

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for Monster by Walter Dean Myers

Book Information

Walter Dean Myers, Monster
Quiz Number: 29945
HarperCollins Publishers, Inc, 1999
ISBN 0-06-028077-8; LCCN
279 Pages
Book Level: 5.1
Interest Level: UG

While on trial as an accomplice to a murder, sixteen-year-old Steve Harmon records his experiences in prison and in the courtroom in the form of a film script as he tries to come to terms with the course his life has taken.

Award: ALA Notable/Best Books; BCCB Blue Ribbon Book; Booklist Editors' Choice; Boston Globe/Horn Book Award/Honors; Coretta Scott King Award/Honors; Edgar Award/Honor Book; Horn Book Fanfare; IBBY Honor List; Michael Printz Award/Honor Book; National Book Award/Honors; Publishers Weekly Best Book; State Award; VOYA Award/Honor; YALSA Top Ten

Topics: Adventure, Crime; Adventure, Trials/Tribulations; Community Life, Violence; People, African American; Places, Prisons; Power Lessons AR, Grade 8; READNOW - Demco Media Turtleback Books, Demco Media - Read Now Grades 9+; READNOW - Perma-Bound, Perma-Bound - Read Now Grades 9+; READNOW - Renaissance Learning, RLI - High School (Theme: Tough Decisions); Recommended Reading, ALA Outstanding Books for College Bound; Recommended Reading, California Recommended Lit., English, 6-8; Recommended Reading, California Recommended Lit., English, 9-12; Recommended Reading, Children's Literature Choice; Recommended Reading, Coop. Children's Book Center; Recommended Reading, Junior Library Guild Selection; Recommended Reading, NY Times Editor's Choice; Recommended Reading, YALSA Popular Paperbacks; Recommended Reading, YALSA Quick Picks for Reluctant YA; Recommended Reading, YARP

Main Characters

Asa Briggs James King's aggressive defense attorney

Bolden the man who testified that Bobo sold him stolen cigarettes

James King a surly, tough criminal who murders a man during a robbery

Jerry Harmon Steve's loving and playful younger brother, who worships him

Jose Delgado the drugstore employee who discovers Mr. Nesbitt's body

Kathy O'Brien Steve's cynical lawyer, who has doubts about his innocence

Lorelle Henry a grandmother who is present during the beginning of the robbery; she identifies James King at the trial

Mr. George Sawicki the sponsor of Steve's film club; he vouches for Steve's character

Mr. Harmon Steve's father, whose faith in Steve is undermined by the trial

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Mr. Nesbitt the owner of the drugstore; he is murdered by James King

Mrs. Harmon Steve's heartbroken mother, who tries to support Steve throughout the trial

Mrs. Moore James King's cousin, who provides him with a questionable alibi

Oswaldo Cruz the fourteen-year-old gang member who testifies against Steve and James King

Richard Evans (Bobo) a seasoned criminal who assists James King in the robbery of the drugstore

Sandra Petrocelli the prosecutor, who is determined to see Steve and James convicted of felony murder

Steven Harmon the young man who describes his own trial as a movie script; he questions his own character throughout the trial

Vocabulary

absolute complete or total

admissions statements that confess an act of wrongdoing

civil polite

commit to do an action; to carry out

contend to argue or claim

tense to tighten or stiffen

Synopsis

Sixteen-year-old Steve Harmon is on trial for allegedly participating in a robbery that ends in murder. In an effort to deal with his inner turmoil, Steve decides to record his experiences in the form of a movie. He describes how two of the four people involved in the robbery have cut a deal to testify against Steve and James King. Steve notes that he does not believe he is guilty because all he did was go into the drugstore and look at things. The prosecution claims that Steve went into the drugstore to determine whether the owner was alone and then signaled to the robbers.

Throughout the trial, Steve grapples with his own demons. He lives with the indignities of being jailed and faces the possibility of dealing with them for years to come. His father is clearly disappointed in

him, and Miss O'Brien is only interested in telling him how to look innocent. She appears to have little faith that he actually is innocent. She carefully coaches him to testify in a way that will prevent the prosecution from catching him in a lie. In her closing argument she notes that none of the evidence clearly proves that Steve was involved in the conspiracy. Ultimately, Steve is given a verdict of not guilty, but James is convicted. Miss O'Brien spurns him when he attempts to give her a congratulatory embrace, and his father distances himself, both literally and figuratively. Five months after the trial, Steve is still struggling with his own self-image and a need to understand his role in the crime.

Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

Initial Understanding

What tactic does Miss O'Brien hope will win Steve a verdict of not guilty?

Miss O'Brien wants to show the jury that Steve is different from the other participants in the crime.

Literary Analysis

How is Bobo characterized in Steve's movie?

Bobo is shown as a heartless individual who only cares about his own interests. He is resistant to authority and tends to be belligerent and disrespectful. He has little concern for how cavalier his actions sound to others.

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Inferential Comprehension

Five months after the trial, Steve notes that Osvaldo was caught stealing a car and sent to a reformatory. Why is this information important to Steve?

On the surface Steve is simply offering a conclusion to the story of the people involved in the trial. However, Steve juxtaposes his current status with that of Osvaldo, James King and Bobo. He notes that they are all incarcerated, but he is not. Steve needs to prove to himself that he is not a real criminal. By showing that Osvaldo was caught committing another crime while Steve is still exploring his conscience, Steve hopes to separate himself from Osvaldo.

Constructing Meaning

When he testifies, Steve says that he was not in the drugstore on the day of the crime. What clues does the reader have that Steve is not telling the truth?

When Steve is considering the matter of his guilt, he notes that he went into the drugstore for some mints. He asks himself more than once if going into the drugstore means he is guilty of a crime. Bobo Evans also testifies that he saw Steve coming out of the drugstore.

Teachable Skills

Responding to Literature In his conversation on the stoop, Steve attempts to show James and Osvaldo that he is tough. Ask the students to write about a time they allowed someone to influence their actions in a negative way. Have them include why others were able to affect their behavior.

Understanding the Author's Craft This book is written as a movie script. Have the students break into groups and choose one of the trial scenes from the book. Ask the students to perform their scene for the class and then discuss how performing the scene affected their understanding of the book.

Extending Meaning The full story of the events on the day of the crime is not told in this book.

Have the students make a time line that describes the events of the day based on the details given in the book.

Comparing and Contrasting Steve encounters many different reactions to his role as a defendant in a murder trial. Ask the students to list the responses of five or more characters. Then have them explain what these reactions have in common as well as how the reactions differ from character to character.