

All American Boys Discussion Board Posts with Peer Comments

My Original Post (Week Three)

What role to fathers or male role models play in *All American Boys*? Choose either Rashad or Quinn's storyline, and focus on how one father figure or male role model is used in the story.

In Rashad's storyline, his father, David, is an ex-military man, who has high expectations for his sons. The way David is characterized throughout the book provides a look into how society expects men of color to appear and behave if they want to be respected by society. Although these "expectations" are filled with harmful biases, ignorance, misinformation, stereotypes, prejudices, and engrained cultural norms, they are often seen throughout our society today. The role David plays as a father figure in this book is to bring light to these problematic societal stereotypes and biases and challenge them.

After Rashad's brutal and unjust beating outside Jerry's by a white police officer, he is laid up in the hospital. His parents arrive and are handed over custody. Immediately, we begin to see the questions we often hear in society when it comes to the topic of people of color and police brutality coming from David. He directs the conversation to Rashad and starts to accuse him of shoplifting before even getting Rashad's story, much like the police officer in Jerry's: "I need to know what the hell you were thinking, shoplifting. Shoplifting" (46). There's a quickness to understand what the officer did and why due to how society respects police officers, but there seems to be an attempt to find some fault in the person of color's actions to justify the officer's doing. This can be seen through David's first question after Rashad has given his story to his parents: "Were your pants sagging?" (49). This insinuates that what Rashad did or did not do is irrelevant; if he looked respectable, according to his father, then he'd be less likely to be accused of something wrong. He continues with the focus on Rashad, rather than what the police officer did in the situation: "Well, they said you resisted arrest, [...] [if] you did nothing wrong, why would you resist arrest? [...] And how many times have I told you and Spoony [...] Never fight back. Never talk back. Keep your hands up. Keep your mouth shut. Just do what they ask you to do and you'll be fine" (49-50). Instead of admitting that the officer's excessive force was completely unnecessary and inappropriate for not only something he did not do, but a simple petty crime had he done it, David continues to berate Rashad on his fault in the incident. Rashad had not resisted arrest, but often we hear in society, "if he wouldn't have run," or "he should have just complied." Instead of placing the blame on police officers for using unnecessary excessive force, society tries to address the victim and how they should have responded. From what I could tell in the story, Rashad did exactly as his father said, which was to not fight back, talk back, keep hands up and mouth shut. Rashad had followed what his father, and society, had told him and other people of color to do, and yet he was still unlawfully beaten. Rashad even says to his father that he followed those guidelines, but in a "matter-of-fact" manner, David tells (not suggests) Rashad, "You couldn't have" (50). The use of David in Rashad's story provides the faulty and perpetual societal expectations and beliefs of what people of color should do when it

comes to interacting with police; although, through countless examples seen in media, it's obvious that even innocent and compliant people can still fall victim to police brutality.

Peer 1:

I appreciate you bringing up what you did, it's a strong line in the story and an integral one in the overall dialogue of police brutality.

What do you make of the fact that David is the character to perpetuate the victim-blaming narrative? A Black man and Rashad's father? That's very interesting to me, and it's definitely deliberate. Compassion often mixes with admonishment when we care for someone, dontcha think? Say someone we care for is hurt, hurt by something we know of, like heartbreak or rejection or failure: what do we do? We give advice, but that ain't really our place in that moment, right? At least not immediately. Just let it sit for a bit. Sometimes all we want is to hear, "That sucks, and I'm sorry." Other times we need justice. One Halloween I was with my then-girlfriend at one of them "haunted corn mazes," ya know? Where teenagers are hired to satisfy their true basest desire to scare the shit outta strangers, but only now they get paid for it. Anyway, we were all (maybe fifteen people, most of us strangers) huddled around this corner gate, waiting for a man dressed like a werewolf or whatever to let us through to the next stretch of the labyrinth, when my girlfriend started forward and yelled "He just grabbed my ass!" I wasn't that "he," mind you. Some stranger in the crowd grabbed her ass (Butt? Rear? I don't know, I'm just repeating her words), but my unconscious response was "Are you sure?" What a telling sign that that was my first reaction: doubt. I'm not suggesting these two abuses, Rashad's assault and my girlfriends, are the same. They aren't, but mine and David's responses are moreso related. We tried to rationalize the world, or rather, rationalize the free-choices of people, which are (depending on which school of philosophy you ascribe to) irrational. I don't go around grabbing people, so it seems strange to me that some people do, so why wouldn't I doubt it? It's a great flaw in my thinking, and I visit that memory quite often. What I coulda done, I don't know, but I'd prefer something else.

I'd think it a failure of such a book as *All American Boys* not to have this moment of victim-blaming, because it's a truth, ya know? Why tell a partial story?

We've all heard that, "Never fight back," or, "Don't react." Two very strange things to say. You ever been punched in the face, William? I have several times, and never did I leave levelheaded. One time I was just leaving a bar, just walking out the door and some dude swung at me. Real cool. Another time it was my friend who hit me when our wrestling got a little too heated. But that time it was alright, I'd rather it be him that hits me. What we're expecting when we say "Never fight back" is for people to make a conscious choice over the sympathetic nervous system (fight or flight). Thus we're asking the impossible. So, these suggestions for mollifying abuse are just empty-words, like saying "bless you" when someone sneezes. Meaningless.

My Reply to Peer 1:

You make a really good point about why would Rashad's father be our voice for the victim-blaming societal aspect? He's also black and the father of the victim, so wouldn't you expect him to be much more sympathetic towards Rashad and angry towards the injustice that happened to his son? I think you're right that it might come from a place of disbelief--that David is in so much shock that this could actually be what has happened to his son that there's no way Rashad had been in the right in this situation.

I think the authors' use of this unexpected use of David to be the victim-blaming voice not only creates a flipped and unexpected narrative that the readers will enjoy and surprise them, but also shine some light on the voices within their own community that have the same thoughts and feelings. (If you want to know who one of those voices are, look up Candace Owens. She is a proud black conservative who has spoken up against BLM. There is even a clip of her supporting Hitler and his views on Nationalism. It's a bit concerning.) Now, I want to make clear, I don't think David is anything like this. I agree with you, I think he's in disbelief that this could happen to his son, so he thinks that he must have done something to insinuate this.

I also agree, it would be a disservice and injustice to not have a victim-blaming voice/narrative put in here. I think that adding the victim-blaming to Rashad's father also deepens the amount of hurt that a victim may encounter. I mean, we see through Rashad's dialogue and thoughts that he can't believe this happened to him when he did nothing in cause it in the first place. Not only that, but now he has to get the third-degree from his father too? A person that should be of comfort and should want to make this right? I think having David be that voice just creates more of a reaction from the reader as well. We see exactly what happens to Rashad in a way that makes the reader connect and empathize with him, and to have a close character pushing against Rashad, I think taps into an emotional side for the reader. I think it's a very smart move as a writer. (It made me think of this quote as I was typing earlier by Robert Frost: "No surprise in the writer, no surprise in the reader." I think the writers take advantage of this, and I love it!)

Thanks for your contribution,

My Original Post (Week Four)

Q1. Which character do you connect with the most, and why is that?

Q2. Every character has a role to play in the theme of police brutality, just as everyone has a part in our society when it comes to police brutality. How do characters' roles affect the reader's understanding of the theme of police brutality?

A1. For me, I connect most with Jill. Jill maintains a strong stance from the beginning of the book towards the issue of racism and police brutality and feels that Paul was definitely in the wrong. This causes rifts with her family, as she stands against the majority belief that Paul was just doing his job (114). I can easily compare this to my own familial experiences, as my family leans more conservatively and I lean much more progressively. I also have education and strong beliefs that back up my stance and myself, as Jill does.

Jill knows where she stands when it comes to Rashad's attack by Paul: Paul's brutality towards Rashad wasn't just a mishap; it was a systemic problem that didn't just affect those involved--it affects everyone. When talking to Quinn, she explains to him that everyone has some responsibility in the situation and the problem of police brutality. She says to Quinn, "...but it isn't only your problem. It's everyone's problem. [...] It's all our problem." (182). Jill also comprehends that this is a racial issue. She questions Quinn: "You think it would have been the same if the lady wasn't white, or if Rashad wasn't black?" (183). Her stance is strong and unwavering, but when it comes to figuring out what needs to be done about it, as a white person who wants to be part of the solution, she's not entirely sure where to start. This is where I connect with Jill as well. Obviously, there's protesting and marches, there's forums and public ways to speak up, there's school and city communities where one could participate, but sometimes, as a white person, there's a fear of overstepping. Sometimes, too, it's hard as a white person to know where to start. These are not excuses, though, as there's so much that can and needs to be done. (Personally, I think reading and educating are a great place to start!) For Jill, she and her friend, Tiffany, and other students meet with Mr. Fischer after school to figure out what they can do as a school and as a community (184).

A2. Each character plays a role or symbolizes a stance or aspect of the theme of police brutality. Rashad and Paul are the opposite ends of the spectrum; Rashad as the victim, who was completely innocent, and Paul as the perpetrator, who believes he isn't to blame as he was "just doing his job." All the other characters tend to lean towards one of these two characters. These varying roles in the story help the reader understand different notions people in our society see this issue. For example, we have Quinn, who is caught in the middle of the two. He's very unsure where he stands in all of this. On one hand, Paul basically raised him, and he had always looked up to him. Conversely, Quinn saw what Paul did to Rashad and knows it was wrong. I think many readers with privilege may sit and resonate with Quinn. They know not all cops are bad, but things like police brutality are not okay. I think the role Quinn plays teaches students as they progress through the novel. Each character does this in some way and gives the reader insight

into different positions people in society take when facing the theme and issue of police brutality and racism in America.

Guzzo represents someone who stands by their family, regardless if what was done was justified. This is apparent when he confronts Quinn and Jill on their stance of the matter, "'You don't even know [Rashad]. [...] You just like thinking you know him because now he's a celebrity. [...] Paul was just trying to help someone inside the store. That's what he says. [...] The dude who fucking raised you'" (170). The people like Guzzo, when it comes to police brutality, would rather protect their family members than listen to the facts.

Spoony represents someone who has motivation and a voice. People like Spoony would rather advocate for not only those close to him, if advocating for them was justified, but also advocate for others, many of which he didn't know but empathized with. This can be seen with the die-in and the protest (304-310), as well as his adamant push against his father in the hospital on how important justice is in this situation (52-53).

Works Cited

"Chapter Five: Responding to Literature." *Bridging English*, by Joseph O. Milner et al., Pearson Higher Education, 2017, pp. 126–175.

Reynolds, Jason, and Brendan Kiely. *All American Boys*. Atheneum, 2017.

Peer 1:

Hi William,

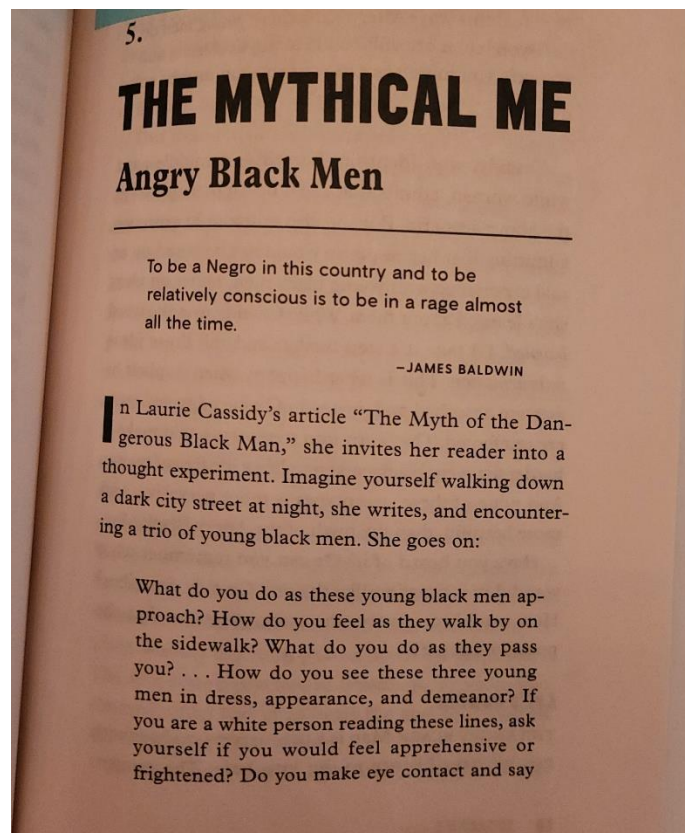
I enjoyed reading your discussion post and identified with many of your points. One of the things you said that resonated with me, in regard to what needs to be done, is "reading and education are a great place to start." Systemic racism is a complex issue, and one that impacts (and implicates) all of us (as you quoted Jill saying above). It is deeper than concluding that "white people are inherently racist/biased." I think this thinking leaves white people responding in a variety of ways, including with guilt and defensiveness. The implications of "being racist" have significant weight in our modern culture. People can be "cancelled" for something that was said or done in the past or present. This creates an environment in which people are so preoccupied with not appearing racist that the root of the issue is not being addressed. Why is there racism and/or bias? Like you said, reading and education are a great start. Another important element is self-reflection. Asking ourselves questions like, "why do I think this?" or "why did I respond in that way?"

We are largely products of our environment. For example, I was speaking to one of my sisters and she told me a story about a business meeting she had with colleagues, one of which was an older gentleman. This man kept speaking over my sister during the meeting because he didn't agree with what she was saying. My sister, who is generally a soft spoken person, raised her voice to match his and responded to his arguments reasonably. He became frustrated and told her to shut up. He later said that he would only attend meetings with my sister if she didn't speak. This man came from a time when women did not hold prominent positions in the business world. It could be argued that he was sexist. My sister, who is a feminist, said that she does not believe he was intentionally being sexist, but rather his response reflected the norms of the time he is from. I think this is where self-reflection and education come in. We need to ask ourselves questions like "why do I think the way I do, where does it come from, and what effect does it have on those around me?" And more importantly, "how is my thinking flawed and how can I change it to become a better person, and a better citizen?" Protests are important because they bring attention to issues. Meaningful change occurs when people's thinking, perspectives, and actions are transformed as a result of education, contemplation, honest self-reflection, and a willingness to change.

My Reply to Peer 1:

Your comment about bias and inherent racism sparked something from a book I've been highly recommending and sharing with others, and I'll take the time to share it with you. I've been reading *Uncomfortable Conversations with a Black Man* by Emmanuel Acho. I highly recommend it. He does an amazing job talking to the reader without putting down, but rather sharing anecdotes, news stories, research, history, and further actions the reader can do after reading the chapter. He does a magnificent job! Your comment brought me to a chapter I read a while ago about implicit bias/racism. I'm sharing the first two pages of that chapter in this reply. I think the story he leads with is exactly that thought process of: "Why am I like that?" or "Where does that come from?" (See attachments - the one that ends in 455 is the first page, the other is the second page.)

Also, I enjoyed/disliked your story. I enjoyed it because I think it's a great example and I liked reading it, but I hate that people are still like that. I kind of felt the same way about AAB. I thoroughly loved the book, but I wish that issues like this weren't so hard to fix. Like, shouldn't human compassion and empathy be enough to end this stuff?! (I know it's never that easy and it isn't just going to stop like that...



"hello," or do you keep your eyes focused on the ground? Do you imagine that they are carrying weapons? Are you afraid that they might mug you? And do you feel guilty that you even feel this way? After seeing these young men do you feel more vulnerable to physical harm and are you more alert to your surroundings?

✓ Cassidy, who identifies herself as a middle-aged white woman, admits that she'd be "apprehensive" in the above scenario. But she also critiques her reaction, admitting that her response would not be based on actual experience with young black men, rather on ideas she's learned about them. While Cassidy uses the word *learned*, I'd take it a step further and call those ideas *indoctrination*. This is what happens when implicit biases are absorbed and, instead of being educated away, are reinforced. They turn into stereotypes that make it harder for every black person to live a life free of racism. And none of these stereotypes is more pervasive, and more harmful, than the myth of the Angry Black Man.

Have you heard of it? Or can you remember what you did in a situation like the one Cassidy describes? How would you answer the same questions that she posed to herself?

Let's Rewind

THE ANGRY BLACK Man is a two-parter—so bear with me, we have history to dig into here. The current