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Book Club Kit Discussion Guide

Fist, Stick, Knife, Gun

by

Geoffrey Canada

(Boston, Mass.: Beacon Press, 2010.)

Author:

Geoffrey Canada (born January 13, 1952) is an African American social activist and educator. Since 1990, Canada has been president and CEO of the Harlem Children's Zone in Harlem, New York, an organization which states its goal is to increase high school and college graduation rates among students in Harlem. He is a member of the Board of Directors of The After-School Corporation, a nonprofit organization which describes its aim as to expand educational opportunities for all students. [From Wikipedia.com]

Summary:

Long before U.S. News and World Report named him one of America's Best Leaders and Oprah Winfrey called him "an angel from God," Geoffrey Canada was a small, vulnerable, scared boy growing up in the South Bronx. Canada's world was one where "sidewalk" boys learned the codes of the block and were ranked through the rituals of fist, stick, and knife. Then the streets changed, and the stakes got even higher. In this candid and riveting memoir, Canada relives a childhood in which violence stalked every street corner. "If you wonder how a fourteen-year-old can shoot another child his own age in the head and then go home to dinner," Canada writes, "you need to know you don't get there in a day, or week, or month. It takes years of preparation to be willing to commit murder, to be willing to kill or die for a corner, a color, or a leather jacket." [From goodreads.com]

Questions:

1. Describe the incident with the jacket when Geoff says he "first became aware of violence." What does it tell us and why do you think he includes it in the beginning of his story?
2. Describe how young Geoff lost his "innocence" regarding trust and friendship through the incident with the boy with the ringworm.
3. In Chapter Three Geoff talks about some of the "rules" of the street regarding fist fights and tells about the fight he had with David. Explain this incident and your thoughts about what he learned from it.
4. In his work at the Robert White School in Boston, Geoff had a unique way of handling a situation with two boy who were anxious to finish a fight they had started. Explain. How did Geoff's experience help him understand what to do?

5. Geoff was in class 6-1 at PS. 99. Explain what this meant regarding his intelligence and "reputation." How did he keep his "reputation"?
6. Describe two incidents that made Geoff admire Mike.
7. Carefully describe the incident in which Kevin had to "prove" himself. What do you think he proved, and why was it important to him?
8. Give some specific details about Geoff and the incident with the man shooting the gun. What lessons did Geoff learn?
9. A man who had been fighting with Kevin pulled a gun on Mike, Kevin, Geoff, and the others. Describe the incident and what Geoff learned from it.
10. It is significant that Geoff never had his finger fixed. Describe the incident connected to the wounded finger and Geoff's reasoning about it. Explain your thoughts about his decision.
11. In Chapter Eleven Geoff discusses the Rockefeller Laws on drugs. These laws were passed during the term of Governor Nelson A. Rockefeller in New York during the early 1970s. Describe the laws and the effects they had on the drug traffic and drug dealers of New York.
12. In the same chapter, Geoff talks about heroin and cocaine. Explain what you learned about them.
13. Describe what Geoff calls the "altar of violence" in America's ghettos: the "heroes," the idea of a "rep," and the "businessmen." Explain the stories of Charles and Hector in these terms.
14. What is Geoff's philosophy regarding the teaching and use of martial arts? How did he develop it?
15. Explain Robert's dilemma and Geoff's thoughts about it. What do you think about it? What happened to Luis and how did this lead to a serious incident affecting Robert?
16. Describe Geoff's gun. Where did he get it, how did it influence him, why did he feel he needed it? What did he finally do with it and why?
17. What do you understand about the Rheedlen Centers for Children and Families?
18. How did Geoff's experience lead to his commitment there?
19. Who was Joe and what happened to him? How did this affect Ramon?
20. How did Geoff handle the situation? Should things have been different?
21. Choose one of these topics to describe: the situation with the boy waving the knife at the Center or how the boy with the handgun almost put an end to the community dances. How was the incident resolved? What were the risks and were they worth taking?
22. When a group of young men went to the Rheedlen Center to play basketball, a serious situation arose for Shawn and Geoff. How did this happen? How was it resolved?

23. Describe the work of Marian Wright Edelman and some of the powerful facts Geoff learned at two dinner meetings with her and others. How did Geoff use this knowledge?
24. How do you think young African-American males and police officers see each other? How do you think police officers see poor communities? How do their views affect how they treat each other?
25. How did Geoff and his colleagues choose the location for the first Beacon School? What activities are provided in these schools? How do they help?
26. Geoff and two girls walked away from a shocking, violent scene. Explain what happened and their reaction to it.
27. What do you think about their choice and why?
28. Describe two key events that occurred when Janet Reno visited Harlem and the Rheedlen Center. Why do you think these are important? What do they show about the community and about Ms. Reno?
29. While working on creating the Peacemakers Program, Geoff was reminded of a personal incident regarding trusting an adult. How did this memory inform his actions?
30. Explain at least two of the actions Geoff says government must take to eliminate some of the violence in our streets. Why do you think he believes in them? Do you?
31. In the final chapter, we learn some details about Geoff's adult personal life and, in particular, about the incident involving Alex. What happened, and why do you think Geoff includes it in the book? How is it important to our understanding of him and his commitment to what he does?

[From beacon.org]