

The Other Wes Moore Discussion Questions

Chapter 1

1. On page 4, Wes talks about the similarities between public schools and prisons. What does he mean by this? Do you agree or disagree with his position?
2. Re-read pages 6-7 and identify the central idea of these paragraphs. Explain what you learned about Wes and Nikki's names.
3. Why was it so important to Joy Moore to punish Wes when he hit Nikki? How did his father react? What do we learn about Joy Moore's history that would make her react to this incident in such a way?
4. On pages 16-18, Mary Moore receives a letter explaining that her Pell Grant was no longer available. Talk about how her life may have been different if this letter never came. How did this news change her goals and her path in life?

Chapter 2

1. On page 36, we learn that Wes's mother slept in the living room to protect the kids from a possible intruder. What other things did she do to protect her children?
2. On pages 36-38, Wes writes about his mother's decision to move from Maryland to New York City. Do you think this was a good decision? Why or why not?
3. On page 42, we learn that Wes's mother and grandparents had a lot of rules for Wes. What were some of their rules? Do you think their rules were fair or too strict? Why do you think they had so many rules? How does Wes's experience with rules and structure relate/differ from your experiences?

Chapter 3

1. On pages 48-49, we learn about the sacrifices Wes and Justin made to attend their school. What did this early experience teach Wes and Justin about the importance of goals?
2. On page 50, Wes writes about a time when he exaggerated the reason he was suspended from school. In this case, Wes felt that bloody fight was more respected than an accident that led to someone getting hurt. What does this indicate about Wes's personal values at the time of the incident?
3. Re-read pages 50-51 and explain how drugs negatively impacted Wes's community.
4. On page 51, Wes writes that he learned, "Never look people in the eye. Don't smile, it makes you look weak." What does Wes mean by this? Do you agree or disagree with this statement? Justify your response.
5. Wes writes on page 54 that, "Later in life, I learned that the way many governors projected the numbers of beds they'd need for prison facilities was by examining the reading scores of third graders." Why do you think governors link prison facilities with third grade reading scores? Do you agree or disagree with this practice? Why?
6. After moving to New York, Wes meets new friends and bonds with them on the basketball court. How did these peer relationships influence Wes?
7. On pages 57-58, we learn that the "other" Wes was initially lured into dealing drugs because he wanted to wear a headset. Do you believe this story or do you think Wes was drawn to drug dealing for other reasons?
8. Explain how their grandmothers impact the lives of both Wes Moores.

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Chapter 4

1. On page 67, Wes writes, "I guess it's hard sometimes to distinguish between second chances and last chances." What does he mean by this and how does this quote relate to the theme of redemption?
2. On pages 69-72, Tony is very violent and threatening toward Wes because he wants him to stay away from drugs. In this instance, do you feel that Tony's violence toward Wes is excusable? Defend your position.
3. According to Wes, he had a teacher who bluntly told him, "It didn't matter to her if I showed up because the class ran smoother when I wasn't there." Do you agree or disagree with the teacher's position? What would you have done if you were in her shoes?
4. On page 77, Wes mentions that he skipped school and says, "My sister, always the loyal accomplice, never snitched." Do you think Wes's sister made a good decision by not snitching on Wes for cutting school? Why or why not?
5. On pages 80-82, Wes is arrested for tagging and we gain insights into his thoughts related to his actions and its consequences. Re-read these pages. When Wes is caught spray painting with Shea, what happens to him when he is thrown in the police car? How is his reaction different from Shea's? Why do you think the police officer responded the way he did? Did the police officer do the right thing or should he have handled the situation differently? In what ways did this incident inform Wes's future decision making process?

Chapter 5

1. When Wes accidentally caused his sister's lip to bleed on page 89, his mother slapped him on the face and made the decision to send him to military school. Summarize the interaction between Wes and his mother on pages 87-89. Do you agree with her reaction in this situation? Why or why not?
2. When Sergeant Austin gave Wes a map to escape from Valley Forge on page 91, did you think he was being a supportive peer? Did your opinion change after reading what happens on pages 92-93?
3. On page 95, Wes describes the financial sacrifices his mother and grandparents made to pay his military school's tuition. What were their previous goals and what were their new goals? Was this a good investment?
4. How does the "other" Wes's life change when Alicia becomes pregnant? What is his mother's reaction to this?
5. One of the "other" Wes Moore's female friends says on page 102, "Get up and walk me out! Be a gentleman." How might this example relate, or not relate to Wes's personal values?
6. On pages 103-105, we learn that after getting beat up, Wes storms into the house, gets a gun, chases Ray down the street and eventually shoots him. What are the direct and indirect reasons Wes made these decisions? What are alternate decisions he could have made in that situation?
7. After shooting Ray on page 105, we learn that, "Adrenaline was rushing through Wes's body, followed quickly by fear, but no regret." Do you think Wes should have felt regret for what he did? How does the regret, or lack of regret, relate to his personal values.
8. After Wes is arrested for shooting Ray, Tony arrives and their mother says, "It's too late, Wes is already gone." What are the two ways in which this quote could be interpreted? Do you agree with her?

Chapter 6

1. Why do you think the author included the anecdote about Woody's graduation from high school at start of Chapter 6?
2. How has Wes changed since beginning military school?
3. After being attacked, Wes convinces Dalio they needed to take a different route back to campus. What is ironic about the route Wes leads him on?

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Chapter 7

1. On page 126, Wes writes that, “The expectations that others place on us form our expectations of ourselves.” What does this quotation mean and how does it speak to the importance of personal and public accountability?
2. On page 133, Wes writes that Colonel Murphy left Valley Forge for cancer treatment and said, “When it is time for you to leave this school, leave your job, or even leave this earth, you make sure you have worked hard to make sure it mattered you were ever here.” What goals did Colonel Murphy accomplish in his lifetime? Who do you think supported him in his life?
3. During his time in the Job Corps, Wes decided to build a small house for his daughter. What does this house symbolize? Do you think Wes should have spent his time building something else?
4. Things change very quickly for Wes once he returns from the Job Corps. Talk about the different pressures he faced and his decision to go back to his life on the streets. Based on what you know about Wes’s life experiences, do you believe this was a difficult decision for him to make? Do you think there were people or opportunities that could have prevented him from making this decision?

Chapter 8

1. On page 147, Wes and Tony rob a jewelry store. What were their goals in doing this? Do you think they were focusing on short term or long term goals when they made this decision?
2. As the “other” Wes Moore prepares to spend the rest of his life in prison, Wes, the author, writes, “Maybe it was because he’d never thought long term about his life at all. Early losses condition you to believe that short term plans are always smarter. Now Wes’s mind wandered to the long term for the first time. Finally, he could see his future.” Do you think short term or long term goals are more important? Why? Use examples from the book and your own personal experiences to defend your position.
3. After being accepted to Johns Hopkins, Wes writes, “having an advocate on the inside, someone who had gotten to know me and understood my story on a personal level, had obviously helped. It made me think deeply about the way privilege and preference work in the world, and how many kids who didn’t have ‘luck’ like mine in this instance would find themselves forever outside the ring of power and prestige” (160). What does this quote mean and how does it relate to the theme of peer, parent, and community support.
4. On page 161, Wes writes, “for the rest of us—those who snuck in despite coming from the margins—the mission has to be to pull up others behind us. That’s what Paul White did for me, and it changed my life.” What does this quotation mean and do you agree with it? Defend your position.
5. We learn about Wes’s South African family on pages 166-168. What are some of the values Wes and his new family seem to share?
6. After living in South Africa, Wes reflects, “Here, burgeoning manhood was guided and celebrated through a rite of passage. At home, burgeoning manhood was a trigger for apprehension.” What does this quotation mean? Do you agree or disagree with Wes? Support your response.

Epilogue

1. On pages 176-178, we learn about the numerous goals Wes has accomplished since 2000. What are the calculated decisions he made in order to accomplish those goals? Do you think Wes is the person responsible for those accomplishments or do you think other individuals are responsible? Support your position with evidence from the book.
2. On page 179, Wes writes, “. . . We make decisions based on what we see in that limited world and follow the only models available.” Do you agree or disagree with this quotation? Why?

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3. On page 179, Wes writes, "What changed was that I found myself surrounded by people—starting with my mom, grandparents, uncles, and aunts, and leading to a string of wonderful role models and mentors—who kept pushing me 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." Although Wes was fortunate to have positive role models in his life, do you think it is possible for someone to be successful without peer, parent, or community support? Explain your thoughts.

Overall Discussion Questions

1. Discuss the types of friends that the two Wes Moores had. Talk about Wes's friendship with Justin as well as the other friends described in the book. Talk about the friends the other Wes Moore had. How did they influence him?
2. Imagine that the two mothers were able to meet. Create a conversation that Mary and Joy might have today. What might they have discussed when their boys were three years old? Thirteen years old?
3. Discuss the role of family in this book. How was Wes' relationship with his sister similar and different from the "other" Wes's relationship with his brother Tony?
4. Do you think the "other" Wes's brother, Tony, is a good role model? Why or why not?
5. One overarching idea presented in this book relates to goals. What would you like to ask each Wes Moore about his personal goals?
6. How well does Moore describe the culture of the streets, where young boys grow up believing that violence transforms them into men? Talk about the street culture—its violence, drug dealing, disdain for education. What creates that ethos and why do so many young men find it attractive?
7. In writing about the Wes Moore who is in prison, Wes Moore the author says, "The chilling truth is that his life could have been mine. The tragedy is that my story could have been his." What do you make of that statement? Do you think Moore is correct?
8. Oprah Winfrey has said that "when you hear this story, it's going to turn the way you think about free will and fate upside down." So, which is it...freedom or determinism? If determinism, what kind of determinism—God, cosmic fate, environment, biology, psychology? Or if freedom, to what degree are we free to choose and create our own destiny?
9. The overriding question of this book is what critical factors in the lives of these two men, who were similar in many ways, created such a vast difference in their destinies?
10. Talk about the role of family—and especially the present or absence of fathers—in the lives of children. Consider the role of the two mothers, Joy and Mary, as well as the care of the author's grandparents in this book.
11. Why did young Wes, who ran away from military school five times, finally decide to stay put?
12. Why was the author haunted by the story of his namesake? What was the reason he insisted on meeting him in prison? Talk about the awkwardness of the two Weses' first meeting and their gradual openness and sharing with one another.
13. From prison, the other Wes responded to the author's initial letter with his own letter, in which he said, "When you're in here, you think people don't even know you're alive anymore." Talk about the power of hope versus hopelessness for those imprisoned. What difference can it make to a prisoner to know that he or she is remembered?
14. The author Wes asked the prisoner Wes, "when did you first know you were a man?" Talk about the significance of that question...and how each man responded.
15. Has this book left you with any ideas for ameliorating the conditions that led to the imprisonment of the other Wes Moore? What can be done to ensure a more productive life for the many young men who grow up on the streets?