

Accelerated
Reader

Upstate

A Novel

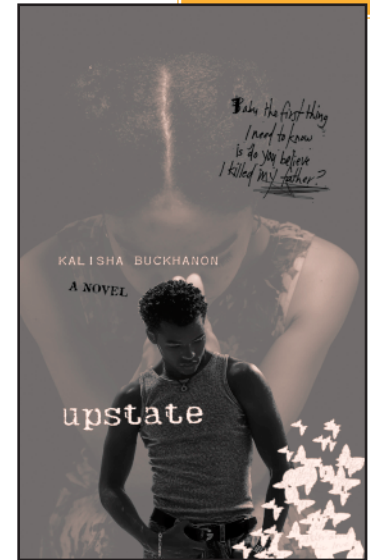
by **Kalisha Buckhanon**

“Wild and beautiful . . . This story is told using the epistolary form with a brilliant skill not seen since *The Color Purple*.”

—Sapphire, author of *Push*

“A literary gem . . . Stunning . . . Completely unforgettable.”

—E. Lynn Harris, author of *What Becomes of the Brokenhearted*



256 pages • 0-312-33269-6



YALSA
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TO THE TEACHER

Upstate is a gripping and unforgettable novel told entirely through the letters exchanged between two Harlem high school students. With elements of young love, suspense, family tragedy, humor, courtroom drama, coming of age, traveling abroad, and contemporary prison life—and with a real, engaging take on life as it is lived by urban American teenagers—this book will immediately appeal to today's students.

Seventeen-year-old Antonio and his sixteen-year-old girlfriend Natasha are inseparable—until Antonio finds himself in prison for the murder of his father. But did he really do it? And will Natasha really wait several years for her boyfriend's release? And—whether they finally get married or end up parting ways—what does the future hold for each?

Set mainly in 1990s New York City, Antonio and Natasha's story is a tale of survival and growth, and of hope and trust. For while Antonio fights to stay out of trouble—and stay alive—in prison, Natasha must confront—alone—one life-changing decision after another. Over the course of a decade, the lovers share a desperate, heartfelt, and genuine correspondence. Often, they have only each other to turn to as life takes them down very different paths—and leaves them

PRAISE FOR
UPSTATE

wondering if they'll ever be reunited. Real, compelling, and at times even shocking, *Upstate* offers a well-told and memorable narrative that brims with surprises—and with truth. In this remarkable debut novel, Kalisha Buckhanon has crafted a profoundly felt story that is destined to speak to a new generation of readers.

“A sensitive portrayal of young lovers that moves beyond gritty fiction. The novel’s inspiring story [is] sure to connect with readers.”—*Essence*

“A realistic love story [with] an urban backdrop as gritty as its characters are memorable.”—*People*

“*Upstate* packs a swift punch. The language is urban, urgent, and [has] a poetry uniquely its own.”—*Elle*

“Heartbreaking and true . . . I’d read it again just for the power of the language.”
—Dorothy Allison, author of *Bastard Out of Carolina*

“Both funny and sad, the letters are rich with anecdotes about friends and family while detailing their own emotions and actions; as the characters mature, Buckhanon skillfully and believably changes tone . . . Recommended.”—*Library Journal*

“Buckhanon’s debut novel captures the young lovers’ anger, hope, and frustration. The letters are fluid, candid, and colloquial . . . A moving, uplifting story of love and hope in the face of adversity.”—*Publishers Weekly*

“Starts out strong and never lets go.”—*The Philadelphia Inquirer*

“In prose that vibrantly captures the way real kids in Harlem speak, Kalisha Buckhanon reveals not only [her characters’] Romeo and Juliet-like ardor, but also their intelligence and ambition.”—*BookPage*

ABOUT THIS
GUIDE

This Teacher’s Guide mainly consists of two sections, both appearing immediately below. The questions in the first section, “Reading and Understanding the Novel,” will help students follow along with the book: narrative comprehension, appreciating the novel’s themes and ideas, interpreting its contexts, grasping its characters, etc. The second section, “Questions and Exercises for the Class,” presents classwide queries and activities that will enable students to reflect more broadly, comparatively, or associatively on Buckhanon’s novel—both on their own and among their peers. A brief final section concludes this Guide with suggestions for “Other Readings.”

1. What do we learn about *Upstate's* two protagonists in the novel's opening pages? How old are they? Where do they live? Describe their relationship, and explain why one book reviewer referred to Natasha Riley and Antonio Lawrence as "Romeo and Juliet-like." Also, describe the school they attend—and their friends, families, and lives at home.
2. Who is Frederick Douglass? Why does Natasha refer to him in her letter of February 7, 1990? Explain why Douglass is a key figure in American history; conduct some outside research if you don't know.
3. As Kalisha Buckhanon's novel begins, what crime has Antonio been accused of? Where is he being held? What are his prospects, in your view? And why does he tell Natasha, in his letter of February 11, 1990, that he no longer cares for food from McDonald's?
4. Why does Natasha, in her letter of February 14, 1990, mention a man named Nelson Mandela? Who is this person, why is he renowned, and what led to his imprisonment? (Again, do some research if you are unsure.) And what does Natasha deem "the best part" of his release from prison?
5. Why do you think Antonio signs his full name at the end of his letter dated February 18, 1990?
6. Describe Natasha's relationship with her mother. Are they close? What do they have in common, and what comes between them? Who is Roy? What happened to Natasha's father?
7. The full text of the shortest letter in this novel reads: "Yes!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!" Provide the meaning of, and context for, this letter, and explain whether or not (upon first reading it) you believed it would happen.
8. Looking back on Antonio's letter of April 12, 1990, explain why he seems to like *The Catcher in the Rye* so much. Why does he identify with the novel's hero, Holden Caulfield?
9. Who is Madame Girard? Why is she an important person in Natasha's life? And who is Mr. Cook? Why is he so important to Antonio?
10. Why does Antonio's lawyer call him "a genius" (as mentioned in Antonio's letter of April 23, 1990)? And how does Antonio's intelligence affect his chances in the courtroom? Or doesn't it?

11. Identify the major plot shift that occurs at the end of Part One. How, if at all, were your own impressions and expectations of *Upstate* affected by this shift?
12. In his letter of May 19, 1990, Antonio says that certain aspects of being in prison are “just like life.” Paraphrase what he means here.
13. Who is Dream Harris? What do we learn about her over the course of the novel? Why do she and Antonio get off to a difficult start, and why does she later become such an influential person in Antonio’s life?
14. Define—and provide examples of (from both this novel and real life)—the “black male crisis in our community” that Natasha mentions in her letter of June 21, 1990.
15. Who are Laneice and Black? Describe these two characters, and sketch out what happens to them over the course of the narrative, summarizing the subplot that is their relationship.
16. Who are Benito and Mohammed? How does each of these men affect Antonio’s prison experience—as well as, perhaps, his post-prison life?
17. In his report on *The Catcher in the Rye* (as reprinted in his letter of August 4, 1990), Antonio discusses Holden’s feelings of intense loneliness. Explain all that Antonio is referring to when he writes, “I had to come here to figure out what [Holden] really meant by that.”
18. Describe Natasha’s trip to France. What does she do there? And how was she able to go in the first place? What does she like best about her trip? And least?
19. In his letter to Ms. Harris of October 22, 1990, Antonio recounts a strange and unsettling dream he had. What did this dream reveal—or, at least, suggest—to you about the character of Antonio, and about the narrative of the novel more generally?
20. In a letter dated November 7, 1990, Ms. Harris urges Antonio to write a letter to his dead father: “Tell him how you feel. Read it or rip it up when you finish. JUST WRITE!” In following this advice, Antonio produces a riveting, disturbing, and pivotal piece of writing. What did reading this “letter never sent” tell you about Antonio’s background, his upbringing, his roots—and about the crime that landed him in prison to begin with?
21. Why do you think Antonio ends his letter of November 20, 1990, by signing “#007624” as his name?

22. Look back at Natasha's letter of November 28, 1990, where she laments her grandmother's recent death. How did Grandma die? Explain the symbolic—or ironic—twist implicit in Grandma's manner of dying.
23. Why does Natasha decline Antonio's invitation to get married while he is still incarcerated? What reason(s) does she give? Do they seem valid to you? Explain.
24. Who is Roland? How, if at all, does he alter Natasha and Antonio's relationship?
25. Who are Tamika and Valencia? Where are they from? And how did each of them befriend Natasha?
26. "Look Antonio, it's over" is how Natasha begins her letter of March 28, 1991. Does she make a valid, well-considered case, in your view, for finally breaking up with Antonio? Why do you think so—or why not?
27. Why does Antonio tell Natasha (in his letter of May 16, 1992): "I'm gonna be a movie star"? And why does Mohammed dismiss this particular phenomenon as "exploitation"? Explain how Antonio's "movie star" turn actually ends up helping him get out of prison.
28. Who is Jeri Lynne Jones? Why does this young girl—her situation, her fate, her story—matter so much to Natasha?
29. Why does Antonio have so much trouble finding a job when he gets out of jail? Who or what finally turns his luck around in this regard?
30. Identify and define the vital historical event at the heart of Antonio's letter of October 16, 1995.
31. Did it seem appropriate or fitting to you that Natasha would decide to pursue a career as a lawyer? Explain why or why not.
32. Per his letter of December 17, 1996, who really killed Antonio's father? Explain where, when, and how this individual's true identity is foreshadowed in the novel.
33. As a reader, what did you make of the ending of *Upstate*? Did you find it disappointing, realistic, satisfying, upsetting, tragic, or otherwise? Expand on your views; defend your final impressions.

1. In a classwide discussion, explore what you learned from reading this novel about prison life in contemporary America.
2. *Upstate* is told in the epistolary form. What does this mean? (What is an epistle?) What other epistolary novels or short stories have you encountered?
3. In her letter of June 21, 1990, Natasha thus consoles her beloved Antonio: “We both miss our daddies.” Discuss *Upstate* as a meditation on experiencing childhood and/or adolescence without a true father figure.
4. At one point, Natasha writes to Antonio (in a letter dated May 1, 1990) that “it’s amazing what you can tell somebody in a letter that you can’t tell them face to face.” Provide several examples from throughout *Upstate* in support of this assertion. Can you offer examples from your own life where you’ve had to tell someone something in a letter or email that you couldn’t tell them in person?
5. As a class, read one of the books (or watch one of the movies) that figures into Buckhanon’s narrative. Then write a short essay discussing where, why, and how the book (or film) in question relates to the plot of *Upstate*—or to its characters, background, details, setting, etc. (Significant books mentioned in this novel include *The Catcher in the Rye*, *The Outsiders*, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, and *Soul on Ice*; films include *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* and *Boyz N the Hood*.)
6. When applying to various colleges, Natasha is required to compose a Personal Statement. After re-reading Natasha’s statement, which appears in her letter of January 11, 1991, write one of your own. Your statement should be—as hers was—an autobiographical assessment of the forces that have shaped your life and your accomplishments thus far, and an account of how you intend to build upon or utilize these forces to achieve your personal goals.
7. Several important figures from the pages of African American history are mentioned in this novel (and some of them more than once): Malcolm X, Angela Davis, Thurgood Marshall, Rodney King, and Louis Farakkan, among others. As an independent research/writing project, select one of these figures and prepare a short paper about him or her: a biographical summary, critique, or appreciation.
8. Looking back over the novel as a whole, discuss where and how *Upstate* engages with the concept of “home”—that is, as a physical as well as an emotional and psychological place. You might want to begin your discussion by re-reading Antonio’s letter of November 12, 1995.

9. “This is the type of stuff you learn when you get out and see the world.” So notes Natasha in her letter of March 14, 1992, describing a friend she made in Paris who comes from Liberia. With your classmates, discuss what you (as a reader) learned from the pages of *Upstate* about the wider world—about other countries, other peoples, other places.

10. In her letter of March 22, 1994, Natasha tells Antonio that she has been “learning about these American poets called transcendentalists.” Why does she also tell him that “I guess I been a transcendentalist before I even knew the word existed”—and why does Antonio, in turn, seem to embrace transcendentalist thought? As a class, read and discuss a few poems by Ralph Waldo Emerson and Walt Whitman—both of whom are mentioned by Natasha in this regard—and then explore whether and how such poems might be praised or embraced by Natasha and/or Antonio.

**SUGGESTIONS
FOR FURTHER
READING**

Students who have enjoyed reading *Upstate* should be encouraged to seek out other books that likewise explore, to varying degrees, issues of race, ethnicity, coming of age, surviving life’s extremes, and finding or discovering one’s self. A few such books that have been read and appreciated in high school classrooms nationwide include: *Escape from Slavery* (Francis Bok), *A Yellow Raft in Blue Water* (Michael Dorris), *My Sisters’ Voices* (Iris Jacob), *Annie John* (Jamaica Kincaid), *We Just Want to Live Here* (Amal Rifa’i and Odelia Ainbinder), and *Betsey Brown* (Ntozake Shange). Free Holtzbrinck Publishers Teacher’s Guides are available for all of these books, along with many others; see the back cover of this Guide for more information.

**ABOUT THE
AUTHORS**

Kalisha Buckhanon was born in 1977. She has been the recipient of awards and fellowships from the NAACP, Andrew Mellon Fund, Illinois Arts Council, Illinois Young Authors Commission, and the Chicago Black Writers Conference. Her work has appeared in such publications as the *Michigan Quarterly Review* and *Warpland: A Journal of Black Literature and Ideas*. Buckhanon holds an M.F.A. in creative writing from New School University and a B.A. in English language and literature from the University of Chicago. She now lives in Chicago. You can visit her on the Web at www.kalisha.com.

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