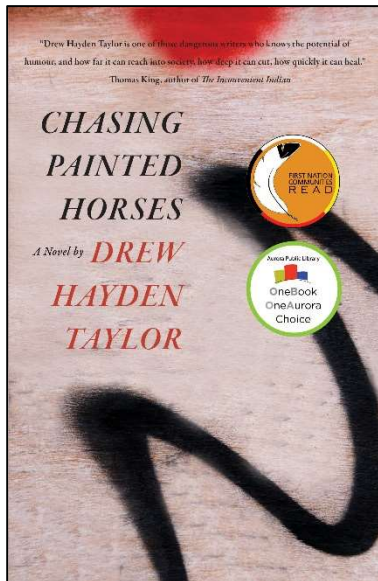


CORMORANT BOOKS

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***Chasing Painted Horses* by Drew Hayden Taylor** **Teacher's Guide**

Created by Martha Brack Martin with contributions from Drew Hayden Taylor and the Cormorant Team.



"Drew Hayden Taylor's writings are a significant part of the Indigenous cultural renaissance which has been gathering momentum since the 1980s. Humour figures in all Taylor's work, eliciting laughter edged with disturbing awareness of stereotypes being exploded and bitter truths being given a very thin sugar coating."¹

Chasing Painted Horses is a perfect example of Drew's writing. Written first as a short story, then as a play, and finally in this novel form, the story uses humour, rich characterization, and an ever-evolving mystery to explore how harsh the world can be to those who are seen as outsiders. More importantly, however, the story also reveals how art and family, friendship and coincidental encounters, can all work together to heal past hurts and reveal universal truths.

This novel would be a fabulous addition to a secondary English or Indigenous Studies class.

Themes

Some key themes and "big ideas" in this book include:

- What it means to be Canadian

1. Robert Nunn, "Taylor, Drew Hayden," additional information by Anne Nothof, Canadian Theatre Encyclopedia (website), last modified March 23, 2022, <https://www.canadiantheatre.com/dict.pl?term=Drew+Hayden+Taylor>.

- The effect of Colonialism on Canada’s Indigenous People
- Family
- Community
- Loyalty
- Appearance versus Reality
- Art and the act of creating it, as a means of inspiration, comfort, and communication

The Plot

When Ralph Thomas comes across graffiti of a horse in an urban alleyway in the early hours of the morning, he is stopped in his tracks. He recognizes this horse. A half-asleep Indigenous homeless man sees Ralph’s reaction to the horse and calls out to him. Over the course of a morning’s worth of hot coffee on a bitterly cold day, Ralph and the homeless man talk and Ralph remembers a troubling moment from his childhood when an odd little girl, Danielle, drew the most beautiful and intriguing horse on his mother’s Everything Wall, winning the competition set up for children on the Otter Lake Reserve. The graffiti of the horse is eerily similar to the chalk image drawn twenty years earlier. But how? Why?

Ralph has lived with many questions that arose from his eleventh winter. What did the horse mean — to him, his sister, his best friend, and, most importantly, the girl who drew it? These questions have never left him.

The Setting

This story takes place in contemporary Toronto and the fictional community of the Otter Lake Reserve in Central Ontario.

What Kind of Reader Will Love This Book? One who ...

- Loves stories featuring warm, realistic family relationships
- Enjoys stories told in alternating perspectives
- Appreciates humour woven into their stories
- Is proudly (or not so proudly) Canadian
- Wants to learn more about life on a Canadian reserve.
- Likes books written in the magical realism genre

Pre-Teaching Prep

Trigger Warning: This book deals with addiction, parental neglect, and mental health issues in both children and adults. Consider the life experiences of your students. To improve your own awareness and support your students, some resources are provided below.

Indigenous Culture:

Consider inviting local Indigenous Elders and/or Knowledge Keepers into your classroom. This will be both engaging and educational, putting the students in the right frame of mind to begin the novel. You can prepare questions for your guests ahead of time, knowing where the book will lead, or you can brainstorm some questions your students wish to know (with a qualifier that some questions may not be appropriate or be answered by your guest). It is also a great idea to simply ask the speaker what they would like to share.

There are many guidelines about how to respectfully welcome Elders and Knowledge Keepers into your classrooms, but here are two for immediate reference:

<https://burnabyschools.ca/indigenouseducation/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/2020/09/Elders-Guide-V3-FINAL.pdf>

<https://www.teachers.ab.ca/SiteCollectionDocuments/ATA/For%20Members/ProfessionalDevelopment/Walking%20Together/PD-WT-16g%20-%20Elder%20Protocol.pdf>

Homelessness:

<https://yogaoutreach.com/2020/03/18/six-ways-to-talk-about-homelessness-with-kids/>

Trauma and PTSD:

<https://www.stanfordchildrens.org/en/topic/default?id=post-traumatic-stress-disorder-in-children-90-P02579>

Chapter Questions (for Independent Work or Class Discussion)

Pick and choose the questions that work for *your* students in *your* classroom. Use as many or as few as you'd like.

Chapter 1

1. The way a story begins is very important, and authors spend a great deal of time deciding on the “lead” they wish to use as their first sentence. In this novel, the author introduces us to Ralph by having him reflect on his childhood friend William’s classic comment about the weather. What does this say about Ralph? Why do you suppose the author chose this lead?
2. The author describes Harry in this way:

“He was known to the world – a world that cared, mind you – simply as Harry, due to his bushy beard, eyebrows, and unkempt hair that peeked out from underneath a worn cap saluting a local hockey team that did not deserve such saluting, which obviously did little to protect his ears from the climate” (p. 2).

This is a very long, complex sentence of subordinate clauses, which is typical of Drew Hayden Taylor’s narrative style in this novel. What are all the things he manages to convey in this one passage?

3. What does the author mean when he says on page 3 that Harry had his destitution “... thrust upon him ... courtesy of a negligent and schizophrenic society confused in its understanding of the relationship between Aboriginal peoples and everybody else”?
4. Given what we learn of Harry’s life and world, are you surprised he is happy? Why or why not?
5. Both Harry and Ralph are characterized by references to the way they are viewed by others.
 - a. Why do the people in Dead Rat River Nation refer to Ralph as an “apple” (p. 7)?
 - b. Why does Harry choose to speak with different dialects when panhandling (p. 3)?
6. How are we immediately shown in chapter 1 that this is a “Canadian” book? Use examples from the text and your own ideas to explain.
7. The author reveals bits and pieces about the horse and its creation in stages, in order to increase the reader’s interest. What do we learn in this chapter about the horse, its creator, and the effect it has on its viewers? Include quotations from the book as evidence of your conclusions.

Chapter 2

8. The author describes “... the ancient and honoured contest known to children around the world as ‘King of the Mountain,’ proving once again that Darwinism was still practised and embraced on this little patch of the Canadian Shield” (p. 22).
 - a. What does the author mean here with his reference to Darwinism?
 - b. What would be a simpler way to describe what is happening at recess?
 - c. What does the author accomplish by describing the scene in the way he does?
9. On page 36, the author describes William drawing on the improvised chalkboard. How does the act of creating and expressing himself through drawing change the character of William from what we have seen so far?
10. Describe Danielle Gaadaw. What can you infer about her life from the chapter?
11. In this chapter the author gives the reader an intimate view into the life of the Thomas family.
 - a. How would you describe their relationships with each other?
 - b. Would you want to live in this home? Why or why not?
 - c. What does the author accomplish by describing life after school at the Thomas home and then moving to end the chapter with Danielle arriving at her home?

Chapter 3

12. Almost everything about Harry is a bit of a mystery (his actual name, his age, and even the way he really speaks). He also appears to have a power that allows him to see the true nature of people. How do you feel about Harry's gift? Is it more believable, in your opinion, given that Harry's past is mysterious? Explain your thoughts.
13. On the bottom of page 45, Harry says, "... I thought I should warn you. You should be careful over there. The Horse ... he likes you. He doesn't like a lot of people, but still, he's got a temper. Best to stay away."
 - a. What did you think when you read this?
 - b. How did you feel about the way Ralph reacted when he heard this?
 - c. Why is the H on the word "Horse" capitalized?
14. We learn Harry hasn't had an alcoholic drink for years. Why did he stop?
15. Harry appears to be a stereotypical street person, but Ralph notices that "... he differed. Substantially" (p. 49). What other things in the book are different than they appear on the surface? In your opinion, what point might the author be making about appearances and stereotypes?
16. What do you predict are the "facts of life" (p. 50) Harry wants to talk about with Ralph? Explain your reasoning.

Chapter 4

17. How is the chat between Ralph and William at the start of the chapter an example of dramatic irony? Explain.
18. Use your inferencing skills to determine what the author is suggesting when he writes that Danielle "... stayed, kneeling as if praying, looking at the Wall" (p. 61).
19. Looking at Danielle's horse drawing, "for a brief moment, Ralph could see through what some have called the crack between the worlds" (p. 68). How does the author use this to suggest a comparison between Ralph and Harry?
20. Describe in detail how each of the children and Liz interpret and respond to Danielle's Horse when they see it for the first time in the kitchen. How do their reactions differ?

Chapter 5

21. Ralph's father Tye has a different reaction to the Horse. Why do you think this is so?
22. On page 90 the author writes, "Colonization had its fingers in all the pies on the reserve." What is the author saying here? Explain your thoughts, then share them with the class in a discussion.
23. In this chapter we learn more about the differences between the Thomas home and Danielle's home. We also learn Danielle won't, or can't, draw the Horse when she is at home. What conclusions can you draw about the reasons for this, from what you've read in this chapter?
24. What do you think the Horse represents to Danielle, and why?
25. In your own words, explain why Danielle is so upset in this chapter.

Chapter 6

26. In this chapter, the story bounces back to adult Ralph and Harry in the Tim Hortons.
 - a. Do you appreciate stories told in two timelines, or do you prefer a more linear storyline? Explain your preference.
 - b. Why has the author chosen this structure for the story?
 - c. How well do you think this structure works? Why?
27. This chapter has several references to the number two. See if you can find at least three.
28. Do you believe in coincidences in life? Why or why not? Share your ideas with a classmate and then with the entire class in a discussion.
29. Why do you suppose Harry is so determined to make Ralph explain why he became a cop?

Chapter 7

30. The author is renowned for his ability to include humour in his works. How does he inject humour in this chapter? Give two examples.
31. Each of the main characters finds their own way to make sense of what the act of creating the Horse does for Danielle. Which one is closest to the way you would describe it, or do you have your own way of explaining it?
32. Danielle notices William looking unwelcoming and decides “not to look at him anymore. That was probably the best thing to do. If she pretended he wasn’t there, he might go away. The opposite of the way she called her Horse. She pretended it was there and it came” (p. 125). What does this say about Danielle and her coping strategies?
33. The author describes Danielle’s artistic process in detail as she recreates her Horse.
 - a. How do the other children each respond to Danielle’s process as she draws the new Horse?
 - b. In your opinion, what is the message the author is trying to convey about art and the act of creating it?
34. William watches Danielle closely, hoping he can copy her process and create something just as powerful. Is it possible to create a copy of an artistic work and have it turn out to be just as powerful as the original? Discuss your ideas with the class.
35. Danielle tells herself, “The Horse was a lot more than many kids had ...” (p. 134). What does Danielle mean by this?
36. What does the Thomas home represent to William? What does it represent to Danielle, and to Tye? Explain using your own ideas as well as quotations from the novel.
37. Both Tye and Ralph sense the Horse is more than “a series of chalk lines on a kitchen wall” (p. 139), but their reactions to this are quite different. Explain why you think this is so.
38. For William, too, the Horse is more than just a drawing. How would you describe what it means to William?

Chapter 8

39. On page 145, Harry says to Ralph, “You don’t see anymore, do you?” Why do you think Ralph has lost the ability to “see”?
40. What do you think caused Harry’s collapse in Tim Hortons?

Chapter 9

41. In your opinion, why is Danielle hiding and watching the Thomases' home?
42. Why do you think William is so oblivious to how wrong his actions were?
43. We learn more about William in this chapter, including that he is perceived by others in the community as a bully. What does it say about Ralph that he has remained best friends with William despite this?
44. Danielle reflects on how her relationship with the Horse has changed in the last few years. Why do you think this has happened?
45. On page 174, Danielle "heard something break outside her door ... but she ignored the sound. There was always something breaking." Do you believe the author is speaking only in the literal sense here? Explain.
46. What do you think happened to Danielle when she "disappeared" (p. 176) at the end of the chapter?

Chapter 10

47. Describe the fallout from the encounter in the classroom.
48. Despite the emotional elements in this chapter, the author still manages to inject humour into it. In your opinion, does humour enrich the emotional scenes, or does it detract from them? Why?
49. In this chapter, there are again numerous references to the number two and the idea of two things. These include the street being named "Twin Pine Lane" (p. 182) and the "duo" (p. 187) arriving at Danielle's trailer "twenty-two minutes later" (p. 182).
 - a. See if you can find any additional references to the number two in the chapter.
 - b. Is this use coincidental, or might the author be trying to say something by repeating the symbolism of two things?
 - c. Look up the "symbolism of duality" to see if it can inspire your ideas.
50. The camp fort is not described in an appealing way, yet Danielle chooses it as her refuge. What does this say about her home with her mother? What does this say about her need to create the Horse? Explain.
51. We finally learn the story of the Horse's origins and more about Danielle's life at home. How do you think her trauma has connected the two things?
52. Now that you know more about Danielle's relationship with the Horse, think about its modern incarnation in Toronto on the wall of graffiti. What do you think it is doing there? What might it mean?
53. How did you feel reading about Danielle's dreams for her future, where she hopes to "have a place for tired ponies to rest and stop walking in circles" (p. 218)? Explain.

Chapter 11

54. Tye and Liz are discussing where the Horse comes from, and how they feel about it. Tye admits "... it gives me the creeps" (p. 224). Later he tries to explain his feelings further, saying, "I think maybe it's some sort of cry for help. Or worse" (p. 225). What could be worse than a cry for help, in your opinion? What do you think he means?
55. Consider this passage where Liz reflects on the kids' request to foster Danielle:

“Though her heart ached for Danielle, especially after what she’d just been told, the law and the world just didn’t allow for her family to scoop up the little girl and adopt her” (p. 229).

What is the significance of the author’s choice of the word “scoop” here?

56. This chapter shows the reader a huge change in William. Think about the version of William we saw back in the classroom, trying to force Danielle to draw the dog. Do you think the change will be permanent? Why or why not?
57. On page 235, we learn William has a list of words he instinctively doesn’t like, in part because “the way the syllables of those words were strung together were unpleasant to his ears.” Are there any words you, like William, don’t like? Why?
58. Danielle is surprised to see the three friends outside her bedroom window. “These were disparate images that did not appear together in her limited experience ... Reluctantly, she opened the window, still not convinced she was seeing what she was actually seeing” (p. 245).
 - a. Does this scene remind you of one earlier in the story? Which one?
 - b. Why does the author want the reader to make that connection? What does it serve to do?
59. On some level, Danielle recognizes that Ralph was “the only one who could really see my Horse” (p. 247). Again, why is this significant?
60. Danielle puts her hand on the frosty truck window when she sees the children and leaves a print identical to the one on the camp fort Horse. When she did this on her Horse in the camp fort, what was her reasoning? How does the author use this handprint to make a statement about her feelings toward the children? Explain.
61. Danielle’s departure triggers epiphanies, resulting in life-altering changes in all three children. Describe these for each child.
62. On the last page of the chapter, we learn about some significant changes in the Thomas family. Why do you think the author chose to simply slip these changes into the story at the end of the chapter, without much detail or explanation? Share your thoughts with a classmate.

Chapter 12

63. Harry finally manages to make Ralph answer the question of why he became a cop. What do we learn?
64. Do you think Harry will survive this latest seizure? Why or why not?
65. What do you think Harry means when he says, “Where would you be if you were a horse” (p. 261)?

Chapter 13

66. We catch up with Ralph, as well as Shelley and William, in this chapter. What do we learn about how they have all been spending their days?
67. The plaster horse has clearly gone through some misadventures since Ralph last saw it. What do you think the author is saying by including its presence here?

68. The author reintroduces Ralph to Danielle through her shadow. What does this allow the author to do?
69. How do you feel now that you've finished the book? Explain your thoughts.
70. In an interview on October 1, 2019 for *Open Book*, the author mentioned that the last two pages of the novel were new additions to his previous incarnations of Danielle's story. Consider those last two pages. If they weren't there, do you think you would feel the same way about the book? Why or why not? Share your ideas and conclusions with the class in a whole class discussion.

Discussion or Essay Questions

- a) Discuss how the author uses the theme of "appearance versus reality" in the story, citing specific examples from the text to discuss the author's purpose.
- b) How does the author work with the theme of "community" in the story?
- c) On page 9, the author writes, "Reality tends to be a harsh teacher." Discuss the accuracy of this statement with respect to the major characters in the book.
- d) The author spends a great deal of time describing both Toronto and the community of Otter Lake. How important is "setting" to this story, in your opinion? Why?
- e) How would you describe the way the author has structured this novel? Would it be as effective written in a different way? Explain.
- f) The author could have chosen any animal for Danielle to draw, yet he chose a horse. Do some research on the symbolism of the horse in different cultures, art, literature, etc. Why is the horse an appropriate choice for Danielle and her story? Explain using evidence from the book and the results of your inquiry to defend your ideas.
- g) The author has carefully crafted the story so that certain things are intentionally compared and contrasted. Prove this statement with examples from the text and your own ideas.
- h) What do you think the author is saying about being an Indigenous person in Canada today? Explain.
- i) Discuss how Harry's Indigenous identity impacts the way he moves through this story and how it affects the way he interacts with and is perceived by other characters.
- j) Some would say this book wears its Canadianism proudly. Where do we see the author demonstrating his love for Canada and where do we see him illuminating Canada's less savoury history? Share examples of each and explain how they work to defend – or contradict – that idea of the novel being "proudly Canadian."

For additional discussion questions and teaching ideas, consider the Readers' Guide to the book, created by Cormorant Books and found here:

https://www.cormorantbooks.com/files/ugd/fea6f4_26447609be7b4125bb6bf9002d8a7426.pdf

Culminating Activities

These culminating activities give students the opportunity to make connections to the world and themselves, as well as to other texts, and to choose their own way of demonstrating them. Here are some other activities to consider at the end of the novel:

In Ten Words or Less ...

Drew Hayden Taylor's writing style is often complex, using several subordinate clauses and looping ideas to describe something relatively simple. In this way he invokes mood, hides his own little gems of wisdom, and often creates humour.

Reread the first paragraph of chapter 1. The author writes three complex sentences to essentially say, "It was a cold morning."

As a class, brainstorm several simple statements about everyday life. These should contain no more than ten words. Now, writing in the style of Drew Hayden Taylor in *Chasing Painted Horses*, pull out your best subordinate clauses, figurative language, and powerful vocabulary to rewrite these statements you've brainstormed. Share them as a class and vote on the best ones.

A Picture's Worth a Thousand Words

The act of creating a visual representation of a horse takes on almost mythic importance in the story. Think about Liz's intentions when she began the Everything Wall and the responses the various characters had to Danielle's Horses.

Now dig deeper. Research the role that art and the act of creating have in Indigenous culture, both historically and today. Be sure to follow the inquiry process as directed by your teacher. Then choose and complete one of the inquiry activities listed below:

- a) Share five Indigenous works of art that speak to you, then explain why you have chosen them.
- b) Research a particular Indigenous artist or artistic style and explain your choice, sharing details of the work and the artist's process as you do.
- c) Research historical or contemporary Indigenous artworks in Canada and/or outside it. Then discuss what these works have taught you about the value their creators placed on the act of creating and representing.
- d) Independent Study – design a project relevant to you and approved by your teacher.

The More Things Change ...

Danielle's experiences are fictional and set in the past. Unfortunately, child abuse and neglect continue to be issues in Canada and around the world.

What is the World Health Organization doing to help children? How are these efforts working? What should Canada and/or the United Nations be doing to make the world a safer place for children?

Consider the following articles (and be aware, they may be triggering for some). Discuss each article with respect to the questions above. How could you and your peers do something to make a difference?

<https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/first-nations-bc-child-abuse-minister-resign-1.6889228>

<https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/85-002-x/2022001/article/00016-eng.htm>

<https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/violence-against-children>

Now act. Try to put one of your strategies or action plans into place, perhaps in a local way. Share your group's success on social media, in the hopes of motivating others and drawing attention to the issue.

Exploring the Same Themes in Different Texts

After reading *Chasing Painted Horses*, consider reading other books by the author, including *The Night Wanderer: A Native Gothic Novel*, *The Night Wanderer: A Graphic Novel*, and *Toronto at Dreamer's Rock*. Older students could also consider *Motorcycles & Sweetgrass*. How are some of the same themes repeated in these stories? How are they handled differently?

Create a presentation comparing the themes in the books, or share your ideas orally in a class discussion. Be sure to include your own interpretation of what you believe the author is trying to say in each work you include.

Exploring the Same Story in Two Different Genres

The author first wrote about the character of Danielle in a short story entitled "Girl Who Loved Her Horses" and then turned that into a play by the same name. Read the play, which is found in the book *The Boy in the Treehouse / Girl Who Loved Her Horses*. (If you can find a copy of the short story version, read that too.) How did the author use the original material when writing *Chasing Painted Horses*? What do you notice about his style and character descriptions when comparing the play to the novel? Which medium do you prefer for the story? Explain your observations and preference to the class.

Watch and Learn

Drew Hayden Taylor has written extensively, but he has also performed and presented a number of times in different venues. Some of these are available for viewing.

Consider watching any or all of the following:

[Drew Hayden Taylor on Using Humor against Racism](#)

<https://www.cbc.ca/books/2021-indspire-awards-recipient-drew-hayden-taylor-wants-to-expand-how-we-define-indigenous-literature-1.4864522> (video included in article)

[Drew Hayden Taylor Speech to ENG4U Class \[Full\]](#)

[OWC 2016 Closing Speaker Drew Hayden Taylor](#)

What do you learn about the process of writing in general, and about Drew Hayden Taylor's particular process, inspiration, and motivations? Discuss how these things are exemplified in *Chasing Painted Horses*.

Listen and Learn

Listen to Drew Hayden Taylor discuss "why laughing matters" and the value of humour here: <https://www.cbc.ca/radio/unreserved/unreserved-s-self-isolation-book-club-what-indigenous-authors-are-reading-during-the-pandemic-1.5556414/healing-through-humour-author-drew-hayden-taylor-on-why-laughing-matters-1.5559465>

How do you feel about what Drew says? Share your ideas and your response to Drew's comments in a reflection written to your teacher and/or shared aloud in class.

About Drew Hayden Taylor:

Drew Hayden Taylor has done many things, most of which he is proud of. An Ojibway from the Curve Lake First Nation in Ontario, he has worn many hats in his literary career, from stand-up comedian at the Kennedy Center in Washington DC, to Artistic Director of Canada's premiere Native theatre company, Native Earth Performing Arts. He is an award-winning playwright (with over seventy productions of his work), a journalist/columnist (appearing regularly in several Canadian newspapers and magazines), short-story writer, novelist, television scriptwriter, and has worked on some seventeen different documentaries exploring the Native experience. Most notably, he wrote and directed *Redskins*, *Tricksters* and *Puppy Stew*, a documentary on Native humour for the National Film Board of Canada.



Awards and Recognition for *Chasing Painted Horses*

NOMINEE, 2020 Forest of Reading Evergreen Award
WINNER, 2020 PMC Indigenous Literature Award
SELECTED, 2021 One Book One Aurora

Related Weblinks, Interviews, and Resources for Further Learning

<https://www.cloudlakeliterary.ca/blogposts/book-review-chasing-painted-horses-by-drew-hayden-taylor>

<https://quillandquire.com/review/chasing-painted-horses/>

<https://open-book.ca/News/Sometimes-the-Story-Isn-t-Finished-Being-Told-Drew-Hayden-Taylor-on-Spending-20-Years-with-the-Story-That-Inspired-His-Newest-Novel>

<https://cottagelife.com/general/drew-hayden-taylor-on-why-thanksgiving-isnt-for-everyone/>

<https://kawarthanow.com/2020/06/23/drew-hayden-taylor-moves-from-stage-to-screen-with-his-new-cottagers-indians-documentary/>

<https://www.cbc.ca/amp/1.5373693>

<https://www.ualberta.ca/the-quad/2018/12/tips-from-drew-hayden-taylor-on-writing-and-perseverance.html>

<https://www.cbc.ca/radio/unreserved/unreserved-s-self-isolation-book-club-what-indigenous-authors-are-reading-during-the-pandemic-1.5556414/healing-through-humour-author-drew-hayden-taylor-on-why-laughing-matters-1.5559465>

[Meet Drew Hayden Taylor: OBOA author visit](#)