

“The Other Wes Moore: One Name, Two Fates” Discussion Questions

- How well does Moore describe the culture of the streets, where young boys grow up believing that violence transforms them into men? Talk about the street culture—its violence, drug dealing, disdain for education. What creates that ethos and why do so many young men find it attractive?
- In writing about the Wes Moore who is in prison, Wes Moore the author says, "The chilling truth is that his life could have been mine. The tragedy is that my story could have been his." What do you make of that statement? Do you think Moore is correct?
- Oprah Winfrey has said that "when you hear this story, it's going to turn the way you think about free will and fate upside down." So, which is it...freedom or determinism? If determinism, what kind of determinism—God, cosmic fate, environment, biology, psychology? Or if freedom, to what degree are we free to choose and create our own destiny?
- The overriding question of this book is what critical factors in the lives of these two men, who were similar in many ways, created such a vast difference in their destinies?
- Talk about the role of family—and especially the present or absence of fathers—in the lives of children. Consider the role of the two mothers, Joy and Mary, as well as the care of the author's grandparents in this book.
- Why did young Wes, who ran away from military school five times, finally decide to stay put?
- Why was the author haunted by the story of his namesake? What was the reason he insisted on meeting him in prison? Talk about the awkwardness of the two Weses' first meeting and their gradual openness and sharing with one another.
- From prison, the other Wes responded to the author's initial letter with his own letter, in which he said, "When you're in here, you think people don't even know you're alive anymore." Talk about the power of hope versus hopelessness for those imprisoned. What difference can it make to a prisoner to know that he or she is remembered?
- The author Wes asked the prisoner Wes, "when did you first know you were a man?" Talk about the significance of that question...and how each man responded.

- Has this book left you with any ideas for ameliorating the conditions that led to the imprisonment of the other Wes Moore? What can be done to ensure a more productive life for the many young men who grow up on the streets?
- The author says to the other Wes, “I guess it’s hard sometimes to distinguish between second chances and last chances.” What do you think he means? What is each Wes’s “last chance”? Discuss the differences in how each one uses that chance and why they make the decisions they do.
- 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?
- Why do you think the incarcerated Wes continues to proclaim his innocence regarding his role in the crime for which he was convicted?
- The book begins with Wes and Wes’s discussion of their fathers. What role do you think fatherhood plays in the lives of these men? How does the absence of their fathers, and the differences in the reasons for their absences, affect them?
- Wes dedicates the book to “the women who helped shape [his] journey to manhood.” Discuss the way women are seen in Wes’s community. What impact do they have on their sons?
- 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?
- Throughout the book, the author sometimes expresses confusion at his own motivations. Why do you think he is so driven to understand the other Wes’s life?
- The author attributes Wes’s eventual incarceration to shortsightedness, an inability to critically think about the future. Do you agree?
- Wes states that people often live up to the expectations projected on them. Is that true? If someone you care for expects you to succeed—or fail—will you? Where does personal accountability come into play?
- Discuss the relationship between education and poverty. In your discussion, consider the education levels of both Weses’ mothers, how far each man got in his education, the

opportunities they gained or lost as a result of their education, and their reasons for continuing or discontinuing their studies.

- The book begins with a scene in which the author is reprimanded for hitting his sister. Why is it important for conflicts to be solved through means other than violence? In what way do the Weses differ in their approaches to physical confrontations, and why?
- Why is the idea of “going straight” so unappealing to the incarcerated Wes and his peers? What does it mean for our culture to have such a large population living and working outside the boundaries of the law?