

Reading Group Guide



Monster

By Walter Dean Myers

Illustrated by Christopher Myers

About this guide:

In *Monster*, which won the first annual Michael L. Printz Award for excellence in young adult literature, acclaimed author Walter Dean Myers weaves a tale that causes us to question what we know and believe about race, justice, and truth in American society today. The author was curious about what leads a person from innocence to committing criminal acts and, eventually, entering prison. He spent many months interviewing killers, robbers, prostitutes, and drug dealers, and that extensive research infuses *Monster* with a gritty realism that is at once riveting and frightening. Presented as a screenplay that the protagonist writes while on trial for felony murder, the story that unfolds is wrenching and provocative, and the reader is invited to draw his or her own conclusions about the events and participants surrounding a brutal crime.

The discussion questions presented here are intended to spark a spirited debate about the many moral and societal dilemmas depicted in this revolutionary novel.

About the book:

Sixteen-year-old Steve Harmon can scarcely believe what has happened to him. Somehow he has ended up incarcerated in the Manhattan Juvenile Detention Center for his alleged role in the robbery of a neighborhood drugstore in which the owner of the store was killed. Now he's been charged with *felony murder!* As the trial begins, Steve feels that this can't possibly be his real life. Everything is suddenly out of control. To him, it seems as if he has "walked into the middle of a movie." Since he is a film student, he decides to tell his story in the form of a screenplay. Steve calls his film *Monster*, because that's how the prosecutor refers to him in court. But is he really a monster? And will we ever really know the whole truth?

For Discussion:

1. Is justice served in Steve's case? Based on the evidence, what was Steve's role during the robbery? Should he have been charged with, or convicted of, felony murder? How should the jury have voted?
2. In the opening credits to his movie, Steve writes that this is "the incredible story of how one guy's life was turned around by a few events." When does Steve lose control of his own fate? What could he have done differently to avoid the situation he finds himself in?
3. Steve also writes that the story is "told as it actually happened." Is that true? How does the fact that the story is told from Steve's point of view influence what the reader knows about the events surrounding the robbery?
4. Steve imagines the defense attorney is looking at him and wondering "who the real Steve Harmon was." Who is the real Steve Harmon? Is he a "monster," as the prosecutor calls him? Why is it so important to Steve to have a better understanding of who he is?
5. Reread the prisoners' debate on truth (pages 220–222). Who is right? What happens to truth in our legal system? Are people always encouraged to tell the truth? Are lawyers always most concerned with the truth? Are fact and nonfact the same as truth and nontruth? How might the characters in *Monster* answer this question?
6. After a visit from his mother, Steve says, "I knew she felt that I didn't do anything wrong. It was me who wasn't sure. It was me who lay on the cot wondering if I was fooling myself." Why does Steve begin to doubt himself?
7. The book's characters are diverse in many ways, including race, background, and age. What makes the characters so realistic? How do they make the story and life in jail seem real? One of

the prisoners, Acie, says, “All they can do is put me in jail. They can’t touch my soul.” What does he mean by this? Is he right?

8. Which witnesses were sympathetic to Steve? Who is credible—the witnesses or Steve?
9. Steve’s defense attorney, O’Brien, tells him, “half of those jurors, no matter what they said when we questioned them when we picked the jury, believed you were guilty the moment they laid eyes on you. You’re young, you’re Black, and you’re on trial. What else do they need to know?” What does this statement imply about the American justice system? Does it treat everyone fairly? Do you agree with O’Brien’s assessment? Was race a major factor in the outcome of the trial? Why or why not?
10. Petrocelli, the prosecuting attorney, maintains that “they are all equally guilty. The one who grabbed the cigarettes, the one who wrestled for the gun, the one who checked the place to see if the coast was clear.” Is everyone equally guilty, or are there varying degrees of guilt? What are the degrees? Is Steve innocent or guilty?
11. Is the screenplay format an effective way to tell the story? Why did the author choose to use this device? In film class Mr. Sawicki warns his students against making their films “too predictable” and also advises them to “keep it simple.” Have Steve and, by extension, the author of the novel, achieved those goals? Why or why not?
12. How does the art in this book enhance the story? As Steve’s movie begins, the credits look like those in *Star Wars*. What does this say about Steve?

Walter Dean Myers has been a prolific writer of children's and young adult literature for over thirty years. During his career he has received virtually every accolade his profession offers, including the Michael L. Printz Award for *Monster*, a Newbery Honor for *Scorpions*, numerous Coretta Scott King citations, and the American Library Association's Margaret A. Edwards Award for his lifetime contribution to the field of children's literature.

Myers was raised in Harlem, where many of his books are set. Despite being a high school dropout, he earned a B.A. from Empire State College. Of his work, Myers says, "Ultimately, what I want to do with my writing is to make connections—to touch the lives of my characters and, through them, those of my readers." Walter Dean Myers lives with his wife, Constance, in Jersey City, New Jersey.

Critical Acclaim for Walter Dean Myers's *Monster*

- 2000 Michael L. Printz Award
- 2000 Coretta Scott King Author Honor Book
- 1999 National Book Award Finalist
- 1999 *Boston Globe-Horn Book* Fiction Honor Book
- 2000 *Los Angeles Times* Book Prize Finalist
- 2000 Edgar Allan Poe Award Nominee
- 2000 ALA Best Book for Young Adults
- 2000 ALA Quick Pick for Reluctant Young Adult Readers
- 1999 Books for the Teen Age
(New York Public Library)
- 1999 Notable Children's Book, *The New York Times*

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