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Building Independent READERS and THINKERS

YOUR STUDENT WORKBOOK FOR

Punching the Air

A novel by Ibi Zoboi and Yusef Salaam

**PUNCHING
THE AIR**

"NOTHING SHORT
OF A MASTERWORK
OF HUMANITY."
—JASON REYNOLDS



NATIONAL BOOK
AWARD FINALIST
**IBI ZOBOI AND
YUSEF SALAAM**

This workbook belongs to:

About the Book

Punching the Air

Story Summary

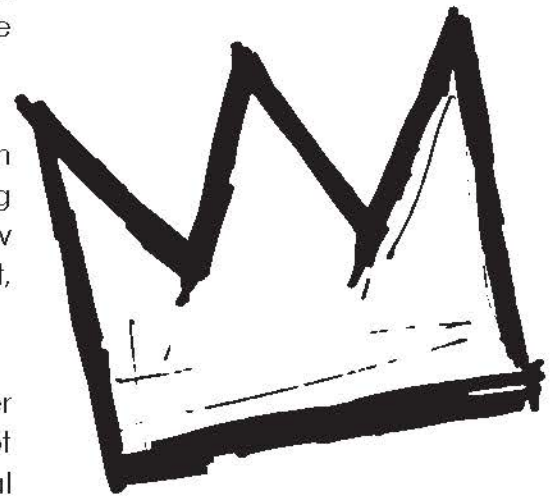
***Punching the Air* uses free verse to tell the story of Amal Shahid as he navigates the racial injustices of the schooling and the criminal justice systems faced by young Black males.** Amal is growing up in a rapidly gentrifying neighborhood; one night, he and a group of his friends get into a conflict with a group of White boys hanging out on their basketball courts. After being accused of putting one of the White boys into a coma, Amal is arrested, taken to trial, found guilty, and sent to a juvenile detention facility. While incarcerated, Amal struggles to keep his spirit and dignity intact. In a system that seems bent on forcing him into submission and obedience, Amal uses his artistic voice as an outlet and resource for navigating the racism and violence he encounters, finding salvation and hope in his friends, family, and his irrepressible artistic expression.

Punching the Air is co-authored by Ibi Zoboi and Dr. Yusef Salaam. The two met at Hunter College in 1999. They both share a desire to show people that light and hope can be found even in dark places.

Ibi Zoboi is a National Book Award finalist who has written a number of successful young adult novels, including *American Street*. She was born in Haiti and now lives in New York City. Zoboi began her career as a student journalist, voicing her concerns about racial injustice.

Dr. Yusef Salaam was 15 years old when he and four other boys were wrongly convicted of a crime they did not commit. The case became famously known as “the Central Park jogger case.” After more than six years behind bars, Dr. Salaam was exonerated and released from prison in 1996. Several movies have been made about the boys’ experiences. Salaam is now a poet and inspirational speaker, and received the Lifetime Achievement Award from President Barack Obama.

About the Authors



Session 1

Theme: Assumptions & Stereotypes

Guiding Question: Throughout our lives, we learn to make quick assumptions and snap judgements based on what we see; some of these assumptions, particularly those based on stereotypes, can be very harmful. Write about a time when assumptions were made about who you are. How did this feel? Were these assumptions accurate, or were they based on harmful stereotypes?

Vocabulary

Write a complete sentence for each of the following vocabulary words. Use the definitions provided to make sure you are using these words correctly!



optics (pg. 9): n., the way in which something is publicly perceived

cacophony (pg. 28): n., a chaotic mixture of sound

refrain (pg. 43): n., a regularly recurring phrase or verse especially at the end of each section of a poem or song

Story Setup

Punching The Air uses first-person verse narration to tell the story of Amal Shahid, a 16-year-old artist and poet who has been accused of a violent crime. The book addresses the experiences, injustices, and emotions a young Black boy faces when swept into the criminal justice system. The story follows Amal through his court trial and ultimate sentence in a juvenile detention facility, demonstrating how he maintains his humanity and creative voice throughout a series of experiences designed to extinguish both.

Read pages 3-45



While You Read:

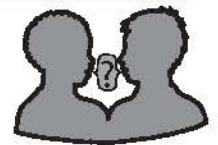
As you read, keep track of unfamiliar words, inspiring quotes, and questions you have.

Reading Context: Consider researching these terms to better understand the Islamic faith.

mosque (pg. 7): a building or place where Muslims worship

Allah (pg. 28): the term referencing God in the Islamic faith

Discussion Questions

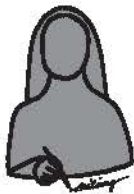


Write your response to each question below using a complete sentence.

- Amal admits to throwing the first punch in the fight. Can it still be self-defense if he threw the first punch? What do you think happened on that fateful night?

- What do you think it feels like for Amal to “replay everybody’s testimonies in [his] head like a song on loop” (pg. 16)? Can you relate to that feeling?

- Amal says his “whole life will be like a mirror” (pg. 31). What do you think he means? What does Amal wish people would see when they look at him?



Choose one of these prompts to respond to in at least one full paragraph of writing.

STEREOTYPES

Amal says that people assume he was "born full grown" and had "never cried for a teddy bear or laughed at Elmo on Sesame Street" (pg. 26); he worries that the people in the court cannot see him for who he really is, and instead just see a stereotype.

What is the difference between the way Amal is perceived in the courtroom and the "real" Amal?

- » How do you think it feels for Amal to be seen this way?
- » In what ways can you relate to Amal? Write about a time in your own life where you felt that people were not able to see you for who you really were.

STRONG EMOTIONS

Amal vividly brings to life the emotions he experiences while in the courtroom. He says that he feels "a stone in my throat and a brick on my chest" (pgs. 11, 40), and says that "rage is a thing with bones and blood and screams that turns into flames, so you have to chew on it" (pg. 41).

Why is Amal coping with such intense emotions? What can we learn from him about coping with these feelings?

- » How does Amal use artistic expression as a way to process and "chew on" his intense feelings?
- » Write about a strong emotion you have experienced. What metaphor could you use to describe the way this emotion feels in your body?
- » What activities help you process intense feelings? How do these activities help?

Name: _____

"The fact that more than half of the young Black men in any large American city are currently under the control of the criminal justice system is not — as many argue — just a symptom of poverty or poor choices, but rather evidence of a new racial caste system at work."
— **Michelle Alexander**

"If one really wishes to know how justice is administered in a country, one does not question the policemen, the lawyers, the judges, or the protected members of the middle class. One goes to the unprotected — those, precisely, who need the law's protection most! — and listens to their testimony."
— **James Baldwin**

"The way the criminal justice system has been used to control black bodies and brown bodies has some of its ancestry in the system of slavery. It's right for us to think about them as related to each other, and important for us to look at some of the parallels of the system and think about how we fight to end mass incarceration, just like we fought to end slavery."
— **John Legend**

"We have a system of justice that treats you much better if you're rich and guilty than if you're poor and innocent."
— **Bryan Stevenson**

"Justice denied anywhere diminishes justice everywhere."
— **Martin Luther King, Jr.**

"Justice grows out of recognition of ourselves in each other — that my liberty depends on you being free too."
— **Barack Obama**

Quote I selected:
Do you agree or disagree with this sentiment? Why?

Quote I selected:
Do you agree or disagree with this sentiment? Why?

How did these quotes help you think about the challenges to fair and equal treatment in the justice system? What might truly blind justice look and feel like?

Is justice really blind? Amal says that Lady Justice is "blindfolded, peeking through the slits." Consider each of the quotes above—each says something about the ability to receive fair and equal treatment in the justice system. Then, select two quotes you'd like to respond to. Explain what you think each quote is saying, then reflect on how you define what truly blind justice might look and feel like.

Blind Justice



Extra Activities
for
Exploring the Book

Name: _____

Nelson Mandela said being angry, being bitter
is like drinking poison and expecting your enemy to die.
It doesn't do anything to the person.
It does everything to you.
But I'm still haunted.
Being free, is free, like you're free
from all of the things that held you back.
I'm not free like that.



1. What are three similarities between Yusef's real life story and the story of what Amal went through?
2. Why would Yousef say that he is still not free, even though he is out of prison? What is he still trapped or imprisoned by?
3. Even if a person's body may be free, what is needed for a person's mind and spirit to feel free?

After reading the afterword and acknowledgements from Dr. Yusef Salaam and his poem above, answer the following questions to explore the concept of freedom more deeply.

Free Like That