

1. The author talks about his journey—both physical and mental—between the privileged world of Riverdale and his neighborhood in the Bronx. How do you think this impacted Wes? Do you think the gap between poverty and privilege has widened since the book was first published?
2. The author states that many governors base their estimates for prison facilities on reading scores from third graders in any given area. Do you think these assumptions are valid? What does this fact say about our education system?
3. Major Schmoke is criticized for saying that Baltimore’s drug problem is a public health crisis, not a criminal justice one. Using what you have learned from both Wes’s stories, do you agree or disagree? And why?
4. Wes talks about how living in a crime-ridden environment forces people to learn how to live with constant fear. What effect do you think this constant fear has on a person?
5. The author talks about getting caught by the police while tagging a wall and realizing that his typical teenage rebellion could have permanent consequences. Can you think of your own “romantic rebellion”? How are your rebellions the same as Wes’s? How are they different?
6. The author talks about how attending Valley Forge Military Academy gave him “a force field that kept the craziness of the world outside.” Contrast this with the other Wes, who spends almost all of his life in Baltimore. How does being in one place for your whole life impact your understanding of yourself?
7. Wes builds his daughter a playhouse, spending weeks on getting it right—and in the process creates a much more complicated project than his other classmates. Yet Wes later realizes that his carpentry skills alone cannot help him support his family. How does his role as a father influence Wes, for good and bad?
8. Wes and Wes talk about how the expectations of others form the expectations for ourselves. How did other people’s expectations of the two men shape their journeys?
- 9: During their youth, Wes and Wes spend most of their time in crime-ridden Baltimore and the Bronx. How important was that environment in shaping their stories and personalities? How do you think urban areas have changed in America since the book was first published in 2010?
10. The author says: “The chilling truth is that [Wes’s] story could have been mine. The tragedy is that my story could have been his.” To what extent do you think that’s true? What, ultimately, prevented their stories from being interchangeable?