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The Other Wes Moore: One Name, Two Fates

By Wes Moore

Student Guide

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Contexts

Historical Context

Wes Moore writes, “But the real discovery was that our two stories together helped me to untangle some of the larger story of our generation of young men, boys who came of age during a historically chaotic and violent time and emerged to succeed or fail in unprecedented ways” (xiii). What was “historically chaotic and violent” about this time period? Moore’s book focuses on a set of crucial years that span roughly two decades in the late twentieth century: 1982 until 2000. This time period covers the presidential terms of Ronald Reagan, George H.W. Bush, and Bill Clinton. In the United States, these years were marked by great contrasts in the cultural, political, and economic spheres. For example, U.S. society experienced a new burst of materialism and consumerism fueled by wealth gains among the upper and upper middle classes and an expansion of Gross Domestic Product along with wage stagnation and a widening income disparity among upper, middle, and lower socioeconomic classes. Technological innovation (and profit) exploded, as did housing starts in many markets, even though many manufacturing jobs and some other white collar jobs were sent overseas in a wave of corporate outsourcing. These two decades certainly exhibited a number of contradictions and a great deal of chaos.

With the election of Ronald Reagan, economic policies were put into place that promoted “supply-side economics.” Also known as “Reaganomics” or “trickle-down economics,” these policies were designed to lower taxes, decrease regulations, cripple labor unions, and cut government services, enabling corporations to make more money and (theoretically) pay more wages, which, presumably, would then lead to an increase in consumer spending, which would in turn lead to more production and a rise in GDP. As we have seen in the intervening years, the results have not been true to the promise: a “trickling down” of wealth to the lower and middle classes. A painful recession in 1982 and a stock market crash in 1987 have faded into the past; the 1980s are overwhelmingly thought of as a relatively prosperous period. There is no doubt that the policies of the 1980s, however, set into motion several effects we are still experiencing, including an increase in corporate power, a decrease in private and public labor union membership, and a bloated government deficit. In the area of social policy, Reagan decreased funding for many social programs. Wes Moore alludes briefly to one of the policies by noting that the Reagan administration cut education funding in half (17). In addition, in 1986 and 1988, sentencing laws were passed that made penalties for crack cocaine much more severe than those for the powdered variety. These laws had a tremendous impact upon the incarceration level of African Americans. This rising conservatism under Reagan also affected American foreign policy. Reagan believed that allowing communism anywhere in the world threatened freedoms globally. Therefore, his administration increased spending on nuclear weapons (Star Wars), sold weapons illegally to Iran to fund the fighting of Central American rebels (the Iran-Contra Affair), and trained the Taliban fighters (mujahideen) to beat back the Soviet incursion in Afghanistan. Reagan’s terms were not without positive developments, however: arguably the most positive development during Reagan’s presidency was the collapse of the Soviet Union.
and the reunification of East and West Germany; both developments resulted from productive diplomatic talks between Reagan and Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev.1

Reagan was succeeded by his former Vice-President George H.W. Bush, who only served one term, from 1989 to 1993. Under Bush, the economy suffered a severe recession and the United States went to war against both Manuel Noriega in Panama and Saddam Hussein in Iraq over the invasion of Kuwait. Nevertheless, Bush proved to be a more moderate conservative than his predecessor, signing into law both the Americans with Disabilities Act and the Clean Air Act. He also raised taxes against his campaign promise in order to deal with a rising deficit left by his predecessor. Perhaps because of this increase in taxes and the recession during his term, he failed in his re-election bid.

Bill Clinton was elected in 1992, and served until 2001. Under his administration, the United States experienced an era of peace and prosperity. The GDP soared, unemployment was low, and the middle class began to prosper. Budget deficits declined to the point that there was actually a budget surplus in the last three years of his presidency. Some of his policies were centrist or even a bit conservative. For example, he signed the North American Free Trade Agreement, which has had a devastating impact on the Mexican economy. He instituted welfare reform, which limited eligibility and increased funding for welfare-to-work programs. He pushed tough-on-crime legislation. Nonetheless, many of his policies were progressive. For example, he signed into law the Family and Medical Leave Act and the Violence against Women Act. Clinton and First Lady Hilary Clinton attempted to institute universal health care for the nation. In addition, Clinton appointed a number of women and minorities to official posts. In his second term, he helped establish trade relations with China, brokered a peace deal in Northern Ireland, and led a NATO effort to stop genocide in Kosovo. The economy continued to prosper, particularly with a technological boom resulting from the development of the Internet. Although a sexual scandal wracked the latter part of Clinton’s presidency, most historians cite him as an example of an eminently successful president.2

**Social Context**

A social history concerns ordinary people and their lifestyles and ways of coping with problems of life. This brief history will cover social movements, demographics, and popular culture. The two decades of the 1980s and 1990s saw many social movements globally, but no extensive movements at home. Domestically, most of the political action by social groups revolved around two issues: abortion (both pro-life and pro-choice) and LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, and queer) rights. Also, the war on drugs instituted during the Reagan era as well as the crisis caused by crack cocaine caused a number of groups to come out against the criminalizing of the drug trade or for tougher legislation against the increasing violent crime of the drug trade. The African American community reeled from the devastating effects of gang

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1 History.com’s article on “The 1980s” was consulted for this section. Available at http://www.history.com/topics/1980s
2 See “Bill Clinton” on history.com: http://www.history.com/topics/bill-clinton; consulted for this piece.
violence. In a few short years, crack addiction and gang-related crime undid many of the civil rights gains of the previous three decades, causing a regression in many poor black communities to the level of suffering of the Jim Crow era. Three movements abroad during this period were especially inspiring to those here in the United States. The Solidarity movement in Poland, led by Lech Walesa, sparked dissidence against the Soviet Union’s repressive government. Revolutionaries in Central America—Honduras, Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Guatemala—fought against dictators and the interference of the United States against leftist reforms. Finally, the movement against Apartheid by the African National Congress in South Africa inspired those fighting for human and civil rights all over the world.

Demographic shifts were important both politically and socially. Many people in the Northeast and Midwest moved to the Southeast and Southwest during the early 1980s, bringing a surge to the Southern economies as well as a rising tide of conservatism. Disaffected Democrats moved out of the industrial cities where they had worked in heavy industry, and they began to vote Republican in the early 1980s. An increase in immigration, particularly from Central America, changed the demographics of many areas of the country. More people moved to metropolitan areas to find work, taxing the infrastructure and the level of available housing, and exacerbating already tenuous race relations. African Americans, fed up with the crime, pollution, lack of affordable housing, and poor educational quality in inner cities, began to move to the suburbs. The same forces also led some urban whites to flee cities, a phenomenon known as “White Flight.” The resulting urban sprawl changed the face of many large and small cities, including Atlanta. Metropolitan counties boomed, housing starts exploded, and roads and schools could not keep up with the population influx. Although the materialism and consumerism of the 1980s and 1990s might seem to indicate otherwise, real wages actually stagnated throughout the 1970s until the present day. Because their wages were not keeping up with inflation, people went into more debt as credit became easier to obtain. Home ownership increased when interest rates were relatively low, credit card debt skyrocketed as new technologies and clever advertising created ever increasing needs, and cars got bigger and consumed more gas as the energy crisis of the 1970s abated. “More, bigger, faster, better!” consumers demanded from corporations. “Buy more, buy on credit, get it now, you deserve it!” corporations tempted consumers. Both sides readily complied.

The popular culture of the era, in many ways, reflects a social conservatism and an economic neoliberalism. The 1980s iconic image was the “yuppie,” or young urban professional. The Yuppie was a Baby Boomer, a white collar professional with a high-paying job and expensive tastes. People in this decade were more concerned with making more money and buying more things than their parents had been. Many of the films and TV shows of the era, however, show a deep-seated anxiety about this lifestyle, and a lack of true happiness (examples include the films The Big Chill and Bright Lights, Big City and the TV show thirtysomething). The 1980s became the decade of the block buster movie (E.T.: The Extra-terrestrial and Raiders of the Lost Ark) the teen movie (Breakfast Club and Pretty in Pink) and cable TV (especially MTV and

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3 See Chapter 3 of Freakonomics by Steven D. Leavitt and Stephen J. Dubner for a history of the crack trade and its effects on crime.
4 For more on social movements in this era, visit http://www.solidarity-us.org/refounding2.
Nickelodeon). Most people owned VCRs, and going to the video store and renting video tapes was a weekly or even daily ritual. Music ruled in the 1980s: popular music included dance, new wave, and rap. Artists such as Michael Jackson, Van Halen, and Run DMC ruled the airwaves. The end of the Cold War at the opening of the next decade and the development of reality-bending technologies served to leave the United States adrift in a world devoid of the hard reality of a nuclear holocaust. Popular culture mirrors this disorientation. Cinema, in particular, destabilized the patriarchal values of the Reagan era as exemplified in the hard body heroes such as Rambo and the Terminator. “Clintonite” cinema, by contrast, can be characterized as having a more nighmarish quality, as in Titanic and Jurassic Park or in projecting a hyperreality, as in Pulp Fiction and The Matrix. Trends in music were characterized by the increasing popularity of alternative rock, particularly the “grunge rock” of bands such as Nirvana and Pearl Jam, as well as the continued ascendance of rap and hip-hop culture. The advent of the Internet, and its accessibility in many more homes, especially in the late 1990s, increased the importance of email as a form of communication and websites as a form of consuming both news and popular media. Accessibility to the Internet, while a great boon to business, communication, and education, served to further widen the gap between the haves and have-nots. Many households still cannot afford Internet services. The gap also widened between the generations as a new generation of digital natives grew up with the personal computer, while older people had a longer learning curve when it came to using the devices.

**Psychological Context**

Much of Wes Moore’s book chronicles the rage, despair, and nihilism of African Americans, particularly males, trapped in the inner city ghettos of the urban United States. In order to understand the self-destructive behaviors of drug addiction, drug trafficking, suicide, dropouts, domestic violence, alcoholism, and black-on-black crime, it is necessary to understand the context of the events and circumstances that sparked and fueled these behaviors. Although a full discussion cannot be given in this short guide, a few points will be made here and further readings suggested that will hopefully start a discussion about these important issues. Wes Moore emphasizes his belief that a combination of nature and nurture leads to the various paths people take. Therefore, fate and choice both play a role, and no attempt is made here to exonerate stakeholders from their personal responsibility for choices that they make. We will look at two sets of variables: the community and the individual, as well as their related concerns.

First, the African American community, particularly in the inner city, has suffered decline under the pressures of economic and social circumstances. The breakdown of the nuclear family through divorce, early death, or out-of-wedlock childbirth has led to a decline in family activities. Community institutions such as churches, civic organizations, parks, and community

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6 For more on the differences between the cinema of the 1980s and the 1990s, see the excellent article “The Hyperreal Theme in 1990s Cinema” by Randy Laist, available at http://www.americanpopularculture.com/journal/articles/spring_2010/laist.htm
centers have suffered from decreases in federal or local budgets, contributions, and/or memberships. These institutions have traditionally provided support networks for people suffering crises in their lives. The resources of organizations have been stretched beyond their limits as wave after wave of crisis sweeps through once-strong communities: truancy, dropping out, teen pregnancy, AIDS, divorce, domestic violence, robbery, addiction, murder, depression, suicide, and chronic diseases (diabetes, heart disease, hypertension, etc.). The infrastructure of the city itself has also proven inadequate. Throughout his book, Moore points out the inadequacies and inequities of social programs and community infrastructure: education, jobs, housing, and healthcare. In addition, the school-to-prison pipeline sets young black males up for failure by giving them a substandard education with no job training, poor-quality housing, and inferior healthcare. They cannot make a living on minimum wage, which pushes some of them into seeking illegitimate lines of “work” that funnel them into the prison system at disproportionate rates based on their crimes. Poor people cannot afford the best lawyers, and sentencing laws more severely punish crimes that poor people are more likely to commit. For example, a 2010 law has served to remedy a disparity since the 1980s between the sentencing for crack cocaine vs. powdered cocaine. What was once a 100-to-1 ratio is now a disparity of 18-to 1 (by weight). Not only are African American males warehoused in facilities (often) run by private companies, but if they ever get out, they will have a hard time finding a job and will never again be able to vote. No reform has been shown to reduce recidivism more than education, which further strengthens the arguments against the school-to-prison pipeline. Wes Moore implies that instead of determining the number of prison beds from third-grade reading scores, the governors would do better to improve the reading scores through a higher quality education.

The community certainly has many flaws, but the blame is often placed on the individual instead. Two polar views of black masculinity show extremes along a continuum of possible views. One theory of black masculinity among race theorists has it that black men have been emasculated to the point of self-hatred. Since the era of slavery, the black male has been emasculated by being beaten in front of his wife and kids, seeing his wife bear a white man’s illegitimate children, and having his family sold away from him. Even when he was emancipated, he could not always find sufficient work at a living wage, and often had to depend on his wife to provide for the family. Under the peonage system, a perpetuation of slavery in the form of debt, he was trapped in the camp, in debt to the boss, like a prisoner. In the era of Jim Crow, he had to look the other way as a white woman walked past, and call white people “Mister” and “Missus” while he was referred to as “Boy.” Because of his humiliations and the injustices heaped on him, the society in which he lived became increasingly matriarchal as women had to pick up the slack. Unfortunately, the degradation and humiliation of these experiences have left deep psychological scars that have yet to heal across the generations. When a man cannot make enough to provide for his family, when he has to beg or steal, he

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7 This law was signed by President Obama on July 28, 2010. See for example, http://www.hrw.org/news/2010/07/28/us-end-sight-infamous-crack-cocaine-laws
8 For a discussion of this view, see Masculinity in the Black Imagination by Mark C. Hopson and Ronald L. Jackson II (pp. 28-29).
feels like less than a real man, and therefore feels a deep self-hatred that leads to the kind of self-destruction we see in The Other Wes Moore.\(^9\)

Critical race theorists holding the opposite view believe in the hypermasculinity of the black male. In this view, he has the characteristics of physical strength and agility, extreme sexual appetite, mood swings, and diminished mental capacity. Both conservative and liberal critics have relied on this myth to explain the behavior of the black male. That is, before the Civil Rights movement, this view was used to justify the hegemony (the power structure of the status quo). Civil rights advocates, however, argued that this rage was justifiable and legitimate and led to the strong-willed resistance of the Black Power movement. Later, however, the same rage was treated by critics as aimless, harmful, and self-destructive. This view can be encapsulated by using the trope of Willie Horton, a figure used by the George H.W. Bush campaign to discredit his opponent, Michael Dukakis. Willie Horton, an African American male, was a convicted murderer serving a life term who committed rape and robbery while on a weekend leave. Dukakis was governor of Massachusetts and had instituted a weekend furlough program there. Interestingly, Horton is now housed at the Jessup Correctional Institution, where the “other Wes Moore” is serving out his life sentence. In the 1990s, the infamous Rodney King beating case was largely about the (perceived) brutally violent black male who needed to be subdued by a cadre of police officers.\(^10\) When the LAPD officers were acquitted, the rage of the ensuing riots horrified and riveted the world.

With these two competing notions still present, that the black male is either an emasculated shell of a man or a bestial thug, we cannot wonder that the young black male is having an identity crisis. Wes Moore refers to this angst throughout the book. For example, he talks about the “ice grille” that the young man must perform. Inside, he is scared, bewildered, and sad. Outside, he must put on a mask of emotionless stoicism. He must look like he does not care that he has lost his hope. W.E.B. DuBois in his 1903 book The Souls of Black Folk talks about the double consciousness of the black man, who always sees himself through the eyes of others. This self-consciousness is poisoned by racial hatred, leading to the self-hatred felt by blacks in a raced and racist society. Little has changed in that respect from 1903, unfortunately.

All is not lost, however, as long as there remains hope. In his wise and engaging book Race Matters, Cornel West talks extensively about the nihilism of black men, particularly those of the demographic of the inner city. When a man sees no future, he lives for the day. Because he does not feel liked, respected, or listened to, he cannot like and respect himself, nor can he listen to his conscience. When he finally loses hope, if he does, there will be no future for him. He will engage in enough self-immolations over time to destroy himself, and in so doing, to destroy those who do care about him. For West, the solution is a “love ethic,” characterized by a nurturance of self love through the love and care of a community. Only through building back black community, West argues, can we practice a “politics of conversion” that will enact local change, and ultimately societal change.

\(^9\) Frantz Fanon’s Black Skin, White Masks is a seminal work dealing with this notion.

\(^10\) For more on the hypermasculinized black male, see pp. 29-31 of Masculinity in the Black Imagination
Timeline of 1982-2000

(This timeline comes from the website about.com

1982

- E.T. Movie Released
- Falkland Islands Invaded by Argentina
- King Henry VIII’s Ship the Mary Rose Raised After 437 Years
- Michael Jackson Releases Thriller
- Reverend Sun Myung Moon Marries 2,075 Couples at Madison Square Garden
- Vietnam War Memorial Opened in Washington, DC

1983

- Cabbage Patch Kids Are Popular
- Reagan Announces Defense Plan Called Star Wars
- Sally Ride Becomes the First American Woman in Space
- Soviets Shoot Down a Korean Airliner
- U.S. Embassy in Beirut Bombed

1984

- Huge Poison Gas Leak in Bhopal, India
- Indira Gandhi, India’s Prime Minister, Killed by Two Bodyguards
- PG-13 Movie Rating Created

1985

- Famine in Ethiopia
- Hole in the Ozone Layer Discovered
- Mikhail Gorbachev Calls for Glasnost and Perestroika
- New Coke Hits the Market
- Wreck of the Titanic Found

1986

- Challenger Space Shuttle Explodes
- Chernobyl Nuclear Accident
- Ferdinand Marcos Flees the Philippines
- Iran-Contra Scandal Unfolds
- U.S. Bombs Libya

• U.S.S.R. Launches Mir Space Station

1987
• DNA First Used to Convict Criminals
• Klaus Barbie, the Nazi Butcher of Lyons, Sentenced to Life in Prison
• New York Stock Exchange Suffers Huge Drop on “Black Monday”
• West German Pilot Lands Unchallenged in Russia’s Red Square

1988
• Pan Am Flight 103 Is Bombed Over Lockerbie
• U.S. Shoots Down Iranian Airliner

1989
• Berlin Wall Falls
• Exxon Valdez Spills Millions of Gallons of Oil on Coastline
• Students Massacred in China’s Tiananmen Square
• U.S. President Bush Announces That He Doesn’t Like Broccoli

1990
• Hubble Telescope Launched Into Space
• Lech Walesa Becomes First President of Poland
• Nelson Mandela Freed

1991
• Collapse of the Soviet Union
• Copper Age Man Found Frozen in Glacier
• Operation Desert Storm
• South Africa Repeals Apartheid Laws

1992
• Official End of the Cold War
• Riots in Los Angeles After the Rodney King Verdict

1993
• Cult Compound in Waco, Texas Raided
• Lorena Bobbitt Takes Brutal Revenge
- Use of the Internet Grows Exponentially
- World Trade Center Bombed

1994

- Channel Tunnel Opens, Connecting Britain and France
- Nelson Mandela Elected President of South Africa
- O.J. Simpson Arrested for Double Murder
- Rwandan Genocide

1995

- Sarin Gas Attack in Tokyo Subway
- Oklahoma City Bombing
- Yitzhak Rabin Assassinated

1996

- Mad Cow Disease Hits Britain
- Two Royal Divorces
- Unabomber Arrested

1997

- British Au Pair on Trial for Murder
- Hale-Bopp Comet Visible
- Hong Kong Returned to China
- *Pathfinder* Sends Back Images of Mars
- Princess Diana Dies in Car Crash
- Scientists Clone Sheep
- Tallest Buildings in the World Built in Kuala Lumpur
- Tiger Woods Wins Masters

1998

- India and Pakistan Test Nuclear Weapons
- *Titanic* Most Successful Movie Ever
- U.S. President Clinton Impeached
- Viagra on the Market

1999

- The Euro the New European Currency
• Fear of Y2K Bug
• JFK Jr. Dies in Plane Accident
• Killing Spree at Columbine High School
• NATO Attacks Serbia
• Panama Canal Returns to Panama

2000

• Elian Gonzalez Goes Home
• Mapping the Human Genome
• “ILOVEYOU” Virus Hits Thousands of Computers
• Microsoft Ordered to Split
• Russian Submarine Sunk in Barents Sea
• Unclear Winner in U.S. Presidential Election
• USS Cole Bombed

Themes

Choices and Consequences

xiv: “I don’t want readers to ever forget the high stakes of these stories—and of all of our stories: that life and death, freedom and bondage, hang in the balance of every action we take.”

xiv: “This book is meant to show how, for those of us who live in the most precarious places in this country, our destinies can be determined by a single stumble down the wrong path, or a tentative step down the right one.”

65: Wes II: “‘From everything you told me, both of us did some pretty wrong things when we were younger. And both of us had second chances. But if the situation or the context where you make the decisions don’t change, then second changes don’t mean much, huh?’”

Wes I: “‘I guess it’s hard sometimes to distinguish between second chances and last chances.’”

71: no sense of the long-term, of delayed/deferred gratification; living in the perpetual now. Wes I talks about this inability to see the big picture and the long road as being a key factor in the lack of success among inner city youth. Read the following writeup in the New Yorker about the now-famous Stanford University Marshmallow experiment: http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2009/05/18/090518fa_fact_lehrer. Why does an early ability to practice delayed gratification seem to bode well for young people? Cornel West talks in Race Matters about the nihilism of their lives, about the self-destructive patterns resulting from living life day to day.
83: “I had become aware of how I had put myself in this unimaginably dire situation—this man now had control of my body; even my own hands had become useless to me. More than that, he had control of my destiny—or at least my immediate fate.” (no consequence, no lesson? The next week, he’s back at it.)

125: “I wasn’t even there that day.’ I looked at Wes, speechless. He still didn’t admit to the armed robbery that had led to his final imprisonment.”

Racism
120-121: the drunken guys in the burgundy Toyota who threw a bottle at Wes; “I didn’t have to be a Black Panther to know that nigger was the ultimate fighting word.”

165: “It was obviously a far more egregious situation, but I could sense faint echoes of Baltimore and the Bronx in the story of these townships.”

167: Skin color hierarchy in South Africa. Lighter-color people get extra privileges and do not suffer as much prejudice. Even within races, there are prejudices related to skin color. In Jamaica and Tanzania, among other places, people buy skin bleaching cream to succumb to this discrimination. Why does this feeling exist among people of color? What are some of its effects? Why is skin color such a powerful marker of status? Discuss other ways in which ideals of beauty are culturally inscribed and manifested in social and political practices.

Contrasts
xi: Wes I as Rhodes Scholar and Wes II as incarcerated murderer

6-7: contrast between Wes I’s parents, Joy and Wes. How does this contrast challenge gender expectations? What about parental roles?

12: contrast between Bill and Wes (Joy’s two husbands)

17: Johns Hopkins and surrounding neighborhood (Harlem and Columbia U): “This city wasn’t their home.” Compare GSU’s “campus” to its surrounding downtown environment. Are any similar contrasts present?

48: Riverdale Country School vs. Gun Hill Road

49: culture clash of Wes’s friends on bball court vs. at Riverdale School

55: Baltimore City vs. Baltimore County; urban vs. rural. Statistics that say 84% people in “developed” countries will live in urban areas by 2030 and 60% worldwide. What kinds of social and environmental impacts might this phenomenon have?

151: Contrast and Irony: Nicey’s daughter’s wedding and the manhunt for the Moore Brothers

166: “Living in the Bronx and Baltimore had given me the foolish impression that I knew what poverty was—even in West Baltimore we lived like kings compared with this.” No matter our
socioeconomic class, we take certain things for granted. Recall a situation in which you were reminded of something you had taken for granted. How did it make you feel?

170: on coming of age rituals: “One of the key differences between the two was in the way their communities saw them. Here, burgeoning manhood was guided and celebrated through a rite of passage. At home, burgeoning manhood was a trigger for apprehension. In the United States, we see the same faces and our reflex is to pick up our pace and cross the street. And in this reflexive gesture, the dimensions of our tragedy are laid bare. Our young men—along with our young women—are our strength and our future. Yet we fear them.” Research various views on generations in different cultures. Some cultures revere the young, some the old, and some privilege both. In what ways are children, adolescents, and the elderly treated in the United States? Why do you think this is so? What could we learn from other cultures?

Nature vs. Nurture
179: “And when I finish my story, the question that comes up with most is the one that initiated the quest: ‘What made the difference?’ And the truth is that I don’t know. The answer is elusive. People are so wildly different, and it’s hard to know when genetics or environment or just bad luck is decisive.”

179-80: “When we’re young, it sometimes seems as if the world doesn’t exist outside our city, our block, our house, our room. We make decisions based on what we see in that limited world and follow the only models available. The most important thing that happened to me was not being physically transported—the moves from Baltimore to the Bronx to Valley Forge didn’t change my way of thinking. What changed was that I found myself surrounded by people—starting with my my mom, grandparents, uncles, and aunts, and leading to a string of wonderful role models and mentors—who kept pushing me to see more than what was directly in front of me, to see the boundless possibilities of the wider world and the unexplored possibilities within myself. People who taught me that no accident of birth—not being black or relatively poor, being from Baltimore or the Bronx or fatherless—would ever define or limit me. In other words, they helped me to discover what it means to be free. As I wrote at the outset of this book: The chilling truth is that Wes’s story could have been mine; the tragedy is that my story could have been his. My only wish—and I know Wes feels the same—is that the boys (and girls) who come after us will know this freedom. It’s up to us, all of us, to make a way for them.”

Parenting
3: Wes II: “‘Your father wasn’t there because he couldn’t be, my father wasn’t there because he chose not to be. We’re going to mourn their absence in different ways.’”

4: Wes II: “‘So tell me, what impact did your father not being there have on your childhood?’”

4: Wes I: “I was taught to remember and never question. Wes was taught to forget, and never ask why.”
“I tried to copy his walk, his expressions. I was his main man. He was my protector.”

“My father’s love for Nikki had forced Bill to step up to his parenting responsibilities…”

“When Mary told her mother she was pregnant, at age sixteen…”

“The baby’s father was a neighborhood boy who had no interest in helping out with his son.”

“Sorry, guys, Mom’s dead,” he finally blurted out, blunt to the point of absurdity.”

“Mary was left with two alcoholic, abusive men who shared the DNA of her two children but no husband or dad for her boys.”

“Finally, admitting defeat, he stumbled back home. That was the last time he tried to see his son.”

“Wes, meet your father.”

“Before he met Woody, Wes had never really seen a father around.”

Joy’s parents help her; family moves to the Bronx

Joy slaps Wes twice for hitting his sister and because she is so disappointed about his being put on probation at school. Irony?

“My mother made the decision to intervene—and decided that overdoing it was better than doing nothing at all.”

“The idea of becoming a father depressed Wes, but he wasn’t sure why. He didn’t have to worry about feeling alone or like a pariah. Wes and Alicia’s situation was anything but exceptional.”

Wes II’s father does not know who he is.

Education

Pell Grants being cut in 1982—“during his eight years in office, Ronald Reagan reduced the education budget by half”

“Finally, she sat him down at the edge of the bed and shared with him, in language he could understand, why school was so important”

“I don’t care! You are going to finish high school and go to college.”

“Mary was the first of the kids to leave home. Education was her escape in more ways than one.”
29: “As football became more important in Wes’s life, his performance in school declined.”
Why is it not “cool” to be smart in certain cultures? Why did Wes attempt to hide his intelligence as he became more bored with school? Watch the movie Finding Forrester. The character Jamal experiences a similar shame about his intellectual giftedness. He learns how to celebrate both his love for basketball and his gift for writing.

57: “Baltimore City had a 70 percent drop-out rate at that time” One organization that Wes Moore’s Resource Guide does not list is a new organization called BoostUp.org. Take a look at their website, which shares statistics related to dropout rates as well case studies of students they have helped and a variety of ways to plug in and get involved. Make a pledge of support of your time or a small donation to the efforts of this great organization, or seek out other ways to give to a cause you feel is vital.

108: “The state of Maryland had one of the highest graduation rates in the nation. ... But in Baltimore City, where Northern High School was located, it was a dismal 38 percent.”

110: “Not surprisingly, without a high school diploma or job training—and with a criminal record—Wes found it almost impossible to find a job to support his growing family.”

Alter ego/doppelgänger

Definition of the doppelgänger: In psychology and literature, the doppelgänger, or “double-goer,” forms an alterego or shadow presence of the subject or protagonist.

In his psychoanalytic study of the double, Otto Rank ascribes the use of the doppelgänger trope to the author’s predilection for “the unreal and the uncanny, to his desire to depict distinct and separate traits of himself, or to his desire for another existence” (xiii). In literature, doppelgängers usually result from an ethical decision. One way or another, the doppelgänger is a troubling figure. Rank concludes that after the practice of psychoanalysis came into parlance, critics realized that authors were responding to an “unconscious impulse to lend imagery to a universal problem—that of the relation of the self to the self” (xiv). Whether perceived as an alter ego, an embodiment of the soul, a monster, an astral projection, or an omen, the doppelgänger offers a tempting power to the protagonist: to be at once himself and someone else.

In The Other Wes Moore: One Name Two Fates, the author describes the “other” for himself. Moore’s doppelganger—the other, incarcerated Wes Moore—reminds him how fine the line is between choices and the paths those choices decide for people. Find other works of literature that use this trope of the doppelganger and discuss how the presence of such a figure problematizes the ethical decisions of characters in the work.

xii: “In an eerie coincidence, the younger brother’s name was the same as mine.” In the novel Dreamer by Charles Johnson, Dr. Martin Luther King discovers his double, a man who can stand in for him at events when he is exhausted or in danger. This man’s troubling presence

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12 Otto Rank, The Double: A Psychoanalytic Study.
creates additional ethical dilemmas for Dr. King in this fictional reimagining of his life. The book has intriguing connections to The Other Wes Moore.

xii: “Sometimes in my imaginings, his face was mine.”

xii: Also, the passage from John Edgar Wideman’s Brothers and Keepers: “The distance I’d put between my brother’s world and mine suddenly collapsed ... Wherever he was, running for his life, he carried part of me with him.”

95: “My grandparents knew that I was at a crucial juncture in my life. These forks in the road can happen so fast for young boys; within months or even weeks, their journeys can take a decisive and possibly irrevocable turn. With no intervention—or the wrong intervention—they can be lost forever.”

126: “We shared a name, but truth was that I didn’t know this man.”

Intersections/Connections
xiii: “I was surprised to find out how much we did have in common, aside from our names, and how much our narratives intersected before they fatefully diverged.”

160: “So many opportunities in this country are apportioned in this arbitrary and miserly way, distributed to those who already have the benefit of a privileged legacy.”

Compassion
xiii: “Even the worst decisions we make don’t necessarily remove us from the circle of humanity.”

83: Cop lets Wes I and Shea off with a warning (graffiti)

Young Male Identity and Coming of Age
xiv: “The book is broken up into eight chapters, corresponding to eight years that had a decisive impact on our respective lives. The three parts represent three major phases in our coming of age.” In this section, Wes Moore discusses the way he organized his writing and why. He did not try to cover everything, but edited the interviews to focus on important milestones or events in the two men’s lives. Also, he uses the significant symbol of the number three. This number usually has an almost spiritual quality. Think of the Holy Trinity, three wishes, incantations, etc.

28: “Young boys are more likely to believe in themselves if they know that there’s someone, somewhere, who shares that belief. To carry the burden of belief alone is too much for most young shoulders.”
31: “The only thing white about him is his skin. Everything else is black. He’s a real black dude.” RE: White Boy—The inside doesn’t match the outside, or there is a disconnect between body and mind. Can you think of other examples from your own experience? How can this situation lead to an identity crisis? How might it be empowering?

31-32: violence as a problem-solving strategy—Repeatedly throughout the book, characters try to solve their conflicts with others through violent means. How does Moore subtly show the futility of such measures? ; see also p. 35: Wes II arrested at age 8 for trying to stab another boy; pages 49-50, where Wes brags about getting suspended from Riverdale; and 69-70, where Tony tries to beat the truth out of Wes

44: “a quick dap, an informal greeting of clasped hand and bumped chests” Daps are often a form of the secret handshake. Sometimes, they are complicated choreographies friends create to greet each other. How do these performances show identity and affiliation among young men?

44: “The basketball court is a strange patch of neutral ground, a meeting place for every element of a neighborhood’s cohort of young men.” Also: “We were all enclosed by the same fence ... as if that fence had created a circle of trust. A brotherhood.” Here, a space enclosed by a border (a fence) protects the young men from the environment outside it as well as encloses them in a circle of friendship. Think of other examples of fences or walls acting as symbols in literature. What is the significance of a barrier, a boundary, a threshold? Robert Frost’s “Mending Wall” comes to mind. What are some other examples from history or literature?

49: “How y’all like it up there at that white school?”

59: Wes II’s first interaction with drugs

65: “‘When did you feel like you’d become a man?’”

94: The “plebe” rules at Valley Forge—How does the “plebe system” at a military school break down students in order to build them up?

96: RE: Ty Hill: “This was real respect, the kind you can’t beat or scare out of people.”

110: Wes locked up for attempted murder while still in high school; he never graduated after being six months behind

115: “They made it clear that they cared if I succeeded, and eventually so did I.”

125: Wes points out that he is one of only two men in the prison waiting room. Why is this important? Why don’t men visit their friends or brothers or sons in the prison?

169: the South African coming of age ritual, including circumcision and wearing all white for a month afterward. What are some coming of age rituals for young men and women in different cultures? Are there any coming-of-age rituals for your culture? Research at least one
practice. (Examples: Quinceañera in Mexico, Sweet 16 party, aborigine walkabout in Australia, scarification rituals, etc.)

Friendship
47: “We knew each other’s neighborhoods, each other’s friends, and each other’s families. There was one thing that helped us bond quickly: he was one of the few other black kids at my new school.”

82: “My friends seemed far away, and in that distance I became aware of the contingent nature of my relationship with my crew.”

117: “Justin simply shook his head and ignored him. It amazed Justin how easily they would write off a twelve-year-old.”

Freedom and Imprisonment
54: veiled criticism of the prison-industrial complex: “Later in life I learned that the way many governors projected the number of beds they’d need for prison facilities was by examining the reading scores of third graders.” Wes Moore is actually referring to the school-to-prison pipeline. Research the third-grade reading scores in your home state (or in the state of Georgia for international students). How do the scores compare to the national average third-grade reading scores? How many jail/prison beds are there in the same state? Is there a correlation between numbers of below-grade level reading scores and prison beds? Why might governors use these scores as a predictive measure? What might be a preventative measure that the governors do not use?

65: the daily miracle of my freedom (the two Weses are contrasted)

Socioeconomic Class and Race
47: “Just stand next to the white people. They’ll get off by a Hundred and Tenth Street.”

52: “I tried to hide the fact that my family was so much poorer than everyone else’s at school.” (Wes wears his sister’s pants.) In what ways do external markers such as clothes become part of our identities? For example, consider the benefits and drawbacks of school uniforms. Think of all the references to clothes in the book—the Riverdale wardrobe, the gangster wear, the military uniform, and the prison jumpsuit. How is each a marker of ideological or circumstantial identity?

52-53: “When the kids would talk about the new videogame system that was out or how their family was going to Greece or Spain or France during summer vacation, I would sit silent, hoping they wouldn’t ask me where my family planned on ‘summering.’” In his engaging book
Outliers: The Story of Success, Malcolm Gladwell explains that the only difference in achievement between children of upper class homes and working class homes lies in the enrichment that each group receives (or doesn’t) over the summer. He argues that summer activities such as trips abroad, museums, summer reading clubs, and summer camps enable kids from affluent families to get ahead in school. Read Gladwell’s chapters on school achievement (he also writes about KIPP Schools, which are mentioned in the Resource Guide in Moore’s book). Do you agree with this findings? What other variables might be affecting school progress?

53: cross-class warfare at the baseball game—Wes is caught in the middle: “I was becoming too ‘rich’ for the kids from my neighborhood and too ‘poor’ for the kids at school. I had forgotten how to act naturally, thinking way too much in each situation and getting tangled in the contradictions between my two worlds.” Compare this cross-class warfare to the conflicts between the Socs and the Greasers in S.E. Hinton’s The Outsiders. How are the situations similar? What emotions are present in such conflicts? What is ethically problematic about conflicts based on chance (birth into a rich or poor family) rather than personal choice?

Addictions
51: “It was crazily accessible and insanely potent—and addictive.”

62: “And he understood, faintly, how addictive that feeling could be, and how easy it would be to make some money off selling that feeling to people who needed it.”

137-38: Cheryl’s heroin addiction

Interdisciplinary approaches to book
Research Topics
Inner city issues: housing, education, infrastructure (public transit, utilities, etc.), crime, healthcare, zoning

Resource Guide: Working for change see pages xiv, 187-234

The Airborne School at Fort Benning, Georgia, “The Land that God Forgot”

Valley Forge Military Academy in Wayne, Pennsylvania

Johns Hopkins University
Rhodes Scholarship
Oxford University
Apartheid in South Africa
The African National Congress and Nelson Mandela

The Xhosa tribe in South Africa

Kwame Nkrumah, president of Ghana

Article in The New York Times RE: Wes I’s high school sports career

Civilian Conservation Corps, Job Corps

Lyndon Johnson’s Great Society

42: “West Indian rules” (research Caribbean cultures such as Jamaica, Bahamas and Trinidad)

Temple University

159: “My perception of Hopkins was as a distant force in the neighborhood, a research university responsible for some of the greatest medical gifts the world has ever received, but that had very little to do with the life of the city I knew.” Research some of the medical breakthroughs that were discovered at Johns Hopkins, including the genetic work done using the cells of Henrietta Lacks. For more on that research, read The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks.

161-63: Cecil Rhodes and the Rhodes scholarship—“he instructed me to learn the larger historical context of the award.” And “Even a legacy as ugly as that of Cecil Rhodes—a nineteenth-century imperialist, white supremacist, and rapacious businessman—could be turned around and used by a person like me, someone Cecil Rhodes would’ve undoubtedly despised, to change the world that Rhodes and people like him had left for us.”

163: Arrival in South Africa for semester abroad. Research study abroad programs offered here at GSU. (http://www.studyabroad.gsu.edu/) Which ones interest you? Which ones fit with your program? Mark Twain said that, “Travel is fatal to prejudice, bigotry, and narrow-mindedness, and many of our people need it sorely on these accounts. Broad, wholesome, charitable views of men and things cannot be acquired by vegetating in one little corner of the earth all one’s lifetime.” In what ways does international travel enrich not only a person’s college resume, but also a person’s learning and worldview?

School for International Training in Vermont: sit.edu

For Further Reading/Viewing

Education and Parenting

Savage Inequalities: Children in America’s Schools by Jonathan Kozol

The Shame of the Nation: The Restoration of Apartheid Schooling in America by Jonathan Kozol
Outliers: The Story of Success by Malcolm Gladwell

Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race, and Family Life by Annette Lareau

The Death and Life of the American School System: How Testing and Choice Are Undermining Education by Diane Ravitch

Disposable Youth: Racialized Memories and the Culture of Cruelty by Henry Giroux

Educating the Other America: Top Experts Tackle Poverty, Literacy, and Achievement in Our Schools by Susan B. Neuman

Inner City Public Schools Still Work!: How One Principal’s Life is Living Proof by Dr. Mateen A. Diop

Lighting Their Fires: Raising Extraordinary Children in a Mixed-up, Muddled-up, Shook-up World by Rafe Esquith

Socioeconomic Class, Poverty

Nickel and Dimed: On Not Getting By in America by Barbara Ehrenreich

Regulating the Poor by Frances Fox Piven

Poor People’s Movements by Frances Fox Piven

Class Matters by the Editors of the NYT

Race Matters by Cornel West

The Working Poor: Invisible in America by David K. Shipler

The Other America: Poverty in the United States by Michael Harrington

A People’s History of Poverty in America by Stephen Pimpare

A Framework for Understanding Poverty by Ruby K. Payne

One Nation, Underprivileged: Why American Poverty Affects Us All by Mark R. Rank

The Rich and the Rest of Us: A Poverty Manifesto by Tavis Smiley and Cornel West

Think and Act Anew: How Poverty in America Affects Us All and What We Can Do About It by Larry Snyder

More than Just Race: Being Black and Poor in the Inner City by William Julius Wilson

When Work Disappears: The New World of the Urban Poor by William Julius Wilson

From Despair to Hope: Hope VI and the New Promise of Public Housing in America’s Cities by Henry G. Cisneros, Laura Engdahl, and Kurt L. Schmoke
A People’s History of the United States: 1492 to the Present by Howard Zinn

The Prison-Industrial Complex, History of Prisons, Prison Life
The New Jim Crow by Michelle Alexander and Cornel West

The Prison-Industrial Complex and the Global Economy by Linda Evans and Eve Goldberg

Perpetual Prisoner Machine: How American Profits from Crime by Joel Dyer

Global Lockdown: Race, Gender, and the Prison-Industrial Complex by Julia Sudbury

Challenging the Prison-Industrial Complex: Activism, Arts, and Educational Alternatives by Stephen John Hartnett


Discipline and Punish: The Birth of a Prison by Michel Foucault

The Prisoner’s Notebooks by Fyodor Dostoevsky

Selections from the Prison Notebooks by Antonio Gramsci

Brothers and Keepers by John Edgar Wideman

Soul on Ice by Eldridge Cleaver

Soledad Brother: The Prison Letters of George Jackson by George Jackson

Are Prisons Obsolete? by Angela Y. Davis

Revolutionary Suicide by Huey P. Newton

Biography and Memoir
Fab Five by Mitch Albom

My American Journey by Colin Powell

Dreams from My Father by Barack Obama

Extraordinary, Ordinary People: A Memoir of Family by Condoleezza Rice

Long Walk to Freedom by Nelson Mandela
**Life in the Inner City**
*Gang Leader for a Day: A Rogue Sociologist Takes to the Streets* by Sudhir Venkatesh

*Freakonomics: A Rogue Economist Explores the Hidden Side of Everything* by Stephen J. Dubner and Steven D. Leavitt

*The Corner: A Year in the Life of an Inner City Neighborhood* by David Simon and Edward Burns

*The Wire: Truth Be Told* by Rafael Alvarez and David Simon

*Cop in the Hood: My Year Policing Baltimore’s Eastern District* by Peter Moskos

*Homicide: A Year on the Killing Streets* by David Simon


**Hip-Hop Culture**

Articles by Adam Mansbach

Articles by Scott Heath, GSU Professor of African American Literature

*Holler If You Hear Me: Searching for Tupac Shakur* by Michael Eric Dyson

*Hip-Hop Revolution: The Politics and Culture of Rap* by Jeffrey Ogbonna Green Ogbar

*Can’t Stop Won’t Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation* by Jeff Chang and D.J. Cool Herc

*Hip Hop Matters: Politics, Pop Culture, and the Struggle for the Soul of a Movement* by S. Craig Watkins

**Novels:**

*That White Girl* by J-Love Calderon

*Dreamer* by Charles Johnson

*Angry Black White Boy* by Adam Mansbach

*Shackling Water* by Adam Mansbach

*The White Boy Shuffle* by Paul Beatty

*Slumberland* by Paul Beatty

*Erasure* by Percival Everett

*White Teeth* by Zadie Smith

*Native Son* by Richard Wright
*Invisible Man* by Ralph Ellison

*Autobiography of Malcolm X* by Alex Haley

*Clockers* by Richard Price

*The Wanderers* by Richard Price

*Rockin’ the Bronx* by Larry Kirwan

**Poetry**

*Lighthead* by Terrance Hayes

*Head Off & Split* by Nikky Finney

*The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes* by Langston Hughes and Arnold Rampersad

*Genius B-Boy Cynics Getting Weeded In the Garden of Delights* by Adam Mansbach

*The Selected Poems of Nikki Giovanni 1968-1995* by Nikki Giovanni

*The Rose That Grew from Concrete* by Tupac Shakur

**Drama**

*A Raisin in the Sun* by Lorraine Hansberry

*Fences* by August Wilson

*The Piano Lesson* by August Wilson

**Film and TV**

Homicide: Life on the Street

The Wire

The Avon Barksdale Story: Legends of the Unwired

The Corner

The Warriors

Bad Boys

The Outsiders
Blood In Blood Out
In the Line of Duty
Finding Forrester
Dangerous Minds
Freedom Writers
The Shawshank Redemption
American History X
Taps
Jarhead
The Hurt Locker
Tsotsi
Invictus
Cry, the Beloved Country
O.T.: Our Town