

Brothers and Keepers: A Memoir Study Guide

Brothers and Keepers: A Memoir by John Edgar Wideman

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Plot Summary

Brothers and Keepers by John Edgar Wideman focuses on John, the narrator, who is an educated black man, and his brother, Robby, who serves a life sentence in prison for armed robbery and murder. Through John's visits with Robby, the two discuss and examine their lives up to this point to understand how one brother ends up successful and the other ends up in prison.

John's youngest brother, Robby, is a fugitive. He and two other criminals botch an attempted robbery and murder a man. It is November 1975. John left Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, where the family lives, and lives in Laramie, Wyoming. John feels that Robby is coming to see him. Despite the distance, he feels connected to his brother.

Robby calls. He is in Laramie. John takes him back to his house. In a moment of privacy looking at infant Jamila, John's daughter, John almost asks Robby about the robbery and murder, but he cannot. Robby leaves the next morning and the FBI finds him. He is extradited to Pittsburgh and receives the mandatory sentence for felony murder: life in prison without probation or parole.

John begins his annual visits to Western State Penitentiary, where Robby is a prisoner. John chose a path in life to rise up out of the ghetto via education. He graduated from the University of Pennsylvania and he is a successful writer and professor.

John and Robby begin to write this book. Robby discusses how he always wanted to party and get success the easy way. He began his downward spiral into heroin and selling heroin on the streets. This eventually led to television scams or selling stolen televisions. Robby says the ghetto mentality is all about the glamor and what is fun in the moment.

Robby tells the story of what happened that fateful night. He felt something bad was going to happen. He and two others attempt to rob a criminal, but one of Robby's crew shoots the criminal. He dies the next morning. Robby and his crew decide to skip town. They take buses to Indiana and Chicago. Robby continues onto Los Angeles, but the others go back to Pittsburgh. Robby ends up in Laramie, John's town in Wyoming.

Robby graduates with an Associate's degree in prison. He is the speaker at the prison graduation. Sadly enough, he is the first and last graduate because the program's funding is cut. In his speech, Robby says he learns that anything meaningful, he must work hard for. He says prisoners need education so they can have a skill and not be society's burden again.

In a letter to John, Robby says his appeals have been turned down and he has lost his motivation. The prisoners keep losing their rights. They have no access to jobs, education or anything with hope.



Visits, p. 4-19

Visits, p. 4-19 Summary

Brothers and Keepers by John Edgar Wideman centers on the relationship between John, the narrator and an educated, black professional, and Robby, his youngest brother. Robby serves a life sentence in prison. The book focuses on John's visits to the prison and how both brothers describe how they ended up on such different paths in life.

John, the narrator, receives a call from his mother. She says that his youngest brother, Robby, and two friends murdered a man in a botched robbery attempt. Robby is wanted for armed robbery and murder. He is a fugitive because he fled the scene. The robbery took place in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, the family's hometown and where the family still lives, except for John, who lives in Laramie, Wyoming. Even though John is two thousand miles away from Robby, he still feels Robby is a part of him. The robbery attempt occurs in November 1975. In February 1976, Robby shows up in Laramie. No one knows of his whereabouts. Their mother knows Robby is free, but is terrified he will get himself into more danger. His family back in Pittsburgh prays, but somehow, John feels that Robby is coming to see him.

Robby calls John from a bowling alley in Laramie. John is about to pick him up, but he has a flashback to November 15, 1975 in Pittsburgh when Robby committed the crime. Robby's partners in crime were Michael Dukes and Cecil Rice. They had attempted to rob a fence, or a criminal who steals and sells the goods to other criminals illegally. When Michael thought the fence reached for a gun, Michael shot and killed him. They fled the scene.

In the present, John picks up Robby from the bowling alley. Robby is with Michael Dukes and Johnny-Boy, a criminal they picked up in Utah. John remembers that his father hated Robby's friends when they were growing up. The father called them thugs, and it seems not much has changed. They stay overnight, talk about anything but the crime and eat a meal. John begins to see it is an unwise decision to bring them into his house with his wife, Judy, and his newborn daughter, Jamila. Johnny-Boy looks dangerous and has no loyalty.

In a private moment between John and Robby, they look in on Jamila in her crib. Jamila had a horrible birth. Mother and daughter almost died. John wants to ask Robby why he stole and murdered, but he cannot do it.

The next morning, Robby and the two others leave. The police show up at John's door, accusing him of being part of a robbery in Utah that consisted of four black men. John experiences what it is like to be an accused black man, even though he is a respected professor and writer.



Robby and the two are picked up for driving a stolen car across state lines in Colorado. The FBI gets involved and they are arrested. Johnny-Boy testifies against Robby and Michael, who are extradited to Pittsburgh and charged with armed robbery and murder. They are held for trial and given the mandatory sentence of felony murder of life in prison without probation or parole. Robby remains in custody in six months before going on trial. Two years later, in July 1978, Robby's appeals are shot down by the Supreme Court of Pennsylvania. Robby gets a bad deal because some of his rights are ignored. He begins to serve a life sentence in Western State Penitentiary.

Visits, p. 4-19 Analysis

The idea of escape is present in the book. Robby escapes to the west in order to leave his problems behind in Pittsburgh. In the same vein, John did the same thing years ago when he escaped the Pittsburgh ghetto and moved to Laramie, Wyoming. Both brothers use escape as a means for leaving the past behind. But is it really possible to escape fully? It seems not to be. For example, even though Robby is two thousand miles away, John still feels connected to him and his life back in Pittsburgh. Robby's escape is immediate so far, and he can literally escape being arrested, but how long will that last? He cannot emotionally escape his problems or the fact he was an accessory to murder. Escape may be possible physically with these two brothers, but not mentally. This escape idea foreshadows how Robby will use mental escape in prison to survive.

John says the name Jamila means "beautiful" in Arabic, but in terms of beautiful internally, or a beautiful spirit. When Robby holds Jamila, it brings out his soft side. Even when things are at their ugliest, beauty is still around. A beautiful spirit or a beautiful moment can be found in the midst of the chaos. This moment almost leads John to ask about Robby's crime, but something stops him. This foreshadows Robby's imprisonment and how Robby must find beautiful moments to survive the hell of living in prison.



Visits, p. 19-35

Visits, p. 19-35 Summary

The text sounds as if John writes letters to Robby in prison, but the text is still in normal, book form. He talks about when they grew up as children, their cousin took a family portrait. They are five brothers and one sister. They all have different personalities. Robby's personality as a child was he always wanted to have fun. He was always looking for the next place to have fun, whether it was a poolroom, hang out corner or girl's house. John discusses his grandfather, Harry Wideman, who was a dark black man versus his mother's parents, who were very light blacks. John and his siblings are a combination of the grandparents—a medium shade of black. Harry moved to Pittsburgh for coal mining job opportunities.

John discusses the idea of running and escape. Both grandfathers escaped the South, but "is freedom inextricably linked with both, running from and running to? Is freedom the motive and means and end and everything in between?" (Visits, p. 24).

John is forty-three and Robby is thirty-three. John escaped from the Pittsburgh ghetto and went to college at the University of Pennsylvania (UPenn), an Ivy League school, in Philadelphia. At UPenn, John was caught in a Catch-22. He had to be the ultimate black man; i.e., a great basketball player, know about blues music, etc. But he also had to blend in seamlessly with the white society. That was difficult for John. He remembers getting into an argument with a white classmate at UPenn about blues music. The white kid swore he knew everything about the blues, but John knew he did not and called him on it. It annoyed John that the white kid threw John's blackness back in his face. College for John was fitting in with a bunch of rich, white kids where John could not make any waves. After college, John escapes to Wyoming, but feels guilty about escaping to safe, white Laramie.

John flashes back to a funny incident when he and Judy (his white wife) drive Robby up to Maine. Robby turns the radio to a black station and sings loudly. John is embarrassed his brother acts so black, but he loves the music too.

In the present, John visits Robby annually in prison. He brings along Jamila, who asks, "How long will Robby be in cage?" (Visits, p. 34). John looks up the word "jail." It actually derives from the word "cage" from medieval England.

Visits, p. 19-35 Analysis

John has a discussion of the idea of freedom on p. 24. As he says, both of his black grandfathers escaped the oppressive society of the American South. Most likely, they were slaves or treated like slaves. He discusses the idea of freedom as running from and to. With John, he experiences freedom when he "runs to" UPenn. He seizes the opportunity of rising up from the ghetto via education. He educates himself, but at the



cost of his identity. He "runs from" his childhood identity to this confusing world of white people and what they expect of him. He must live up to their expectations at all times. So, he is still not free in terms of being a black man in white society. In fact, he is not free at all.

Robby "runs from" his arrest in Pittsburgh. He "runs to" his brother's safe, white town of Laramie, Wyoming. It is interesting to note that both brothers run to white society to escape their lives. But both escapes do not bring freedom. John asks on p. 24 if freedom is the motive for everything. In this book, freedom does seem to be the motive, but no one is fully free from his past. No one has fully confronted the past yet, thus he is not free from it.



Visits, p. 35-44

Visits, p. 35-44 Summary

John looks at Jamila's growth as a yardstick for Robby's growth. Robby develops in prison in a spiritual and mental way. Horrible things happen in prison, but the inmate's worst enemy is time. The prisoner cannot kill time no matter what he does.

John says the whole family visits Robby in prison, including Judy, Jamila and Jake (John's son). Jamila is the youngest visitor at five years of age and only three feet tall. She is a beautiful, little girl. She has an obsession with graveyards, maybe because of what she went through as a baby. When Jamila is an older child, she tells John what she remembers about visiting Robby. She remembers Robby eats apples, wears braids and looks like Steve Wonder. Robby is happy to see his family, but not happy because he is in prison. Jamila thinks the authorities should let Robby out of the cage because he wants to see people and have a life outside of prison. She remembers Robby saying it is nice to see her. Jamila does not tell any of her friends about Robby because they would not understand. Only one of her friends might understand, but she chooses not to discuss Robby.

To get to the penitentiary, John and the family must drive through the Homewood Avenue section of Pittsburgh, which is the ghetto. It is a leftover, coal mining ghetto. The drive is always dangerous due to bad, winding streets and the way the people drive. Western State Penitentiary is a nicer prison. When John and his family first drive up, they see the barbed wire and the guards. They must act in a respectful way because they are black (except for Judy).

Visits, p. 35-44 Analysis

John and his family must make a symbolic transition every time they go through Homewood Avenue. They must go through the ghetto in order to get to the penitentiary. It is a symbolic journey where John must ride through his ghetto Pittsburgh past in order to get to the nice place on the hill, the prison. In a strange way, John makes this transition because without it, he cannot get to where he is going. Symbolically, John begins to confront his past by passing through Homewood Ave. He starts on his path to true freedom by examining his past close up.

The prison, in turn, symbolizes a palace or safe haven of some sort. It represents something better. It is not dark or forbidding. Robby is in there and not on the mean streets of Homewood Ave. It symbolizes a better place than the ghetto. There is something safe and familial about the prison.

John makes direct social commentary on how the black man must be in control at all times. His kids cannot laugh or scream at the prison like the white kids. They must be in

control and quiet. John feels this way around white society. The black man must know his limits and abide by them. If he steps out of line, there are consequences.



Visits, p. 44-54

Visits, p. 44-54 Summary

John and his family walk into the penitentiary. Annually, John comes with his family and his sister's family. He observes the prisoners. He can feel how the prisoners' eyes appraise everyone. He feels how the prisoners see children as sexual objects with their young, firm bodies. The prisoners look at the children like meat. John can feel the prisoners' paranoia and suspicion. Almost all the prisoners are black. They are like John, but they are bad. John owns up to the evil in himself to identify with them.

John tries to treat the prisoners like people, but they cannot reciprocate in this way. He is scared of them. He does not enjoy being seen entering or leaving the prison. John talks about a previous visit where he spends an hour in the visitors' lounge waiting for his brother. A prisoner asks him if he is Faruq's brother and John says yes. Faruq is Robby's new Muslim name. The prisoner does not say anything else to John. John and his family go through the corridor and the guard station. The waiting room is ugly and dirty in the first few years they visit. John thinks his kids do not belong here in this waiting room, but in a sense, whose kids do belong there? The effect is the visitors are treated like prisoners too until they leave. They are prisoners for that small duration. John is confused until he understands this effect. John is happy Judy insists on having the kids visit. John likes seeing the kids hug their uncle Robby. They act like a family and tease and love each other. John feels like they have made it through another visit.

Visits, p. 44-54 Analysis

John and his family go through a symbolic transformation when they enter the penitentiary. They enter as upstanding people of society. But once they walk through the prison doors, they are prisoners too. Their mental states turn to one of a prisoner. They must obey at all times and submit to the power of the prison and its infrastructure. The guards control the atmosphere. When they visit with Robby, they must adhere to strict regulations. Finally, when they leave the prison, they are no longer in the prisoner state-of-mind. They are free and return to being normal people in society.

The family structure is abnormal for John and his family. They must visit an uncle in prison every day, which is opposed to visiting a family member for a holiday celebration or just a visit. The visit brings on different types of stresses, such as feeling like a prisoner and exposing the kids to this world of incarceration. John's family structure is direct social commentary of the structure of many black families. Today, eight hundred thousand black men are in prison in the US. Thus, this idea of visiting a black relative in prison is perhaps normal for many black families. John does not like that it is normal, but he deals with the awkward family unit because he loves Robby.



Our Time, I

Our Time, I Summary

Garth was a good friend of Robby's and very loved in the neighborhood. He died of an unknown disease, but it is inferred the disease is AIDS. No one took care of Garth in the hospital because he was black. Robby and his friends feel they let Garth die. It was an emotional awakening for Robby. Garth's death began Robby's downward spiral into drugs, stealing and crime. Robby began to drink a lot and hang out with thugs. John never realized until recently how much Garth's death affected Robby. Their mother worried about Robby all the time. He could not be disciplined, no matter how harsh Mom made the punishment. Mom found \$20 missing from her purse and a syringe and knew that Robby was higher than a kite. So Mom knew what Robby was getting into back then. Robby changed Mom. She used to be sweet and forgiving. She is now angry and bitter. She lost that forgiving part of her.

Mom was raised on Homewood Avenue in a classy, black family. They did not have much money, but Mom and her sisters were known as the nice girls. Their father would kill anyone who put a hand on his girls.

John talks with Robby for three hours in prison. It is the most John has ever talked to Robby in his entire life. They both agree on their upbringing in Homewood. John comes up with the idea of writing this book, but he does not know whether to make it fiction or make it about the lessons John learns from Robby in prison. John says there was a prison revolt in 1980, a prisoner died in his cell due to an asthma attack. The guards did not get to him for an hour and the prisoner died in his cell. The guards grabbed the prisoners out of line for no reason and beat them. That was the summer of 1980. Prisoners were not allowed to step out in the warm weather. There was a revolt for prisoner rights, but the state came in and said they have no rights.

Robby talks about his life as a performer for himself and in the family. He could do impressions of famous people and make everyone laugh. He thought he would be in the entertainment business. People loved his stories, which is similar to John, the writer. Robby saw himself as Superfly when he was growing up. He was going to make it differently than everyone else. He was not going to further himself through education or sports. Robby was going to get out of the neighborhood his own way. Robby loved to party back then. No one could tell him differently.

Robby's birthday, December 29, is a day of mourning. At the end of December, many family members have died. Mom looks at this period as a time of mourning. Robby talks about one Christmas where John and Judy brought a television set to Mom's house. Robby was in withdrawal from heroin, so he stole the television to pay for more heroin. But an undercover cop busted him as he tried to buy drugs. He went to jail. The cop recommended for Robby's family to let him rot in jail before his hearing to teach him a



lesson, but the family is too nice. They bailed him out. Robby thinks that if they left him in jail, it might have woken him up.

Robby feels most terrible about taking away the sweet and forgiving side of Mom. That is the worst thing he has done and it kills him.

Edgar Wideman, their father, tried to discipline Robby by beating him, but Robby threatened him with scissors and Edgar stopped.

Robby talks about the summer of 1968 at Westinghouse High School. The black kids fought off the cops because they were always around the school. Finally, the black students had a student strike. Robby stood up in front of the whole school and trash talked the cops and talked about black freedom and black power. He was expelled. Robby feels that he had the courage to take a stand during the strike.

Our Time, I Analysis

Garth's death symbolized a death in Robby. Garth was a beloved treasure in the neighborhood. He was a kind soul. For Robby to witness Garth's slow and ignored death took a toll on him mentally. This is the point where Robby's childhood innocence dies. He cannot look at the world with naive eyes anymore, especially being a black man. Robby loses the part of him that has childlike dreams of achieving anything he wants. He sees how a good, black man is treated, internalizes this and has a rebirth as a criminal. This is identical to what happens to Mom. She also goes through an emotional and mental death when Robby starts on his criminal path. The beautiful, forgiving side of her dies. She is left angry and bitter.

It is interesting to see how two brothers from the same family turn out so differently. John chooses a path of education and bettering himself through education. Robby chooses a criminal path and he attempts to achieve his superficial goals, such as buying a house in cash for Mom, through crime. This comes down to both men's motivations. John's motivations are to better himself with education, have a family and have a safe, successful life. Robby's motivations are to party and have fun. For Robby, it is all about living in the moment.



Our Time, II

Our Time, II Summary

Robby discusses how he operates as a criminal and how his criminal roots began. He had ambitions to become a big time drug deal in Pittsburgh. He traveled to Detroit to get the drugs he needed to sell. Michael Dukes and Cecil Rice were his crew. Robby talks about how they went to Detroit to a housing project. He shoots the heroin before he buys it to make sure it is good. They get \$2,000 worth of heroin in Detroit and will turn it around to \$7,000 profit in Pittsburgh. Robby's girlfriend wakes him up and says there is a Cadillac outside the door. There is gunfire and it is aimed at Robby. It is the police. They tear through the apartment. They find a lot of heroin on Robby and he gets arrested. He cannot sell on the street for a couple of weeks. The cops somehow knew how Robby bought the drugs in Detroit, so he, Michael and Cecil think another guy in their crew snitched. Robby finds out it is Tanya who set him up.

Robby talks about how he had a job working with autistic and mentally challenged kids in a home. He was good with the kids and liked working with them. He got an autistic kid to talk with him. He says the kids were space cadets and brain dead. He was nice to the kids and they worked well with him, but the kids would go home and get beaten by their families. The kids would come back the next day and they would be even worse. The professionals, the doctors and nurses, who worked in the home also beat the kids. Robby got fired from that job the same day Michael was fired from his job.

Robby and his crew found out the heroin they sold was not good. So they start to do these television scams. They steal TVs from criminals' trucks and vans, also known as fencing operations. A couple of times, Robby and his crew took the criminal for everything he was worth. They made out well until that fateful night. Robby had an uneasy feeling something would go wrong that night, but he had to go through with it.

Robby says in the ghetto mentality, dreams are not about having a house with a white picket fence. It is about the glamor and the show of everything. When you get \$1,000, you are ready to spend it in one night. It is just about the good times.

Our Time, II Analysis

This will be discussed further in the language and meaning section, but it is here that the language shifts dramatically. The reader hears Robby's point of view via his first person writing. John's language is a formal, educated writing interspersed with difficult vocabulary words. But Robby's language is of the streets. He speaks in a black vernacular of the times. He uses black slang such as "you dig." He does not speak in complete sentences or with perfect grammar. This shows the direct opposition to John and how John's education literally speaks for him. If John had not had his education, he would speak like Robby.



Robby's motivations consist of those of the ghetto mentality. It is all about living for today. It is about living for the glamor and having fun at a moment's notice. This is an in-depth look at Robby's personality because the reader can see he is completely consumed by this mentality. He cannot escape it; it is ingrained in him. However, John does not have the same mentality. He looks for security and a future. Both men represent the opposite sides of the spectrum of black society.



Our Time, III

Our Time, III Summary

Robby continues the story of the night of the attempted robbery. He felt something was going to go wrong. That night, Robby, Michael and Cecil show up to Stavros' office. Stavros is the fence, a white man. He is a criminal that buys stolen goods from other criminals. There are two other men there and the lights are off. There are not supposed to be two other men there. Stavros goes to the back. Michael swears he saw Stavros reach for something, which he believes was a gun, and put it in his pocket. Robby sees Stavros' shadow, but he does not see Stavros put anything in his pocket, but Robby is not at a good angle to see clearly. They go to the truck, where the stolen televisions are. Stavros asks to see them. They open the truck and Cecil sits inside with a sawed-off shotgun. Stavros and his men are in shock and Stavros realizes he was set up. Robby, Michael and Cecil tell Stavros and his men to throw the money on the ground. Robby and Mike pull out their guns. Mike shoots Stavros and he goes down. But they are not sure if Stavros actually got shot or he goes down to dodge the bullets. Mike fires a second shot. Stavros is shot, but he runs away. They put Stavros' two men in the back of the van and lock it, but they do not lock it well. Robby, Mike and Cecil are in the cab, driving. Stavros runs around shot and bleeding. At a red light, the two men open up the back door and run away. Robby, Mike and Cecil know they are in big trouble because three white guys are running around.

Robby, Mike and Cecil go into this little shop and try to call a cab. A naive, white teenager says he has a car and he will take them wherever they need to go. Robby says occasionally you meet a person like that on the road: a person who naive and innocent and is not affected by anything in life. He drives them to their car. They do not rob the kid. They all go back to their respective houses. Robby goes back to Wanda's house, who is his girlfriend at the time. The next morning, Mike picks Robby up at 9 and they head to a disco, but it is too early. Robby gets chills, which is the exact time of death of Stavros. He dies at 10 on Saturday. Robby drinks and they go to the disco. They are ready to party.

Our Time, III Analysis

It is obvious that the black criminals have more to lose than the white ones. When the men escape the truck and Stavros runs around shot and bleeding, the men are in fear of what could happen to them as black criminals. When they go into the all-white neighborhood to the shop to call a cab, the cashier is nervous. She does not want trouble, even though they pose as upstanding black men. In this society, the black man must stay on his side of town. Otherwise, it is an invasion of the territory. It is the same with injuring or killing white criminals. It is acceptable to hurt a black criminal and not face any harsh consequences. But when a white man is killed, even if he is a criminal, the black man has gone into his territory and crossed the line.



The white kid represents childhood innocence. He is not scared of three black men and offers them a ride. On the ride, he talks to them like his equals or friends. He represents the hope between the black and white community, but the hope contains naivety and ignorance. It is direct social commentary of Robby to say that blacks and whites can get along, as long as there is ignorance and naivety at the forefront of the relationship. It is not hopeful commentary, but it is realistic for that time period and place.



Doing Time, I. November 16, 1975

Doing Time, I. November 16, 1975 Summary

Robby continues to tell the story of what happened after Stavros' murder. The next morning (after the robbery), the cops look for Cecil because they know about his stolen license. He wants to go to the police, but he decides against it. They all decide to leave town. They drive to Gary, Indiana. A friend of Cecil's sister who lives in Gary says he will hook them up with IDs, but something is not right with him, so they leave Gary. Cecil and Mike get in a fight in a phone booth in Chicago. Mike calls his father and Cecil calls his mother. Robby is angry because they made a pact not to call any family. Cecil's mother says for him to come back to Pittsburgh because he will not get any time in jail because he is a first time offender. Robby says that is not true because he is black. He will be put in jail and locked up for a long time.

Mike and Cecil plan to head to Pittsburgh from Chicago. Robby plans to head to Los Angeles. Mike and Cecil abandon their plans and the three of them plan to get on a bus headed west. Mike says he has to take care of his car in Chicago and he will meet them in LA. Robby does not meet Mike until six weeks later. Robby and Cecil take buses to head to LA. Robby is sick from his heroin withdrawal. He is on methadone. Cecil calls his mom again, who says the police will go easy on him if he turns himself in. Cecil goes back to Pittsburgh. Robby goes to Lincoln, Nebraska. He likes the name Lincoln, because as a child he loved memorizing state capitals, and Nebraska, because it sounds cool. He gets on a bus and sits in the back and drinks wine with this guy he names Pops. Pops is an old guy and a liar. He entertains Robby. Robby lies about his life too, saying he is a pimp from New York City and he had to get out of the Big Apple. Pops convinces Robby to go with him to Ogden, Utah. Pops knows Johnny-Boy and introduces he and Robby in Ogden. Johnny-Boy can get anything in town, such as any types of drugs. Once Robby meets Johnny-Boy, he thinks his luck is changing and that things will get better.

Doing Time, I. November 16, 1975 Analysis

Pops represents an older version of Robby. He is Robby without John and the family. He is a pathetic, old man on a bus who lies to everyone to feel better about his life. He is a con and an entertainer. Robby is the same way, except a younger version of Pops. He even takes his cue from Pops because he begins to lie about his life too. Robby could easily turn into Pops if he did not have the support and love of his family. Pops is a pathetic future that Robby must face.

Robby's motivations change into not being a black man in jail. He convinces Cecil at first to not be that either. There is a part of him, the boy from the high school strike, that still exists. He will not be brought down by the white man and live by the white man's rules. He sees the plight of the black criminal as unjust and unfair. He knows he will not

receive the same rights and considerations as the white criminal. So his motivations turn into staying out of prison, no matter the cost.



Doing Time, II. Summer 1982

Doing Time, II. Summer 1982 Summary

It is the summer of 1982. John says it gets hot in Pittsburgh and nothing changes in the city, but nothing remains the same. John goes by himself to visit Robby in prison. His friends recommends a driving shortcut and it works. John gets to the penitentiary quickly, but he bypassed Homewood Avenue. He does not feel right about this shortcut because he needs to go through his regular, mental transition first. He needs to go through the ghetto, where he grew up, to properly get to the prison—this is the correct way for him. He thinks about the workers and how they get to punch in and out, but Robby does not. This makes him angry. He believes the workers should think about the prisoners.

John focuses on the ritual of going to the prison. On this trip, he is alone. Usually, the ritual is he cannot have anything metal on him. He goes through metal detectors. It is similar to being a prisoner himself. He feels like he is stripped of his some of worldly possessions such as his keys, watch, etc. He thinks about what if his child comes on the next visit with metal braces—will the child be allowed in with metal in their mouth? Robby gets strip searched. In other words, the guard must have Robby bend over and spread his butt cheeks. The guard searches around in his anus. John talks about how prisons are overcrowded. He finally meets Robby. They hug and shake hands. John begins to wonder why he is there.

Sometimes the brothers sit at the lawyer-client tables during their visits. John believes he is a professional because he writes a book and has to take notes. He is a professional journalist. But the guard that day does not let them sit at a lawyer-client table. John is angry, but he keeps his cool, only shaking his head in objection. He does not cause a scene because the guard will take it out on Robby. John goes through the ritual of setting up his pens and yellow pad.

Robby says he likes the first draft, but something is missing. Another reader says John only writes facts about Robby, but the reader wants to know more about Robby's inner self. John rewrites the book from scratch. John says he wrote the first draft out of fear and not from Robby's voice. He edits Robby's voice too much to sound too educated. It is not Robby's normal street voice. John changes this in the second draft and writes as Robby really talks.

John questions the source of his brother's stress. John says that Robby displays courage and dignity as a prisoner, and that he himself could never do this. Robby is self-sufficient and has inner calm. John does not envy Robby; he does not want to become a prisoner. But he recognizes the fact that Robby remains true to himself.

Robby talks about Tanya, his girlfriend. Tanya had always been there for him. She had been with him through all the hearings, trials and other prison obligations. She visited



him all the time. He writes poems about her and his new girlfriend, Leslie. Robby was in love with Tanya, who changed her name to Tia. He felt she was his rock, but she began to realize dating a prisoner with a life sentence was going nowhere. She does not come back to prison and their relationship is over.

Robby meets a fellow prisoner's sister named Leslie. Leslie is half black and half white. She looks white. She has green eyes, blond hair and white skin. She is very pretty. She has had a rough life. She grew up in foster homes. She was pregnant by age thirteen and had children. Black girls would beat her up. She was a prostitute. She is currently addicted to heroin. Robby takes Leslie on as a project and he helps her get clean. Leslie visits him and they have a romance. He lectures her on how to better herself. The strange thing is that Leslie's brother (the fellow prisoner) tells her that Robby will be free in a couple of years. Robby now must either tell the truth of his life imprisonment or lie to her. He chooses to lie and every year, he adds a year. She does not understand the system; she thinks the judicial system adds years onto Robby's sentence. She says she will kill herself if he never gets out of prison, so he chooses not to tell her the truth.

Coincidentally, John cheats on his wife. Judy catches him. So John advises Robby to tell Leslie the truth before he gets caught.

John and Robby have this ritual where they walk to the vending machines. The prisoners cannot hold money, so John must buy snacks and drinks for Robby. Robby usually does not ask for much food because he is embarrassed by this.

Robby is in pretty good shape. He does 1,000 push-ups a day. He plays basketball and runs five to six miles in the prison yard when he can.

Robby has a son named Omar. Omar's mother and Robby's first wife, Geraldine, does not want Omar to visit Robby. John keeps promising he will get Omar to visit, but he has not kept his promise.

John says you never know who you will meet in prison. He meets this prisoner, Reds Murphy, who played high school basketball with him. Red was a star player, but too messed up to make it to college. He was a policeman. Reds chopped his wife into little pieces when he found her in bed with another man. John shakes Reds' hand.

Robby is a hermit. He studies all the time. He works toward getting his Associate's degree in engineering. He is also a converted Muslim.

Prisons overflow with prisoners. Prisoners are usually worse when they come out as opposed to when they came in because they are treated so badly.

John and Robby's visits end with the last fifteen minutes of silence. John does not know what do with these silences. He thinks there is nothing left to say. Maybe it is a reminder of Robby's limits.



Doing Time, II. Summer 1982 Analysis

John and Robby are both obsessed with the idea of ritual. Ritual is more than keeping them on track or on a schedule. Ritual symbolizes a way of life for them and how they get through each visit peacefully. Ritual is also how Robby survives in prison without losing his mind. To get to the prison, John must have a ritual of driving through the ghetto. It feels right to him. In a strange way, it is comforting and it puts him in the mindset to see Robby and deal with his brother's imprisonment. John goes through the ritual of feeling like a prisoner such as walking through the metal detector and being searched. On the other side, Robby is his mirror image, except Robby gets searched anally as well. After these two brother go through this ritual, they can finally meet.

Ritual allows Robby to remain sane in prison. He divides his time between studying and working out. He does both in a methodical fashion. This ritual allows Robby to have future goals—something he never had as a youth. Ritual enables Robby to stay in shape physically and emotionally.

John does the same thing with his setting up of pens and note pad for his visit. He must go through this ritual to keep his own sanity. He buys Robby snacks and maintains this ritual to Robby's comfort. John sits in silence with Robby to allow him time to wind down. They do not have to say anything, but the ritual of silence says everything for them. These rituals symbolize the brothers' connection to one another and keep them on the same page.

When Robby lies to Leslie, John does the same thing with Judy. This idea of "cheating" shows both men, a prisoner and a free man, are capable of the same actions. In fact, in a physical sense and sense of violation, John's actions are worse. He cheats on his wife. This is direct social commentary on how any man is capable of making mistakes.



Doing Time, Postscript

Doing Time, Postscript Summary

Omar, Robby's son, makes his first visit and then another. It seems Robby and Omar get along. They understand each other as man to man and father to son. Geraldine, Omar's mother and Robby's ex-wife, is generous and understanding about bringing father and son together. Robby graduates with an Associate's degree in engineering from his community college program. He is one of three prisoners to complete a degree. Everyone else dropped out. They have a little graduation ceremony in the prison. The graduates wear caps and gowns. Guests from the outside are allowed to attend. Mom says Robby is eloquent in his graduation speech. John says words cannot capture the delivery of Robby's speech, but he provides it for the reader in the Postscript. John says the last words of the book should be Robby's words.

The good news is that Robby graduates, but the bad news is that he is the prison's first and last graduate. The community college program has been shut down due to lack of funding.

The last few pages of the Postscripts are Robby's graduation speech. He says he learns that everything that is worth anything is worth working hard for. He originally thought the easy way out was the right way, but he now knows education is the way out. It is the way to better himself. It has nothing to do with receiving a better job or material gain. For Robby, it is about self-satisfaction and self-accomplishment, which are more rewarding. Robby says the education funds have been cut back for this community college program he graduates from. He says education allows everyone to dream and make those dreams become reality.

He ends with the question: why should criminals be given a free education? He says it is a chance for prisoners to feel proud and better their lives. They cannot better their lives in prison, but through education, they can have a skill and become a productive member of society. And because of this, prisoners will not be society's burden again.

Robby writes a small letter to John. He says he has his Associate's degree and three certificates. But he loses his motivation, since his appeals have been turned down. Inside the prison, things get worse. The prisoners' rights are being taken away; for example, only six phone calls a year per prisoner and the new prisoners must share cells. There are no education programs or rehab or jobs for male prisoners. They are locked up like animals. Robby says society cries for punishment, but people are blind to what really happens in prison. He says he is going to start on a road story again. Robby realizes if he wants to reap rewards, he must work.



Doing Time, Postscript Analysis

Robby's motivations change once again. He strives to be an educated man. He works for his education and takes it seriously. He wants to be taken seriously and do something productive while he is in prison. He finally realizes education is the way out. Ironically, John knew this as a child and worked toward being an educated professional all along. Robby has to take a different life path than John to come to this realization and change his motivations to achieve future goals. Robby's motivations produce a change in him. His graduation speech is eloquent and he sounds like an educated man. He speaks with passion and admits his mistakes in life. He has become someone John and Mom are truly proud of.

Robby makes direct social commentary on the prison system. A prisoner should have the right to an education and a job, if he chooses. Prisoners should have rights, especially rights as human beings. They should not be treated like animals. Both John and Robby appeal to the reader on the prisoner's behalf, asking the reader to become aware of this prisoner issues. It is now up to the reader to decide if the prisoner should have more rights or not.



Characters

John Wideman

John Wideman is the narrator of the book. He is an educated black man. He grew up in the Homewood Avenue section of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, which is the ghetto. He decided to get out of the ghetto through education. He graduated from the University of Pennsylvania. He is a successful writer and professor living in Laramie, Wyoming. Even though he is two thousand miles away from Pittsburgh, he feels connected to his family there, and especially, his brother Robby, who serves a life sentence at the penitentiary.

John moved to Laramie to escape the ghetto. Laramie is a safe town with white people. He is a novelty because he is black. He married Judy, who is white. John understands how to get along in the world of white people, but he loses his identity a bit along the way. He is in an identity crisis to be black and know about black things such as basketball and the blues, but he must not make waves in the white world. He must play by white people's rules at all times. John struggles with this.

He feels a strong connection to Robby, whom he visits in prison. He writes this book with Robby. In the writing process, they discuss their lives and how they ended up on such different paths in life. John was motivated by hard work and education. John begins to understand who his brother is. He is a criminal, but Robby has evolved and developed. John sees his brother as courageous and heroic, especially that Robby never loses his real self in prison. John also learns that despite his success, like Robby, he makes mistakes. He cheats on his wife. John sees he and his brother are not that different in certain aspects of their lives.

Robby Wideman

Robby Wideman is a black man who serves a life sentence for felony murder in a Pittsburgh penitentiary. Robby grew up in the Homewood Avenue section of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, which is the ghetto. Robby was never a disciplined child. His parents could not control him. He always looked for the next party. He never wanted to work hard. He wanted to do everything in his own way, with the end goal being fun. Robby began his downward spiral into heroin and he began to sell it on the streets. Then he progressed into selling stolen televisions, which led to his imprisonment.

In a botched robbery attempt on November 15, 1975, one of Robby's crew shoots a criminal they try to steal from. The criminal dies. Robby flees the state and is on the run for three months. He ends up at his brother John's house in Laramie, Wyoming. Finally, he is captured and receives a life sentence.

Robby lives his life in prison. He grows and develops as a person. He converts to Muslim. He and John write this book together, in which Robby reveals a lot about his life and how he ends up in prison. He had the ghetto mentality of living for the moment.



Now he studies hard for his Associate's degree in engineering. He realizes that anything meaningful is worth working for. He graduates, but the program's funding is cut, so he is the first and last graduate. Robby grows discouraged and unmotivated because he sees prisoners' rights being taken away one by one.

Judy

Judy is John's white wife. She encourages John to take their children on prison visits to Robby.

Jamila

Jamila is John's daughter. Robby meets her as an infant and then she visits him in prison every year. Jamila has a beautiful spirit. As an older child, she remembers visits with Robby as happy times, but that Robby is not happy to be in prison. She loves her uncle Robby.

Garth

Garth is Robby's friend from the ghetto. Everyone loves Garth. He is a black man who dies of AIDS. Because he is black, the hospital does not take care of him and lets him die. Garth's death is where Robby's downward spiral into crime begins.

Mom

Mom is John and Robby's mother. She is distraught over Robby. She was a sweet and forgiving person, but since Robby's imprisonment, she lost that part of her. She is now angry and bitter.

Michael (Mike) Dukes

Michael Dukes is a childhood thug friend of Robby's. He was part of the botched robbery attempt and he shot the criminal. Michael also receives life in prison.

Cecil Rice

Cecil Rice is a childhood thug friend of Robby's. He was part of the botched robbery attempt. He turns himself in.



Stavros

Stavros is the white criminal who Robby and his crew try to steal from. The attempt is botched and Michael Dukes shoots and kills Stavros.

Leslie

Leslie is Robby's new girlfriend by the end of the book. She is half black and half white. She looks white. She has blond hair, green eyes and light skin. She has had a rough childhood and she is addicted to heroin. Robby helps her kick her drug habit. Leslie thinks Robby will be out of prison in a couple years, but he does not have the heart to tell her the truth.



Objects/Places

fence

A fence is a criminal who buys stolen goods in order to sell and turn a profit.

chinook

Chinook means snow-eater. It refers to high land that is windy and sunny, which blows away and melts snow at a very fast pace.

Laramie, Wyoming

Laramie, Wyoming is where John lives. It is a small town of white people in the West. Being black is a novelty there.

Pittsburgh

Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania is where John and Robby grew up. Robby and the rest of the family still live there. Their section of Pittsburgh is ghetto. The city is an old, coal mining town that is very hot in the summer.

UPenn

UPenn, or University of Pennsylvania, is an Ivy League school in Philadelphia where John received his undergraduate degree. When John went there, it was mostly rich, white students and he had trouble fitting into the white world.

Homewood Avenue

Homewood Avenue is the ghetto of Pittsburgh where John and Robby grew up. It is an old, coal mining ghetto. People drive like maniacs there. Only black people live there and it is on the wrong side of the tracks.

Western State Penitentiary

Western State Penitentiary is the prison in Pittsburgh where Robby resides. It is actually a decent-looking prison from the outside, but inside, the guards have all the power and the prisoners have no rights.



square

A square is a person who has academic and athletic goals. Robby refers to John as a square in high school because John was successful in academics and sports.

the hole

The hole is the Restricted Housing Unit in the penitentiary. It is a two-story, cement building with thirty-five six by eight cells. Prisoners are confined to these cells and endure inhumane treatment.

dope

Dope is heroin.



Themes

Escape

One of the major themes of *Brothers and Keepers* is escape. One of the brothers is always looking for an escape. When John was a child, he began his escape through good grades and sports. He earned a scholarship to the University of Pennsylvania, and thereby escaped the ghetto. Then he escaped again to Laramie, Wyoming, a safe town of white people in the West. John constantly looked for an escape growing up and he found it. But escape comes with consequences. At UPenn, John thought he escaped the ghetto, but he begins to have an identity crisis. The rich, white kids want him to be the best black, who knows about basketball and the blues. Yet at the same time, the whites expect him to stay in line and not cross any boundaries. John must watch everything he says and does. John struggles with this. Thus, escape for him comes with consequences. In Laramie, which is two thousand miles from Pittsburgh, John cannot escape his ghetto past. Nor can he escape that Robby is in prison. He must come face to face with both of these things.

Robby literally tries to escape by being a fugitive. But he cannot escape his mental state of his problems and the fact that he is an accessory to murder. When he goes to prison, he escapes every day by establishing a routine of working out and studying. This is the only way for him to escape the hell of prison. He uses this escape in a positive way. Yet he cannot escape his past and all the mistakes he made. He thinks about them constantly. He chooses to escape the prison mentality by becoming educated and developing as a human being, brother and father.

Freedom

John and Robby both want freedom in their individual ways. Freedom is in their blood line, since their grandfathers escape the slavery South. They thrive for freedom as well, but their versions of freedom are very different. John wants a freedom of safety and future goals. For example, he opts to go to UPenn for school and he chooses the freedom of education. He will educate himself to set himself free as a black man. He will be free of ghetto life. He achieves his goal of freedom and he moves to Laramie, Wyoming. Freedom for John means relocating to a safe, white town. He is free to be a professor, writer, home owner, husband and father. He even marries a white woman. Freedom means achieving what any white person can achieve.

Conversely, Robby wants freedom to live in the moment and have fun. He has no long term goals nor does he use education or sports to better himself. Freedom to Robby means taking the easy way out and achieving very short term goals. For example, he wants to be a drug dealer in Pittsburgh. When he is successful, he stays within the ghetto mentality of living for the moment. He blows all his money as soon as he makes it. He spends it on partying and drugs. His loftiest goal is to get a lot of cash and buy his



mother a nice house. But he will only do this via criminal means. Robby is free as a criminal in society, but when he is caught, he is not free anymore. Freedom to Robby means everything in prison, but he most likely, he will never achieve the type of freedom he desires.

Ritual

One of the major themes of *Brothers and Keepers* is ritual. Everyone has a ritual to keep them sane. John's rituals revolve around going to visit Robby in prison. When he first visits Robby, he brings his family. This ritual makes John feel secure and complete. When driving there, the family sees the wire fence and the guards. John recognizes this ritual as going into the prisoner world. When they are in the prison, they must go through a ritual of metal detectors and checking in. As John and Robby begin to write the book, John goes alone. Now he needs rituals to keep his sanity. He drives through the Homewood ghetto to the prison, so he can feel his past and the transition back into this type of life. He must ease into the prison atmosphere. On the visits, he has a ritual of buying snacks for Robby and their visits ending in silence. These rituals sustain John while he visits the prison.

Robby must adhere to rituals as well to keep his sanity in prison. Robby is not a product of the dangerous, prison mentality due to these rituals. He has a ritual of working out every day. He runs five to six miles in the courtyard. He does one thousand push-ups daily. He plays basketball. To feed his mind, he needs rituals too. He studies all day long for his Associate's degree. He converts to Muslim for a sense of inner peace and ritually studies the religion. There are also bad rituals that Robby must endure such as getting strip searched every time he has a visitor. He must adhere the prison's rules and regulations, which become harsher and harsher. Thus, prison rituals begin to overwhelm Robby and it is only his personal rituals that help him survive.



Style

Point of View

The main point of view for *Brothers and Keepers* is John's first person point of view. Through this perspective, the reader can see how John feels about his brother's situation and their lives in a close up and personal way. The reader gets an inside look into John's private thoughts about his visits in jail and what he thinks of his brother's dire situation. John represents the educated, black male point of view in the book. His voice stands as the authority. John reveals a lot about himself and his life through this perspective.

The story of Garth switches to a third person, omniscient point of view. This entire story is told from a distance as Garth's suffering from AIDS in the hospital and death is discussed. The reader can see Garth as a representation of the every black man because of this distant perspective. It is the only time the reader sees a third person, omniscient point of view in the book.

The other major perspective is Robby's first person point of view. He takes the reader into the depths of his life, including personal details of how he descended on a downward spiral into drugs and robbery. Robby's confessions are raw and brutally honest; for example, he confesses to stealing the family's television to pay for his heroin. Robby's unique perspective as a prisoner represents the uneducated, black male voice. He talks in a street jive, unlike John. This point of view allows the reader to see how a person turns into a criminal and prisoner.

Setting

The setting of *Brothers and Keepers* takes place mostly in Western State Penitentiary where Robby serves a life sentence. The prison is located on the outskirts of Pittsburgh. John must drive through the Homewood Avenue ghetto, his childhood home, to get to the prison. The prison itself is decent from the outside. It is not scary or dark. Once John enters the prison, he sees it is dirty (in the first few years of visiting there). There is a waiting room. There are metal detectors and guards who wield power. The visiting room is just tables and chairs and a vending machine. Prisoner's families come there to visit and they can only stay for three hours at a time.

The other setting of the book is Homewood Avenue. This is the ghetto section of Pittsburgh where John and Robby grew up. It is an old, coal mining ghetto. Only blacks live there. It is on the wrong side of the tracks and whites do not visit there. In John and Robby's flashbacks to the old neighborhood, they discuss that blacks had a hard time living there due to the white school system.

Laramie, Wyoming is another setting. John moved there years ago to escape Homewood. Laramie is a small, Western town. It is safe and white people live there.



John is a novelty in Laramie, since he is black. Robby also flees to Laramie for safety when he is a fugitive. John's house seems like a regular, nice house. Laramie is a far cry from the setting of the Homewood ghetto.

Language and Meaning

The language of *Brothers and Keepers* is divided into two distinct voices. The first voice is John's, the narrator's voice. He is an educated, black man. He graduated from Ivy League school UPenn. He is a successful writer and professor. When John speaks in the novel, the language reflects his higher education and his creative writing skills. He uses difficult vocabulary at times. He uses literary devices such as metaphor. His writing is formal and adheres to the complex rules of grammar. He writes in a grammatically perfect way. His voice is the authority due to his educated language. The meaning that comes from the language is that John is an upper class black male and a professional in society.

The second voice is Robby's. Robby's language is very street-like. He does not speak in full sentences. He uses incorrect grammar at times. He speaks in very simple sentences with very simple vocabulary. He uses slang from time to time; for example, saying "you dig" or using slang terms for criminal things such as "dope" for heroin. He sounds uneducated compared to John, but his language is very powerful. The reader sees that despite not being formally educated, Robby is very intelligent and the language reflects this fact. The meaning that comes from the language is that Robby is a black man from the ghetto who develops and changes in prison. In the Postscript, Robby's language for his graduation speech is very formal and sounds very educated. This shows that Robby has made a transition to an educated individual, who desperately wants to get out of prison and have a second chance at a new life.

Structure

This book is comprised of three major parts called: Visits, Our Time and Doing Time. Within Visits, there are no chapters or parts. Our Time is broken up into three parts of varying length. Doing Time is divided into three parts of varying length. In Our Time, the parts have numbers. In Doing Time, the parts have names that signify time period. The parts have short paragraphs that lack much description. The book follows the time line of roughly November 15, 1975 to 1982. The reader can easily follow the characters from one event to the next, but there are many flashbacks. Also, the reader hears the details of Robby's fateful night in pieces throughout the book.

The plot of the book is easy to understand. The book is about John's visits to his brother Robby, who has a life sentence in prison. The book follows how these two men turned out so differently.

The book's pace is normal and moves moderately. It is neither fast-paced or slow. It is the right speed for a modern day reader. It is a moderate read with some difficult vocabulary interspersed throughout the story. There is a sparse amount of swearing and

slang terms. The plot engrosses the reader into this prison world. The story shifts around as the visits make the brothers reveal details about their pasts and they have flashbacks. The book is a moderate read and entertains as a whole.



Quotes

"I had a distorted view of how I wanted things to be rather than how they really were or are."

Visits, p. 3

"I could never run fast enough or far enough. Robby was inside me."

Visits, p. 3

"You never know exactly when something begins."

Visits, p. 19

"Is freedom inextricably linked with both, running from and running to?"

Visits, p. 24

"Just two choices as far as I could tell: either/or. Rich or poor. White or black. Win or lose."

Visits, p. 27

"Prison is an experience of death by inches, minutes, hours, days."

Visits, p. 35

"Time's all you got in here."

Our Time, p. 91

"Prison is more perverse. Inside the walls nothing is certain, nothing can be taken for granted except the arbitrary exercise of absolute power."

Doing Time, II, p. 183

"We're going to talk, survive another day."

Doing Time, II, p. 191

"Beneath whatever else Robby says or does or thinks, the dream of freedom pulses."

Doing Time, II, p. 193

"Blackness connects me with my brother but also separates us absolutely."

Doing Time, II, p. 221-222

"The silence was a reminder of limits."

Doing Time, II, p. 237



Topics for Discussion

Where is the idea of escape prevalent in this book? Who needs to escape and who does not? How do the characters use escape? What are the consequences that come with escape?

How does the idea of freedom shape the two main characters? Is freedom really ever possible? For example, can you ever be free from your past? Are the characters free from their pasts? Which character do you think has achieved the most freedom?

What does this book say about prisoner rights? Do you agree with Robby and John about prisoner rights? What types of rights should prisoners have and what should they not have?

This is a male-focused book, but how are the female characters portrayed? Are they weak or strong? Who is the female character that relates best to John and Robby? How do females shape the brothers' lives?

Robby discusses the ghetto mentality of living for the moment. Does Robby get out of the ghetto mentality? How is it possible that two brothers from the same family have such different mentalities and outlooks on life? Do you see the ghetto mentality Robby speaks of in your town or neighborhood?

This is a memoir, yet the reader receives a lot of Robby's first person voice. Did you find this distracting or well-done? How did you feel about Robby's voice versus John's voice? What other points of view could John have included in this book; e.g., their mother's view, Michael Dukes' view, etc.?

There is a campaign to free Robby from prison. Do you believe he should be freed? Why or why not? If he is freed, what should he do with his freedom? Would you visit your sibling in prison and help her/him get free from prison?