

A Study Guide prepared by Tutor Byron Eden

MONSTER

By Walter Dean Myers

As you read this book, see if there are words that were used that you don't know, or don't understand. Keep track of these unfamiliar words, and bring your list to class each week, and we will together work on vocabulary. Did you wonder why this book was written the way it was, as a screenplay (the storyline for a film) rather than as a novel? As a screenplay, this book is written with phrases that are important to a movie director, but of no real significance to the reader of a novel. Examples would include phrases such as "cut to", "fade in", "fade out", "close up", "voice over", "medium shot" or "long shot". After you have finished reading this book you might want to ask yourself if you would like to see this story told as a movie as well.

The main character of this story is **Steve**. But again, when you have finished reading this book, you might ask yourself how this story might have been written from an entirely different perspective if it had been written from the viewpoint of the **victim's family, or the prosecutor, or Steve's parents**.

Some words and phrases are not meant to be taken literally, such as on page 1, "I see a face looking back at me (in the mirror) but don't recognize it". Sometimes information is given that is really not important to the plot, but just adds color to the story, in an attempt to make it more interesting. Examples of these details, that don't concern the central issue of whether or not Steve is guilty of the crime for which he has been charged include such things as: the termite story on pages 64-66, the wrong power cord, or the guard having a hemorrhoid operation, or the use of a butt plug in the death row execution room on page 73.

1. As you begin reading this book, make a list of some common themes. See if you can add to your list each week as you read further along. An example that I noticed is the **lack of privacy** that Steve faces each day. See page 3, for a good example, but there are many more examples throughout the book. See pages 96 and 128 as well. Tell me about examples that you have found. Are there examples you could tell me about that are not found in this book, but are very realistic to you based on your time at IYC?

2. Another common theme found throughout this book is **fear**. An excellent example is found in the opening lines of the book, "The best time to cry is at night, when the lights are out and someone is being beaten up and SCREAMING for help". See if you can find other examples of fear that are found in this book. Steve and others are frequently overcome by fear, as found on pages 36-37 with the sexual harassment of a witness, and on page 57 with a sexual attack of an inmate being beaten. How have your life experiences with fear helped you in understanding what Steve is going through? How much does fear enter into your daily routine while here at IYC?

3. What did Steve's attorney, O'Brien, mean when she answered Steve's question, "you think we're going to win?" with a response "It probably depends on what you mean by win"? (page 13). How can you win, yet not be a winner?

4. How did your courtroom experiences compare to Steve's? The book talks about the judge, attorneys, guards, stenographers, witnesses, spectators etc. Did you have a trial that was similar to Steve's, or was it different in some ways?

5. On page 19, the film workshop mentor, Mr. Sawicki comments on the need for a film to not be predictable, where viewers make up their minds before the film is over. Do jurors do the same thing with impressions that are made during a trial? Think about the clothing being worn in court, the prosecutor calling Steve a monster, the use of crime scene photos, or questioning if the defendants will testify? Attorney O'Brien tells Steve "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?" (see pages 78-79) During your courtroom experiences, did you feel that sometimes decisions were made based on impressions rather than facts that had been presented?

6. What do you think of the use of deals, or plea bargains with witnesses or co-conspirators, such as is found on pages 55, 102-103, and 186-188? Are deals and plea bargains fair to everyone, or just to a few? Does society suffer as a result, or are we better off?

7. What did you think when Steve says on page 59 "I do not feel like I'm involved in the case" (his trial). Why do attorneys control everything that happens in a courtroom? Steve says on page 3 "sometimes I feel like I have walked into the middle of a movie. It is a strange movie with no plot, and no beginning". Have you found yourself in situations like that where you don't understand why the things that you are observing are happening? We tend to ask ourselves "what led up to this?" How did we get into this situation? Have you had experiences in your life where you can't seem to connect what you have done in the past, with the problems facing you at the present time?

8. Carefully read pages 71-72. How should people handle conflicting information? How is the reader supposed to know who is telling the truth?

9. How reliable is evidence? Did the police dust for fingerprints? Was DNA found at the crime scene? Were interviews videotaped? Were line-ups or photo spreads used? (See pages 162-170) What about the use of an alibi witness? (See pages 206-211) Have eye witnesses ever positively identified someone, only later to be found to be wrong due to DNA evidence, or and unshakable alibi?

10. Perjury is a crime, consisting of telling a lie when you are under oath to tell the truth. Do people always tell the truth? In your opinion, are there some people who are under oath to tell the truth, but who still lie? Can people lie sometimes, but tell the truth other times? How will we know the difference? What happened to the truth on pages 106 and 220-222?

11. On pages 147-148 Steve meets with his mother who tells him “No matter what anybody says, I know you are innocent”. Steve tells himself that “I know she felt that I didn’t do anything wrong. It was me who wasn’t sure”. Why was he questioning himself after what his mother had said?

12. **Did Steve participate in the robbery as the look-out man, as the prosecution alleged?** See page 140. “What did I do? I walked into a drugstore to look for some mints, and then I walked out. What was wrong with that?” “I didn’t kill Mr. Nesbitt...Sunset said he committed the crime. Isn’t that what being guilty is all about? You actually do something?” Look for information about the giving of a sign or signal on pages 177-178, 182, and 190. At the end of the story on pages 270-271 Steve says “I think about December of last year. What was the decision I made? To walk down the streets? To get up in the morning? To talk to King? (See page 225 for what Steve said in court, under oath, as to when he spoke with King). What decisions didn’t I make? A getover? I don’t do getovers?” See the summary given by Steve’s attorney, O’Brien on pages 244-253 concerning the giving of the signal that plays such an important part in this robbery/murder.

13. What is the reason Steve and his attorney played the game with the cup turned up or down, on pages 217-219? How do the answers given by Steve compare to his court testimony on pages 223-233?

14. What do you think of the prosecutor’s summary on page 260, “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”?

15. On page 276, why would King be found guilty, yet Steve was not? Why did Steve’s attorney resist the hug from Steve?

16. On page 281 we read the summary. “My father is no longer sure of who I am”. “I want to know the road to panic that I took”. “What did she see that caused her to turn away? What did she see?” **Could it be possible that Steve really did act as the lookout for the robbery, and his attorney knows that he was found not guilty of a crime that he did in fact commit? What is the difference between being “Not Guilty” and being “Innocent”?**