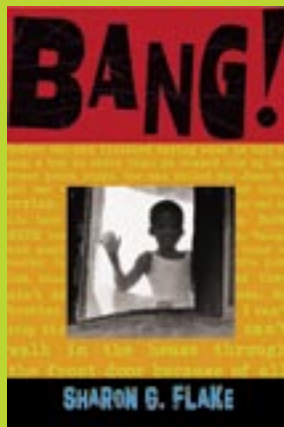


Prepared by Tracie Vaughn Zimmer, a reading specialist and author of the poetry collection

Sketches from a Spy Tree.

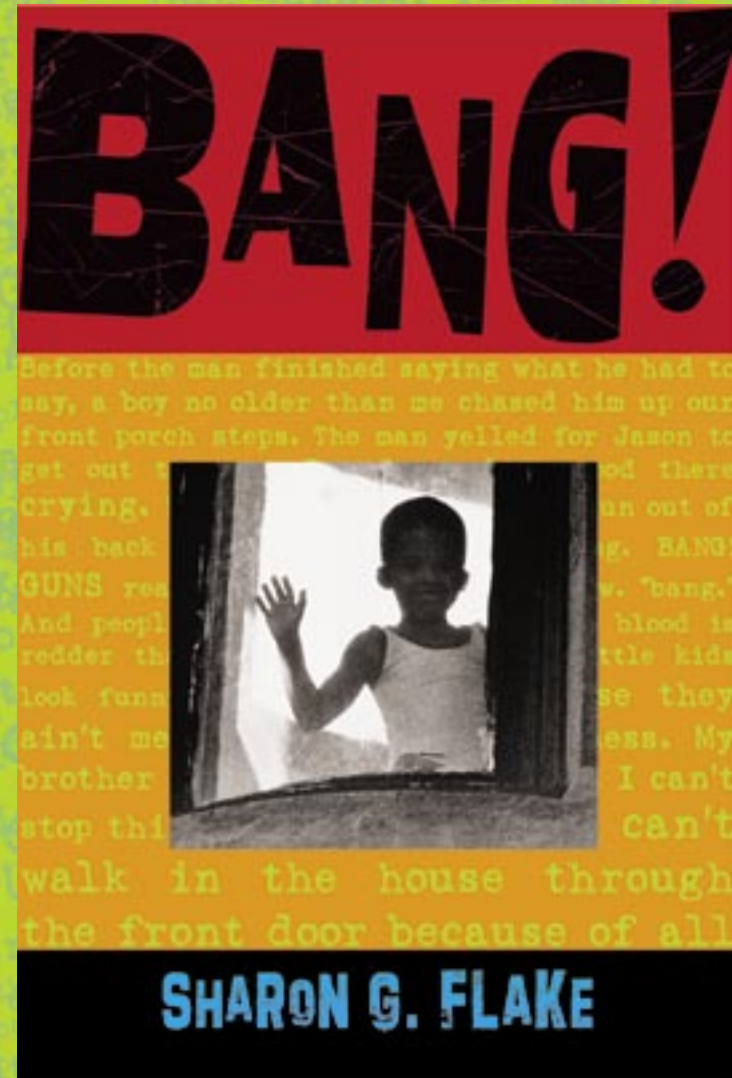
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DISCUSSION GUIDE

 JUMP AT THE SUN

ABOUT THE BOOK

Mann lost his younger brother, Jason, two years ago—an innocent bystander in a shooting on his own porch. Murders are a frequent occurrence in Mann's neighborhood. They're so common, in fact, that he and his best friend, Kee-lee, are keeping a running tally of all the deceased, since no one else seems to be paying attention. More and more, Mann escapes reality through painting and horseback riding, but, eventually turns to fighting, cheap thrills, and much worse. In a last-ditch effort, his father does the one thing he thinks will teach his son how to survive. Drawing on an ancient African tradition, he abandons Mann and Kee-lee in the woods, leaving them to navigate their way home, alone. What seems like a sound idea quickly turns tragic as a father's good intentions force his son down a destructive path. Another wrong turn, and it may be over for Mann. Bang.

ABOUT THE GUIDE

This guide includes discussion questions and projects which extend the use of the novel into classrooms, book clubs, and literature circles. It should promote discussion on the themes of the novel, including faith, betrayal, family relationships, racism, violence, and hope.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 1 Compare Kee-lee and Mann. In what ways are they alike and different? How do you think their personalities contribute to their fates?
- 2 Mann's dad tries to turn him into a "real man." What is a real man? Do you think it has a different definition depending on where you live or what culture you're from? How and why?
- 3 How does Jason's murder unravel this family? How would Mann's story be different if this hadn't happened? What other events can destroy a family? Why do some families survive tragedy (and even become closer) while others fall apart?
- 4 In the beginning of the novel how does William Adler punish his son? Did you agree with these tactics or not? How does the extreme environment they live in contribute

to the father's need to push Mann into adulthood? How would you react if you received these harsh punishments? Does his father have any other alternatives? What might they be?

- 5 "They kill people where I live. They shoot 'em for no real reason. You don't duck, you die." (p. 1) Describe the neighborhood where Mann and Kee-lee live. How does this shape their outlook on the world? What are their chances of either one having a successful future?
- 6 Discuss Man and Kee-lee's art. What do they learn about themselves, each other, and others as they create it? How does it pay off?
- 7 When Mann's extended family arrives, including the matriarch of the family, Ma Dear, Mann describes it like "somebody breathing air into a person who's almost drowned." (p. 75) As Mann's experiences become more intense is there anything you felt this part of the family could have done to help? How? How is your family similar to Mann's?
- 8 The police don't respond quickly in troubled neighborhoods like the one Mann lives in. What other details reveal the inequality and racism still present in our culture today? Are there any local examples that you can think of?
- 9 Do you think Mann and Kee-lee should be held totally accountable for their actions? Why? What choices do they make that foreshadow more extreme events? What choices were not left up to them? At what point do you think they could have changed the outcome of their stories?
- 10 How does the story of the horses mirror the story of Mann's life? How does the father's definition of "real man" change from the beginning of the novel? How has Mann changed? How have you been educated and affected by reading Mann's story?



PROJECTS

ART:

Create a memorial to someone who you have loved and lost. It can be a large mural as Mann and Kee-lee created, or it can be done in any media of your choice. Write a brief biography about the person your creation honors.

MUSIC:

Choose five scenes from the novel and find the music you would use to accompany it. Explain why you chose these pieces of music in a brief paragraph and what they would add to the scene.

LANGUAGE ARTS:

Write at least five letters from a variety of characters that show that you read and understood the entire novel.

Examples:

Mann to Jason

Mann to Ma Dear

Ma Dear to William (Mann's dad)

Grace to Mann

Jason to Mann

Keep an illustrated journal as if you are Mann as you read the text. Write brief but accurate entries (at least five) that demonstrate your complete knowledge of the text.

DRAMA:

Write and perform dramatic monologues based on the characters in the novel. You could stage performances for other English classes or for the whole school.

GROUP PROJECT:

In small groups of no more than four students write a pamphlet or poster on one of the following topics:

- Quality of schools between those in the inner cities and suburbs
- Violence among teens
- Comparisons of police response times in suburbs versus inner-city neighborhoods

AUTHOR INTERVIEW

1 What was your initial inspiration to write Mann's story?

In Pittsburgh, like other large cities, we go through seasons where young black men get killed randomly. A few years ago this was happening and it made me sadder than usual. I thought something should be done, but like a lot of people, I wasn't sure what I could do. I started writing a short story about the issue, but it didn't work well. Another year passed. The killings started again. I thought, this is wrong. People should do something. Then I pointed the finger at myself and said you do something. Writers write, so that's what I did.

2 What is your process when you write a novel? Do you outline or just dive right into the story? How much revision do you do?

Some people like to go driving only when they know exactly where they are going, what sights they will see, and how much the whole thing will cost them. I like to hop in the car and just go. That's how I write. I knew I wanted to write a story about random killings, but that's all I knew. It wasn't until my fingers touched the keyboards that the characters began to reveal themselves. All of my characters are most likely hiding in little corners of me, stepping out only when need be . . . leading the parade, whispering for me to follow them if I dare. I do a lot of revision. Even when my editor gives me feedback on a story, I start editing from beginning to end, touching sections she hasn't mentioned, editing even at the galley stage.

3 Art is such an important theme in this book, and yet so many times these programs are getting cut from the public school curriculum. What do you think about this and the importance of the arts for children?

Art allows us to dream ourselves bigger and better. And it is a good way to soothe, comfort, and share. Art in school matters because we don't just want people who can crunch numbers and plot graphs. We also want to complement the planet with people who can create and color our world beautiful in a zillion different shades, textures, techniques, and emotions.

4 Which character was your favorite in *Bang*?

My favorite character in *Bang* . . . that's hard, I love so many of them. Jason is sweet and loving. Mann is growing, angry at times, but filled with creativity and a longing to do the right

thing. Kee-lee is funny and reckless, with a knowing that his life will be short. Then there's Grandma, the only character I've ever based off of a real person. Given my restrictions I'd say my favorite is Mann, because in him I see so many black boys—good and decent, creative and smart, so often trapped by the world's perception of them, the world's inability or unwillingness to reach out to and save them . . . yet through it all so many of them keep on keeping on, through the hard times, persevering in ways we don't even imagine.

5 All of your novels have a contemporary urban setting, but this one delves into the darkest aspects of it. Was this difficult to write about? How important do you think it is for young adults to read books like yours?

This was so hard. It made me cry. It made me, for the first time ever, start another novel in the midst of writing one. But the bodies stack up around us, and our young people know this, even though we don't speak of it with them. This book will give them a chance to talk about their fears, their experiences, their pain and anger. It won't just allow inner-city youth to join the discussion, but also suburban youth, regardless of color. Already they are raising their hands when I ask if they know someone who has been shot or killed through random violence. They come from pretty homes, with green grass and \$100,000 price tags. Yet they, like youth in the city, respond the same to the book and the situation. If inner-city youth are at risk, all youth are at risk—they get this. I'm hoping their teachers and parents understand it as well.

6 What do you want teen readers to take with them after reading Mann's journey into adulthood? I want teen readers to know how much pain a person and family experiences when something like this happens. I want them to understand that violence destroys families and communities, and that we all have to speak up about it. I want them to find their voice in regards to this issue, and to lead the effort to end youth violence.

7 What advice do you have for teens interested in writing as a career? I'd advise young people to pick up a good book and read. Somehow reading has a way of oozing into your blood and helping you develop talent as a writer. Next I'd advise them to write whatever they want whenever they want. Writing is a fun way to make a living, so they should enjoy the ride.

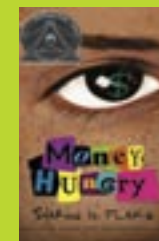
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sharon G. Flake is the groundbreaking author of the 2002 Coretta Scott King Honor Book *Money Hungry*. With *The Skin I'm In*, her first book for children, she won the Coretta Scott King/John Steptoe Award for new authors. Ms. Flake has one daughter and lives in Pittsburgh, PA.

BOOKS BY SHARON G. FLAKE



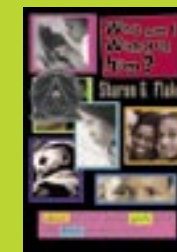
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