Makes Me Wanna Holler: A Young Black Man in America Study Guide

Makes Me Wanna Holler: A Young Black Man in America by Nathan McCall

BOOKRAGS

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Plot Summary

The book opens with Nathan McCall and several of his friends, as teenagers, seeing a young white boy riding a bicycle and immediately attacking him, beating him severely. Each time McCall strikes the boy, he remembers some injustice against him, usually a slight based solely on race. When he realizes the boy isn't moving, he steps back and the group eventually stops beating the boy. McCall admits that for a moment he fears the young man dead, but then sees him breathing. Chapter two opens by stepping back in time to 1964 as McCall and his family arrive in a housing development called Cavalier Manor. The family has a new home among a development filled with new homes aimed at blacks. While the stated goal is to provide equal housing opportunities, the perceived goal is to keep the blacks confined to a specific neighborhood.

McCall grows up on the streets and early comes to despise his father's hard-working ethic and the fact that he seems to bow down before whites. He continually fights against a system that he believes destines young blacks - men and women - to failure. He soon finds himself involved in illegal activities of various kinds as a way to get money without having to bow himself before a white boss. When he and two friends rob a McDonalds, they are all caught and sentenced to jail. McCall, having gotten probation for a prior shooting of another black man, is sentenced to ten years. The message is clear - robbing the white manager of a fast food store is more serious than shooting and almost killing a black man.

While in prison, McCall takes stock of himself and those around him. When he's released, he has training in the printing field and quickly enrolls in college, taking up where he left off and struggling to finish a degree that enables him to go into journalism. He works for several papers, including the Washington Post.

Through it all, he fathers a child with his teenage girlfriend and has little connection or contact with the boy, who is named Monroe. He briefly marries and tries to include Islam in his life, but divorces and drops out of the religion. He then meets Debbie, a young professional, and they have two children though McCall feels that he was trapped into both fatherhood and marriage and the divorce is final just a few years later. He struggles to pay child support on all three children and to pay the mortgage on the home his wife retains. When he falls behind, he's briefly jailed.

Soon, Monroe wants to live with McCall and McCall finds himself worrying about Monroe, fearing that he will fall in with the wrong crowd or will simply be in the wrong place and will pay for that mistake with his life. He does what he can to protect his son, but comes to realize that he is no longer part of the street life and that he actually fears the power these destructive young black men hold in their hands. As McCall puts it, it makes him "wanna holler."

Part I, Chapters One through Five

Part I, Chapters One through Five Summary and Analysis

The book opens with Nathan McCall and several of his friends, as teenagers, seeing a young white boy riding a bicycle and immediately attacking him, beating him severely. Each time McCall strikes the boy, he remembers some injustice against him, usually a slight based solely on race. When he realizes the boy isn't moving, he steps back and the group eventually stops beating the boy. McCall admits that for a moment he fears the young man dead, but then sees him breathing. Chapter two opens by stepping back in time to 1964 as McCall and his family arrive in a housing development called Cavalier Manor. The family has a new home among a development filled with new homes aimed at blacks. While the stated goal is to provide equal housing opportunities, the perceived goal is to keep the blacks confined to a specific neighborhood. The wealthier side of Cavalier Manor is separated from a poor white neighborhood called Academy Park only by a highway and there are clashes between the two neighborhoods, one resulting in the death of a young black girl. In chapter three, McCall describes the natural understanding that occurs in the life of most regarding the desirability of race and comes to believe that "white people have more fun." He says that the neighborhood adults all take care and responsibility for the children, a fact he doesn't appreciate until many years later, and that getting in trouble at school meant that a teacher would inform parents when they met up at the grocery store or church.

McCall lives with two full brothers who are slightly older, Dwight and Billy, and the child of his mother and stepfather, Bryan Keith. His father soon takes in a child from a previous marriage, Junnie, who is also older than McCall. With the addition of McCall's grandmother, called Bampoose, the three-bedroom house is filled to capacity. His stepfather is in the Navy when they arrive and upon retirement, works full time at a ship yard and cares for lawns on weekends to support the family. All the boys who are old enough to help go with McCall's stepfather on his weekend jobs and McCall, though at first excited about the opportunity to make some spending money and understanding that the family needs the income, comes to hate the way his stepfather humbles himself before the white employers and to hate the way the whites expect that attitude. Bampoose works as a maid for a Jewish family and McCall admits to jealousy for the affection she apparently feels for the sons of that family.

In 1966, McCall briefly attends a white junior high school recently open to integration, but doesn't fit in and is harassed daily so that his parents move him back to the W.E. Waters, a junior high created near McCall's home with the likely intent of keeping the black children out of the white schools. Chapter four describes McCall's desperate attempts to fit in there as the new kid and introduces terms such as "getting clean" which means dressing to meet the coolest styles, "joning" which is a form of putting down and is something of a competition, and "pimping" which is a term for a specific

step-shuffle kind of walk. The clothes are important as are other aspects of style and those kids with the reputation for being coolest set the trends for the others.

Chapter five describes McCall and some friends being caught as they try to sneak out of school to play pool and their decision to sign the resulting suspension notes themselves and to spend the next two days pretending to go to school but hanging out together to play pool instead. McCall comes to realize that a teen is identified by the company he keeps and he "hangs" with a rough group accepted as popular. With this group, he's caught shoplifting and goes into the juvenile court system. Another time, he rides around with some boys in a stolen car, realizing only that he's having fun. They aren't caught that time.

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McCall says that his mother demands strict obedience and that everyone be clean and dressed well whenever the family goes out. He notes that if he or his brothers dared to act up, she would tell them not to act "like a nigger." He watches as dirty white children run all over a restaurant without chastisement and envies them their apparent freedom.

McCall describes his intense shyness and the fact that he doesn't fit in well in any group, constantly fearing that he'll do or say something that earns the contempt of his classmates. He comes to like a girl named Denise and she encourages him to attend a party with her, which he does. There the kids are all dancing "the grind" which is merely a way of moving to the rhythm of the music while holding the dance partner as close as possible. McCall says that once he took the plunge and danced with Denise, he learned that it was easy and he was seldom off the dance floor after that.

McCall notes that the parents of his own mother's generation felt their duties were to protect their children, clothe them and feed them. McCall says that he came to realize the reason for his decision to steal, which had nothing to do with need, was merely a rite of passage in that he was proving his ability to take from others. This begins a serious conflict between McCall and his stepfather, who punished freely and confined often. McCall's stepbrother, Junnie, soon leaves home to join the military. McCall, still only fourteen, runs away but soon returns, admitting to himself that he's not yet a man and taking a whipping from his father to "save face" for having come home.

Part I, Chapters Six through Ten

Part I, Chapters Six through Ten Summary and Analysis

In chapter six, McCall mentions that his mother began a relationship with the man who became his biological father in 1949 when she was thirteen and that by age eighteen, she was saddled with three boys, soon splitting up with her husband. His father is out of his life until McCall is an adult. He notes that, having had this experience, one might expect his mother to talk to the boys about sex, but she doesn't. The young men in the neighborhood, who are by now forming groups that have all the earmarks of gangs, often form "trains" which McCall says are the equivalent of gang bangs. At one point, McCall participates but admits to feeling dirty afterward. When he encounters a former girlfriend named Denise, he convinces her to go to bed with him but before they can consummate the act, several guys break into the room and a fight erupts. McCall loses sight of Denise and learns later that she was raped by several of the attackers. McCall has to face Denise's parents but doesn't testify because he is only fourteen. He says it's something of a wakeup call and that he'd never considered a "train" might be "run" on someone he cares about.

In chapter seven, McCall talks about the necessity to fight well and that once two young men "lock horns," they tend to respect each other. A nineteen-year-old named Horace Perry whips the fourteen-year-old McCall regularly, but McCall says that he knows Horace likes him and is toughening him for the life to come. He notes that fighting whites is a common occurrence as are small rumbles between groups of gangs, and that it's all "dress rehearsal" for their future, though they'll eventually give up fists in favor of guns. In chapter eight, McCall is beaten severely by a group called the "Cherry Boys," and learns that his friends can't be counted on to stand beside him when things are serious. He is taken to the hospital and begins carrying a gun, first a borrowed one and then a .25 pistol he purchases. In chapter nine, the ongoing feud with the Cherry Boys is interrupted by a new threat from "downtown."

One night, one of McCall's friends - a boy they call Bimbo - is shot in McCall's front yard. McCall admits to feeling love for his friends but quickly wipes away his tears and the emotion as a sign of weakness. Bimbo recovers but spends weeks in the hospital. Later, McCall and a friend drive by a house and shoot up a house. McCall waits for an arrest or news that someone was shot or killed, but hears nothing and soon brags about his exploits. During another clash, the police arrive and a boy called Prairie Dog is killed. There's immediately an outcry and the Black Panthers arrive in town with plans for a war. McCall says that he doesn't care about the Black Panthers but the idea of participating in the fighting attracts his attention. He is arrested at one point for having a sawed off shot gun, gives the names of enemies in return for his freedom, and is released.

There is hostility between McCall and his father which comes to a head in chapter ten as McCall lands a demeaning job on a construction site, eventually flares up at the supervisor and is fired. McCall says his parents are later told that the supervisor said if McCall's stepfather could afford to pick him up in a Cadillac, McCall didn't need a job anyway, but McCall's stepfather believes hard work is the only way to keep McCall off the street and that his lack of a job is evidence that he doesn't want to work. McCall says what he doesn't want to do is take the abuse of a white supervisor. He is soon looking for any opportunity to steal, going so far as to take gifts from a Christmas tree and coats from a party, and then successfully stealing an ice cream truck. He notes that his father, believing McCall to be innocent of the crime, backs up his alibi and cementing McCall's reputation.

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When McCall is beaten by the Cherry Boys, he comes to realize that those beating on him don't know when they've gone too far, injuring him for life or even killing him. It's interesting to note that this is a very similar thought to what McCall thinks when he himself is holding the life of another literally in his hands. He does write about the sense of power he gets from holding a gun. When a group of rivals are following him soon after the beating, he doesn't run as he would have without a gun. Instead, he turns and fires several times into the crowd, scattering them and stopping the pursuit - at least for the moment. When admits that upon his arrival at home he wants to tell his mother what happened in case the police come for him, but that he forces himself to go to bed.

One night at a party, there's a gunfight and McCall notes that he's too excited to be afraid during the fight. This seems to be another example of his sense of invincibility, typical of youth. When McCall and his friends are caught "downtown" one night, they have no weapons and are shot at. They lose sight of one of their own, a heavy youth named Bimbo, and fear him dead. When they go to Bimbo's house, they expect to be telling his mother that Bimbo was dead or dying but find him already there, wondering what kept them. It's interesting that sometimes McCall and his friends are angry when someone refuses to stand and fight and at other times, running is perfectly acceptable. The complexity of these relationships is not that much different than the relationships of typical teens, but it is interesting to see McCall put it down in black and white.

Part I, Chapters Eleven through Sixteen

Part I, Chapters Eleven through Sixteen Summary and Analysis

McCall and begins hustling people, then breaking into homes and taking all the items that could be easily fenced or sold. When McCall, who knows of a man shot by a homeowner while breaking into a home, believes he's encountered someone, he quits and turns to armed robbery, usually taking shoes, jackets and clothing from his victims as well. He sells what he doesn't want or what doesn't fit and wears anything that he likes. He soon notes that he's commanding the same level of respect from the youngsters as he had for those older than he just a few years before. It's at this time that several friends drop out of school, but he remains, saying it's for the proximity with the girls though he admits to enjoying literature. In chapter twelve, McCall examines the effect of movies such as Superfly on the young black men. He says the anti-drug and pro-black went past him without notice, but that everyone then imitated the style of the black hero. Even McCall's stepfather had one extravagance - his Cadillac.

In chapter thirteen, McCall meets a young girl named Elisabeth Miller. The two are named homecoming king and queen and McCall says he loves her to the point of ignoring his friends. His parents like her because she influences McCall to stay off the street. Then she announces she's pregnant. He promises to do what he has to in order to help but has no idea what that means.

In chapter fourteen, McCall becomes a father on July 19, 1973, and is soon accepted to three colleges but chooses to remain in Norfolk because his parents can't afford anything different and he feels the need to remain near Elisabeth and his son, Monroe. He makes the honor roll, finds at least two adults who are pulling for his success, but hates the fact that he's no longer among the most popular people on campus and soon goes to class high or seldom at all. When a man named Plaz - who had been involved in the rape of Denise - taunts Elisabeth, McCall takes action. As the two are about to fight, McCall pulls a gun and shots Plaz in the chest. At home, he tells his stepfather what he's done and turns himself in to the police. Plaz lives, McCall is released on his own recognizance and later sentenced to thirty days in jail for assault. The light sentence is, McCall notes, partly because the life of Plaz is worth so little and partly because McCall had done so well his first year of college.

In chapter fifteen, McCall briefly tries to make money selling drugs but admits that there are too many downfalls and he can't track the money well enough to make anything. He does drugs himself, becoming increasingly paranoid and watching the deteriorating relationships with Elisabeth, his family and then even the young men he calls friends but not really knowing what to do about it. As chapter sixteen opens, McCall and Liz plan a scam in which he goes into the store where she works, loads up his buggy and the clerks check out a single item, putting the receipt on his bag. They take orders from people who want things and the scam works so well that the store eventually closes.

McCall says he didn't view it that way at the time, but they had done away with a business that provided several jobs and hurt themselves in the process, meaning Liz had to find another job and McCall had to find another scam to run. He begins robbing businesses and one night, with two others, is caught immediately after robbing a McDonald's. He's sentenced to twelve years.

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McCall notes that he faces graduation with trepidation. He fears being forced out into the real world and applies to three colleges with the idea that they offer a reprieve from that. When a friend asks why he isn't happy at graduation, he admits to himself that he has nothing but a piece of paper, a pregnant girlfriend and a dim future in the "white man's world" ahead of him. He notes that after graduation, he's supposed to meet some friends and drives around for hours without finding the place. He cites that as an analogy of his life from this point.

McCall talks at some length about his attitude just before going to jail and during his time awaiting trial. When he is preparing to go out, his mother tells him not to go and warns him that he can't get into any trouble because he's currently on probation. McCall is relieved when his friends come to pick him up because it means he can escape his mother's warnings and a confrontation. It's interesting to note that he knows in his heart that she's right, even though he won't give in to her pleas. He also admits that when he and his friends go to rob the McDonald's he doesn't need the money because he'd just robbed a store a few nights earlier. Another interesting point is that when McCall is told he will likely be sentenced to five years, meaning he'll serve about eighteen months, he's almost relieved and admits that it will take that long for him to dry out and get off the drugs. With all these thoughts, it seems evident that McCall realizes already that he's headed in the wrong direction but that he isn't willing to make any change for himself. Instead, he seems to be waiting for someone else to force the change that he seems to desire.

Part II, Chapters 17 through 23

Part II, Chapters 17 through 23 Summary and Analysis

In chapter seventeen, McCall is taken to jail and notes that the way a man enters jail says a lot about him, including whether he's been in jail before. He meets a man here named Moses Battle who teaches McCall about playing chess. Moses, called Mo, says that chess is like life and McCall realizes that he's spent all his time trying to capture the pawns while thinking they were kings and playing without thinking ahead so that his only option is accepting the consequences. In chapter eighteen, McCall earns a spot in the prison library as a way to help pass time and discovers literature relevant to his life and situation. Specifically, he finds the book called "Native Son," and soon reads Malcolm X as well, realizing that there must be a higher power because he's had too many close calls. Toward that end, he turns toward religion.

In chapter nineteen, McCall asks Liz to marry him and she agrees but he is moved from the jail to prison in Southampton before the ceremony can take place. He describes meeting many old friends and that it felt briefly like a homecoming. There are many inmates who take obsessive pride in their cells, going so far as to decorate with plush towels, and McCall realizes this is a sign of the warped sense of self from being incarcerated too long. McCall is among the prisoners who do manual labor at the prison which operates, he says, like a plantation. He works at the farm chores and one day is ordered to load heavy bags. Having had enough, he refuses and is written up for failure to follow the order. He has time to consider his actions, realizing that he should have done so prior to acting, and when he receives no punishment, takes it as a sign from God that he needs to get his act together. He changes his attitude, begins working harder and takes on chores without being ordered to do so. He says that this is exactly what his stepfather had tried to prepare him for and that he finally understands that there is dignity in work, but that he can't find the words to tell his stepfather that he's figured this out. He soon works in the prison library where he has the opportunity to read all he wants.

In chapter twenty, Liz announces that she's seeing someone else and McCall says that it's the first time he's been hurt by a woman. He says he doesn't blame her and admits that he wouldn't have stayed around as long as she did, but he is depressed afterward. In chapter twenty-one, McCall writes about the sexual frustrations, including an incident in which an openly gay man who looks like a woman and calls himself Pauline is the object of jealousy between two rival gangs. McCall says he battles the sexual tension daily, hates a teacher because she keeps the hormones of every man in the place in turmoil simply by being near, and vows that when he's out of prison he'll never again hurt any woman.

In chapter twenty-two, McCall talks about his advancing knowledge under an inmate named Jim who had been in jail for more than a decade and realizes that the reason many blacks drop out of public school is that they feel the education has nothing to do

with them. In chapter twenty-three, McCall is granted a weekend furlough and goes home. He and Elisabeth spend a night together and realize that the feeling between them is gone. He visits briefly with friends, but doesn't remain long, wanting to distance himself from that scene.

In chapter twenty-three, McCall is transferred to a minimum security prison, St. Brides, where he is nearer home and can receive more visits and where he can learn printing as a trade. There, he encounters a former teacher named Mr. Gates and is ashamed to say he's in jail for armed robbery. He notes that he wants to tell Mr. Gates - one of the few teachers who had tried to reach the young men like McCall on their own level - that the lessons had made a difference though that doesn't seem to be the case.

McCall, introduced to some fundamentals of Muslim, realizes that he's lived his life without advancing and that he's not alone in that situation. Learning about the printing process, he comes to decide that he wants to start a career in either literature or journalism and eventually settles on the latter. He writes to Norfolk University, explains his situation and the fact that he's looking to make a new start, and is urged to submit an entry for a contest. He wins a year's tuition and in February, 1978, is released on parole.

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Time in jail crawls for McCall and he notes that the one week he is relieved for visiting hours to end is the week that his grandmother, Bampoose, comes to visit. He says that he - like most of the others in his family - wanted desperately to retain her love and hates for her to see him in jail. In addition, he can see that she's grown frailer in the time of his incarceration and worries that she won't live to see his release.

As McCall begins to consider situations and his own actions and reactions, he comes to realize that he has to make some decisions. He admits to being drawn to the gangs that form in the prison and wants to be affiliated with a gang for protection. He also wants to move away from that scene and so begins spending time with a Christian fellowship. He does stop one day and wonder what he would do if his friends were in a fight - whether he would back them up or walk away. He seems to realize that the right thing is to walk away but also fears that will leave him standing alone to face any trouble on his own. At this point, McCall seems to be facing a major decision and trying to avoid making a conscious decision.

When McCall gets a weekend furlough, he visits friends only briefly and remembers that they haven't stayed in touch with him. He notes that when another of their group had been in jail, McCall had written to him regularly. He seems hurt that these friends didn't remain in contact.

McCall is given a piece of advice by his prison print shop instructor - to find a "comfortable" work position. McCall says that there's no such thing and that if he waits to find it, he'll be unemployed. It seems that, though he's coming around to the idea that he can make something of his life, he remains so rooted in the idea that whites are

going to keep him from success that he can't imagine that he will make something of it unless he avoids whites altogether. He has some distance to travel in reaching the ultimate goal of believing in himself but seems to have made great strides in that direction by his parole date. It's also interesting that he touches briefly on an introduction to the Muslim religion and says it appeals to him but does not, at this point, claim a dedication to the religion.

Part III, Chapters 24 through 29

Part III, Chapters 24 through 29 Summary and Analysis

Chapter twenty-four begins with McCall arriving at home where he takes great pleasure in small things, such as being able to go for a walk late at night and locking the bathroom door for a long soak in the tub. He makes arrangements to see Monroe but notes that he feels awkward around the boy. As McCall is trying to get his life together, he learns that Scobe - a major part of McCall's teenage years - has a job, wife and kids but shoots another man in the back after an altercation over a basketball game. McCall searches unsuccessfully for a job while dealing with a probation officer who is constantly telling him to get a job and one day realizes that there's a convenience store that would be the perfect target for a robbery. He thinks about it for some time before driving away. Chapter twenty-five begins with McCall entering college in 1978. He works on the school newspaper and is saddened when he learns that Scobe - diagnosed with a terminal illness - kills himself and his wife. In chapter twenty-six, McCall comes to learn about Islam from a college professor and feels a connection with the principles, including the fact that blacks must exact change if they expect change. McCall joins the American Muslim Mission but admits that it's largely because of the influence of one professor. He is by now seeing a young woman named Yvette and they are pressured by the Muslims to marry. Yvette is soon having trouble at work and McCall realizes that it's because she has an inferiority complex and isn't willing to stand up for herself. He also comes to realize that some of the Muslim practices - including that women hold inferior positions in the home - are not what he believes to be right. He and Yvette soon divorce and McCall drops out of the religious meetings.

In chapter twenty-seven, McCall graduates and increases the search for a job. He notes that being black is the first strike against him and that having a felony record is the second - usually enough to prevent potential employers from hiring him. He likens the interview process to a slave on the auction block and hates the process. In chapter twenty-eight, McCall begins work as a reporter at the Virginia Pilot-Ledger Star in 1981, and the editor confides that his prison record made the decision to hire "close." McCall's parents are excited about his job and his mother tells everyone she knows, either in person or by phone. In chapter twenty-eight, McCall works at an array of assignments, including the court beat where he often bumps into friends from the neighborhood. McCall knows it's just a matter of time before someone alerts his co-workers to the facts of his past and asks for a transfer, saying he's ready to take on something else.

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As McCall is dealing with the challenges of starting his life all over, he's invited to a night on the town by an old friend. He notes that it's difficult to turn down such an offer and that men who come out of jail and quickly turn over a new leaf are usually believed to have turned in friends in return for getting out of jail. He also admits that, prior to his

own stint in jail, he would have been suspicious of a person who exhibited changed attitudes. These thoughts weigh heavily on his mind, but only briefly. He quickly realizes that he can't worry about what other people think and must choose the right thing to do. He also comes to realize why so many return to jail within the first five years of freedom and admits to thinking sometimes about the meals, housing and job provided to inmates.

McCall is one of few blacks who work at the Portsmouth newspaper and he notes that he's constantly stressed. He obviously doesn't trust anyone there, citing the race difference, and turns down all offers at friendship. He at least partly fears that his co-workers will find out about his prison record and believes those questions and comments that would never be uttered during the day could come out in social settings. It seems that McCall could be passing up genuine offers of friendship because he can't yet trust that there are whites who are not his enemy. His one exception seems to be the editor who, McCall says, seems to realize the years of oppression, the role of the white race in that oppression, and to be trying to make up for some of it. He attends a company party at the urging of co-workers who say it's necessary that he be there, remains uncomfortable all evening, and can't believe there's no music. While McCall says that he remains apart from his co-workers, he does relate an incident once in which he and a court official are going to lunch together when McCall encounters a friend who makes a comment about McCall's own prison term. McCall doesn't elaborate on the lunch date or say whether the official was a casual acquaintance. He also doesn't mention the official's race.

Part III, Chapters 30 through 34

Part III, Chapters 30 through 34 Summary and Analysis

In chapter thirty, McCall deals with his feelings for his father, J.L., who McCall had not seen for more than twenty years. McCall's brother, Billy, finds J.L. and it's through this contact that the two meet. McCall recounts an incident in which his father was to have picked up all three boys when they were very young to shop for school clothes, but never arrived. McCall now spends some time with his father but when his father once tells McCall to call when he wants to go fishing, McCall decides that he wants his father to be the one who calls. They are never again in contact, a situation McCall calls "pitiful." Meanwhile, McCall finally begins to connect with Monroe but Liz moves with him to California. In chapter thirty-one, McCall begins dating a girl named Debbie who announces after just a few months that she's pregnant. He has a job offer in Atlanta and has finished his probation, and considers pressing her to have an abortion. While trying to make that decision, he's instructed to cover an abortion protest and realizes that he doesn't believe it to be right. His parents are upset but Debbie's parents are happy for her. In chapter thirty-two, McCall becomes comfortable in his job though he occasionally encounters dangerous situations, such as the time he's told by a sheriff that he needs to be out of town by dark. He comes to know an undercover cop named Detective Davies who is "pure street," and the two men hit it off. Meanwhile, Debbie is preparing for the birth of their son and McCall fears that he's bringing another black into a world of pain and strife. He notes that he and Debbie aren't getting along and that he wants to leave, but doesn't want to add to the stereotype of black men having children and leaving them for their mothers to raise. He also doesn't want to remain with Debbie. Debbie chooses the name Ian and McCall picks the middle name, Bakari.

In chapter thirty-three, McCall continues to face the trials of fitting in at work and is one day bawled out by a black civil rights leader named Hosea Williams who accuses McCall of being an "Uncle Tom." McCall objects but is overridden and humiliated by Williams. He admits that his paper has a double standard for murders of blacks and whites. He gives the keynote address at his tenth year high school reunion and attends the funeral of his grandmother, Bampoose. In chapter thirty-four, McCall moves out and begins dating, but can't make a commitment with anyone. Wondering if he should give the relationship with Debbie another try, he spends a few nights with her and she announces that she's again pregnant. She gives birth to a girl despite McCall's pressure to abort, and he immediately falls in love with his daughter, connecting in a way he didn't with his sons. He eventually gives in to pressure from Debbie to marry when she says she plans to move back to Norfolk, fearing the separation from the children. McCall says some try to talk him out of the decision and he feels he's sold out, but that it "legitimizes things" for himself and the children.

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McCall says that he is super-sensitive about issues related to race. For example, he never dances in front of white people and when having lunch with a white person, never orders chicken - issues that are racially defined. He says that he is very careful but then is sent to cover a watermelon-eating contest in which some young black boys enter and win. McCall says that he hates the situation, hates the fact that the young black boys would be laughed at, that their parents would allow it to happen, that the whites would laugh, and hates the fact that he's become so racially sensitive that he can't enjoy the assignment.

McCall says that there's a clash over the naming of his first child when he tells Debbie's mother that he's chosen an African name. She tells him there's no need for that "African shit," which angers McCall. He says he's glad when the women begin choosing unusual names for their children because those at least are not the names of slavery.

Part III, Chapters 35 through 39

Part III, Chapters 35 through 39 Summary and Analysis

In chapter thirty-five, McCall continues his quest to retain his sanity while fitting into the mainstream, gets a personal look at the political scene and the blacks who have that kind of power - sometimes turning it to help the whites who had opposed their candidacy - and becomes involved in an Atlanta subculture of "trendy" blacks who are intelligent but finding ways to live outside the mainstream. In chapter thirty-six, McCall has a visit from an old friend named Stanley who wants to escape the drug scene in Norfolk but is disgusted with the low pay for welders and begins dealing in cocaine. McCall plans to get in on the business but gets high once on cocaine and realizes that it's a huge step backwards and leaves.

In chapter thirty-seven, McCall meets and befriends a white journalist named Danny Baum and his girlfriend, Meg Knox. Danny and Meg soon go to Africa, a trip McCall is jealous of. In chapter thirty-eight, McCall loosens up around some of the white co-workers and discovers his life is better for the change. There's a change in the newspaper and McCall is promoted to city hall bureau chief. McCall and Debbie continue to drift apart though McCall remains in the marriage for the sake of the children and works at getting them off to a good start in life, specifically with regard to their race. In chapter thirty-nine, McCall interviews for a job with the Washington Post and decides not to mention his prison record. When it's discovered, he's confronted about it and takes his name from consideration. He then attends a program about minorities and realizes that his attitudes have been self-centered, that minority refers to more than just black people, and that others are just as angry as he over attitudes of some media companies regarding minorities. At one point, he decides to tell his current boss, Mr. Kovach, about his prison record. The information is simply accepted with an admonishment that McCall is to let Kovach know if anyone gives him "shit" about it.

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McCall and Danny become friends by a matter of choice, but also because their desks are near each other and Danny has a driving curiosity about race. Being Jewish, he's had his share of racial slurs and the two men take at length about the racial system and what can - and should - be done to lessen the gap. It's Danny who says that McCall is carrying around too much hatred because of racism and that he has unfairly judged all whites by the actions of others. He suggests that McCall should get to know some who have tried to befriend him and McCall admits that Danny is right in that some have been friendly and that he hasn't given them a chance.

Part III, Chapters 40 through 44

Part III, Chapters 40 through 44 Summary and Analysis

In chapter forty, McCall talks of the impact of drugs on the young black men and the number of them strung out, in prison or in rehab. His brother, Dwight, continues to be a drain on his parents and his mother refuses to give up on him, always bailing him out with money or food though McCall tells her that Dwight will never change as long as he knows he has someone waiting with a helping hand. One day, McCall passes a car and the driver challenges him to a fight when they stop at a light. McCall notes that he's ready to fight though he knows that the driver is likely armed. When the juvenile attitude that's holding onto him, he honks his horn at the other driver - who has already pulled over and stopped - and drives on by.

In chapter forty-one, McCall and Debbie go through a horrific divorce and he's ordered to pay the mortgage on the house that Debbie will live in and five hundred dollars a month for child support, a total of twelve hundred dollars a month. He can't keep up and the two are constantly fighting with McCall losing all control of the children as well and often finding Debbie gone when it's his turn for visitation. He then receives a call from the Washington Post for another interview.

In chapter forty-two, McCall works in Washington, D.C., and when he gets a chance to return to Atlanta to visit the children, is arrested for non-payment of child support. He's held until parents and friends can raise the two thousand dollars for bail. In chapter forty-three, McCall encounters a woman named Carolyn who had claimed to have had a daughter by McCall. The girl, now eighteen, soon has a child of her own. McCall visits them in the hospital, noting that the father is nowhere around. When a nurse calls McCall "grandfather," he realizes that this is another cycle of his own life. Monroe comes to live with McCall and graduates high school. Chapter forty-four concludes with McCall running down the fate of some of his former friends and his fear for the blacks in general.

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McCall admits that while Monroe is living with him, he fears that some black drug dealer or user will walk demand Monroe's money or clothes and then will simply kill him for not reason. It's this that makes McCall first realize that he's become afraid of the race and class of people he was such an integral part of just more than a decade earlier. He also talks about the fact that he himself is no longer at home in all those situations. One day, he stops at a convenience store to talk to some men he knows. He says that he immediately senses danger from the young men he doesn't know and realizes that they, looking ahead at the system of racial bias, feel they have nothing to lose. McCall ends with the statement that "It make me wanna holler."

Characters

Nathan McCall

Author of "Makes Me Wanna Holler," McCall is a child when his mother and stepfather move the family to Portsmouth, Virginia, in 1964. McCall is the youngest of three sons of his mother and lives with his stepfather's son by a previous marriage. He readily admits to being the most rebellious of the boys and says that he refuses to obey the rules, willingly taking his punishments for that refusal. He seems bright but realizes in junior high that carrying school books and making the honor roll is not a trait that will endear him to his friends.

McCall soon becomes very street wise and finds himself in trouble, initially for shoplifting and later for shooting another young man in the back and finally for robbing a McDonalds. The time in prison is good for him in that it provides a way for him to turn his life around. McCall will continue to struggle throughout his life for a way to keep his identity while living a productive life in what he calls "mainstream" society where whites rule. He seems to learn the most from people who talk to him, though those people typically have to earn his respect before he is open to them. There comes a point where McCall admits that he no longer has what it takes to remain on the street and that he fears the young black men who act like he acted at their age.

Bonnie Alvin

McCall's stepfather and the man who raised McCall and his two brothers, in addition to one stepbrother - Alvin's biological son - and McCall's half brother who is the result of the union between Alvin and McCall's mother. Alvin is a military man and believes in working hard. He demands the same from McCall and his brothers and it's on this point that McCall and Alvin often clash. McCall initially looks forward to working with Alvin in order to make some spending money but later hates it and cites the fact that McCall acts subservient to the white people who hire him for yard work. McCall criticizes Alvin for this aspect of his temperament without seeming to realize that Alvin is simply doing what he believes is best for his family.

When McCall is talking about his biological father, he notes that his father went for years without seeing McCall or his brothers, and that in all the ways that count, Alvin was his father. Though McCall and Alvin clash often when McCall is growing up, McCall realizes while in prison that Alvin had been preparing him for life. Alvin has a son of his own before marriage to McCall's mother and fathers one son with McCall's mother. While McCall doesn't go into great detail, it seems that the boys are treated fairly by Alvin with no difference made between his biological sons and stepsons. Both Alvin and McCall's mother are very strict on their youngest child and McCall admits that it's likely because they saw McCall go astray.

Denise

The girl who is McCall's girlfriend in the sixth grade. They encounter each other again several years later and Denise agrees to allow McCall to be her "first." While they are in bed together, a group of young men attack McCall and then several of them rape Denise, prompting charges. McCall notes that this is a sign to him that he's on a bad track, but is unable to change his course.

Debbie

A young woman McCall meets soon after divorcing Yvette. Debbie desperately wants children and when she becomes pregnant, McCall feels that she's done so on purpose and that he's trapped into marriage and fatherhood. They divorce after only a few years.

Horace Perry

A nineteen-year-old boy when McCall is fourteen, Horace never sees McCall without attacking him and forcing him to fight. McCall notes that Horace makes him eat dirt and grass at the end of the fight, invariably ending with McCall being beaten. McCall says that he eats less when he fights hardest and that he always meets the challenges. Despite the fact that he's fighting Horace every time they meet, McCall notes that Horace actually likes him and that he continues to challenge him to fight in order to toughen McCall for the life to come. McCall says that later, they meet on equal footing and respect each other.

Elisabeth Miller

Elisabeth, called Liz, meets up with McCall as a senior in high school and they soon begin spending a great deal of time together. McCall admits that he loves her and goes so far as to spend time with her even though it means his friends taunt him about his soft emotions. When Elisabeth announces that she's pregnant and that the child is McCall's, he promises to do what he can to help but it turns out to be very little. She gives birth to a son, Monroe, in July of 1973.

Plaz

Plaz is a few years older than McCall and the two clash on several occasions. Plaz is among those who rape McCall's girlfriend, Denise. When Plaz taunts Elisabeth Miller, the mother of McCall's child, McCall is spurred to action and as the two are about to fight, McCall pulls a gun and shoots Plaz at point blank range. He lives and McCall later pleads guilty to assault, pleading self-defense, and serves his jail time on weekends.

Moses Battle

Called "Mo," he is a junkie who is in jail when McCall is convicted of robbing the McDonald's. It's Moses who teaches McCall to play chess, teaching him to view it as he should be viewing his life. Through this teaching, McCall comes to realize that, like a poor chess player, he had been simply barreling into situations without considering the consequences ahead of time, and that he'd been focused on the pawns thinking that they were kings. McCall notes that Mo is very smart but that he admits that he can't give up the heroin for anyone or anything, and that he seems to relish the times in jail as opportunities to get briefly off the drug and to think on a deeper level.

Jim

A man McCall meets while in prison at Southampton. The two hold deep conversations on an array of topics and it's Jim who introduces McCall to the concept that black men in jail can't be "rehabilitated" because they were never "habilitated" in the first place, prompting McCall to look up the word, "habilitated," discovering it means "qualified." He comes to believe Jim's words and the idea seems to spur him into action as he prepares for his own release, some months after Jim's.

Yvette

The young woman McCall marries soon after his release from prison. She is a college graduate with an accounting degree and is constantly beaten down by her white boss. McCall urges her to stand up for herself but she doesn't and he believes her lack of self-esteem and self-confidence derive from a feeling of inadequacy directly associated with her dark skin. They marry after receiving pressure from the members of the Muslim Mission to which they belong and are divorced a short time later.

Sadie Benton

Otherwise known as "Bampoose," she is McCall's grandmother and he notes that she is one of the constants in his life. She lives with McCall while he is a child and at one point he expresses jealousy that she is working as a maid and caring for two young Jewish boys, giving her attention to them when she should be his alone. She dies at sixty-eight and McCall says that she hadn't wanted much of life and had, it seemed, lived little.

Objects/Places

Cavalier Manor

The newly-constructed neighborhood where McCall and his family live, having moved there in 1964.

Academy Park

The white neighborhood that is separated from Cavalier Manor only by a highway.

W.E.Waters Junior High

The school McCall attends after having attended a white school for a brief period of time.

Woodrow Wilson High School

Where McCall attends high school.

McDonalds

The business McCall and two others rob and for which McCall is sentenced to prison time.

Southampton

Where McCall is sent to serve his prison sentence.

10-63-84

McCall's prison number.

St. Brides

A minimum security prison that offers printing as a trade and the facility to which McCall is transferred as his parole date draws nearer.

Virginia Pilot-Ledger Star

The Portsmouth, Virginia, newspaper where McCall interns while in college and works after graduation.

Atlanta

Where McCall lives and works as a journalist while married to Debbie.

Washington, D.C.

Where McCall moves in order to take a job at the Washington Post.

Themes

Racism

Racism is an overriding theme with McCall spending the majority of his life seeking a way to fit in to the "mainstream" in which whites hold most of the supervisory positions. McCall begins dealing with the racism as a child and it's made clear when a girl in his neighborhood is killed during a drive-by shooting. As McCall ages and shows scholastic potential, he's enrolled in a traditionally white junior high with the idea that he can get a better education. Instead, he's tormented by the whites until his mother realizes the extent of the torture and puts him in a predominantly black school.

One of the most incredible points of racism pointed out by McCall is his sentence for shooting Plaz, another young black boy who has disrespected McCall's girlfriend and prompted a fight. When McCall confronts the boy and shoots him at point blank range, he's arrested but the judge, citing the fact that McCall is a college student, allows him to serve out his thirty-day jail sentence on weekends. When McCall is the one holding the gun during a McDonald's robbery in which no one was hurt, he's sentenced to years in prison. He says that at that moment the message was clear - the life of a young black man was worth little and deserved little punishment, but McCall had made the fatal mistake of pointing a gun at a white man and was punished severely though he hadn't pulled the trigger.

Self Respect

While McCall and others in the story battle against the racism, they are waged in another battle - that of the quest for self respect. McCall comes to realize that even when a black person succeeds, he or she can easily be pushed back to the point of self-doubt, which is really just another level of the lack of self respect so common among the blacks. McCall notes that those who have succeeded and who seem to be doing well sometimes still lack the self respect necessary to maintain jobs, families and a healthy self. When McCall first holds his young daughter, he's immediately deeply in love with her and feels a sense of responsibility to lead her into adulthood as a self-respecting, strong black woman. McCall, remembering his own youth and the way he and his friends treated black women, knows that his daughter has a hard life ahead of her unless he can protect her by instilling that self respect.

McCall also writes about the fact that the young black professionals can easily be made to doubt themselves. He cites a co-worker who was criticized for having an error in a story and that the immediate reaction is that it's a black doing sloppy work. While that's not the case, McCall points out that the lack of respect becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy and the blacks become less sure of themselves when faced with that situation.

The Power of Stereotypes

McCall, having fathered two children with Debbie and spent several years with her, says that he wants out. He seems set on leaving Debbie except for the fact that he knows that a black man walking out on their children is an accepted stereotype and that he doesn't want to be branded another of the same caliber. It seems that McCall may be overly concerned with stereotypes. For example, he admits that as a young journalist in Atlanta, he avoids ordering chicken when out with anyone at a restaurant because blacks liking chicken is a stereotype. He notes that he's been very careful about such situations and then finds himself covering a watermelon-eating contest.

While stereotypes concerning blacks are a major focus, McCall also talks about his own stereotypes. For example, he says that he never thinks about the fact that the term "minority" includes races other than blacks. He also writes about his tendency to avoid white co-workers, constantly making excuses why he can't have a drink with them after work or join them for any social event. When he meets Danny Baum, he's amazed to discover that Danny is as clueless about blacks as McCall is about whites, and it's Danny who tells McCall that he should give up wasting so much time on anger.

Style

Perspective

The book is written in first person with a view limited to that of McCall. Because this is largely an autobiographical work, the first person limited view is the only real option open to the author. It should be noted that the first-person account of a story such as the one McCall writes is often sanitized. For example, a person who writes about a life of crime may very well tone down the crimes or omit specific events altogether. It's also important for the reader to remember that the events and emotions described by McCall are presented entirely from his point of view, meaning others involved may have given a different account of the events. McCall seems to hold back little, but it's left to the reader to determine the depth of the truth and to decide whether it's likely that McCall was completely honest.

The story includes dialogue which is presented as direct quotes, but the reader should understand that these cannot be direct quotes and that McCall has used journalistic license in presenting them as such. It's again left to the reader to determine whether McCall's memories are accurate or whether they could have been altered by perception and passage of time.

Tone

The story is written in a somber tone with periods of darkness and hopelessness. There are periods in which McCall and those around him have raised spirits and hope, but the majority of the story reflects the struggles and ideals of a black man fighting against a racist system. One of the more hopeful points of the story comes when McCall, having fallen behind in his child support payments, is arrested in Atlanta and spends several days in jail there. He could easily have thrown up his hands at that point and given up, but chooses to remain on the career path and to do his best.

The story consists largely of narration with periods of dialogue. The dialogue is necessary to point out the depth of the street language so familiar to McCall as a young man. That dialogue seems reasonable for the situation. It should be noted that there are passages that contain foul language but those, too, seem reasonable for the circumstances and the people talking.

Structure

The book is divided into three parts and a total of forty-four chapters. Part One has chapters one through sixteen; Part Two has chapters seventeen through twenty-three; and Part Three has chapters twenty-four through forty-four. The chapters are both numbered and named with the names offering some clue as to the contents of that chapter. With only a few exceptions, the chapters range in length from six to twelve

pages. Examples of titles are Cavalier Manor, Nigger, Respect, Power, War, Work, Superfly, Busted, Sex, Freedom, A Measure of Peace, The Past, The Brothers and The Choices. The book opens with the middle of the story that include details of McCall and his friends seriously beating a white boy who had done nothing but dare to ride through their neighborhood on a bicycle. Chapter Two then goes back several years to McCall's arrival at Cavalier Manor with his family. After that point, the book progresses roughly in chronological order though there are occasional flashbacks presented through McCall's memories.

Quotes

"I waited in that room, crying and wishing I could take back the moments before I was caught. It was a feeling I would come to recognize." Chapter 5, Page 37

"I was struck with the sense that I was deeply involved in some things that were over my head. At the same time, I couldn't conceive of altering my course or turning back." Chapter 6, Page 52

"As I got older, though, fairness, honor, and all that other virtuous bullshit went right out the window. The object was to win and to do serious damage, like Dwan Moore did to Shane." Chapter 7, Page 59

"A two-parent home is no better off than a single-parent one if the father is fucked up in the head and beaten down. There's nothing more dangerous and destructive in a household than a frustrated, oppressed black man." Chapter 10, Page 87

"She pulled me aside one day after class and said, 'You know, you really are a bright student, and I think you could make something of yourself if you took that dangling earring out of your ear, buckled your belt, and applied yourself more.' She might as well have been speaking French." Chapter 11, Page 97

"I wore a long, blue, crushed-velvet maxi overcoat, white shoes, and blue-and-white elephant-leg pants. I carried a wine flask over my shoulder, and although it was dark outside, I sported sunshades. I'd smoked reefer and drunk wine at Shell Shock's house before the game, and was flying high as a kite by the time I reached the Churchland Stadium. If Barnum and Bailey had seen me that night, they would have kidnapped me for their circus." Chapter 13, Page 110

"The comfort of familiar faces briefly made me forget the circumstances that had brought us together. For a minute there, it felt like homecoming at Cavalier Manor." McCall upon arriving at Southampton prison, Chapter 19, Page 170

"Down on all fours in rows of vegetables, plucking up food in the sweltering heat, I couldn't help wondering what it must have been like for my ancestors to toil like this with no hope of being freed. Always nearby was the symbolic 'ol mass,' a white, shotgun-toting prison guard." Chapter 19, Page 175

"There are so many Mr. Browns out there who do their damnedest to teach the Nathan McCalls that there is a right way and a wrong way, a good way and a bad. And there are far too many Nathan McCalls who simply must learn the hard way." Chapter 23, Page 217

"I knew from the get-go that the crossover into the white mainstream would be very risky. I knew I'd be extremely uncomfortable entering a world that had never welcomed

me. But never, not in my wildest nightmares, did I imagine that going inside the system would make me an outsider, uneasy with the folks I knew best." Chapter 23, Page 265

"I also thought - 'hoped' is a better word - that maybe Debbie had gotten it wrong. Maybe her body was just messing with her head. Maybe her body was doing one of those weird things that women's bodies do every now and then where their period pulls a no-show for a couple of weeks and then arrives after nearly giving everybody a fucking heart attack." Chapter 31, Page 283

"In Atlanta, for the first time in my life, I saw my people seriously running things, controlling something other than the penitentiary or the rear-end lever of a garbage truck." Chapter 32, Page 286

"Race played a key role in how I viewed my domestic situation, how I responded to Debbie's actions, and, ultimately, how I got myself into deeper doo-doo while trying to clean up my act. I was dogged by racial stereotypes about irresponsible black baby-makers. I didn't want others, black or white, to see me that way." Chapter 34, Page 311

"The councilman, Bill Campbell, smiled and said something I'll never forget: 'Nathan, there are two things you never want to see being made: laws and sausage.' I'd never seen sausage made, but the process of lawmaking was sometimes nauseating." Chapter 35, Page 323

"He struggled because in school he hadn't been taught diddly about blacks. Even though he saw us every day and interacted with us, we were puzzles to him. That showed me that the education system in this country has failed white people more than it's failed anybody else." Chapter 37, Page 347

Topics for Discussion

Who does McCall live with as a child? Where is his father? mother? How many siblings does he have? What are his attitudes about his family and the family's living situation?

Who are the "Cherry Boys" and how does McCall become involved with them? How does his involvement escalate his actions of violence?

Who is Denise? Yvette? Debbie? Compare the three women and their influence on McCall.

What is McCall's attitude about his stepfather's lawn working job? How do these attitudes change over the course of time? Why?

Why does McCall shoot Plaz? What is the sentence McCall receives for shooting Plaz? What is the sentence he receives for robbing the McDonalds? What does McCall come to believe is true because of the disparity of the two sentences?

Who is Moses Battle? Jim? Mr. Gates? Scobe? Danny Baum? J.L.? What are the things he learns from these people?

How does McCall come to be a journalist? What challenges does he face in his quest for a job? What are the challenges McCall faces when working in the newsrooms? How does he come to deal with them?

McCall says that he'd never expected there would come a time when he was uncomfortable with his own "people," the blacks of the streets because of his position in the mainstream. What does he mean by this statement? List an example of a time when this proved true.