

The Rock and the River Study Guide

The Rock and the River by Kekla Magoon

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Plot Summary

Sam Childs is the thirteen-year-old son of civil rights activist Roland Childs. Sam's mother, Marjorie, stands next to her husband as he leads crowds of demonstrators in the methods of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Sam's older brother, Steven, is known as Stick to Sam. The boys are close and, during one large demonstration, plan to slip away from the crowd. Before they can make their escape, there's a fight and Stick steps in. He's hurt and Sam manages to get him to the hospital where their parents catch up with them. At home, Roland is furious that the boys put themselves in a position to be involved in a fight. The next morning, Dr. King's wife calls to check on them and Sam spends the day fielding questions from his classmates at school.

One day Stick's friend Bucky arrives at their house. He and his family have been kicked out of their apartment and Bucky sometimes sleeps at the Childs' house. One particular evening, Bucky has information about the Black Panthers. Sam soon discovers through his girlfriend that Stick is involved in the Black Panthers. Stick is soon working with the group, seeking to create a better life for those in the black community. One of the efforts is a feeding program that provides breakfast for the kids who would otherwise be hungry. Stick is also excited about plans for a free medical clinic.

Stick leaves home because of arguments with his parents but one day he slips back in and stashes a gun at the house. Sam is furious and hides the gun, then refuses to give it back to Stick. Sam is trying to figure out what to do with the gun one day just before a demonstration when his father enters the room. In an effort to hide the gun, he slips it into his waistband and winds up leaving the house like that. At the demonstration, a fight erupts and Stick becomes involved. Sam rushes to Stick's side and waves the gun in the face of Stick's attacker, forcing the man to let go. Stick and other members of the Black Panthers rush Sam away from the scene. Once in Leroy's car, the gun is put in the glove compartment.

Meanwhile, Stick's friend Bucky is jailed for running into a police officer. Sam witnesses the arrest which is brutal and decides to testify for Bucky. Bucky is released and Sam goes with Stick and Raheem to pick him up. They are in the car on the way back to the neighborhood when the police pull them over. Stick reaches into the glove compartment for the car's registration and the police, seeing the gun there, shoot and kill Stick then arrest the others. Sam's father comes to the police station and picks him up.

At the funeral, Raheem announces that he has the name and address of the officer who killed Stick. He and Sam leave the funeral, planning to avenge Stick's death. On the way, Sam sees the building that's been designated for the free clinic and realizes revenge isn't the way to honor his brother's memory. Sam, who has always been torn between his father's non-violence teachings and the idea that a more militant approach could be more effective, dedicates himself to the Black Panther Party.



Chapter 1

Chapter 1 Summary

As the story opens, Sam is in a demonstration led by his father, Roland Childs. Sam's mother, Marjorie, is near Roland as are his two body guards, Ty and Jerry. The family has recently been threatened because of Roland's civil rights activities which prompted the body guards. The demonstration is taking place in Chicago and there are many people gathered. Sam is standing near his brother, Steve Tyrone, who Sam calls "Stick." When Sam and Stick are momentarily separated, Sam panics. He knows that, at thirteen years old, it's a ridiculous reaction and he doesn't tell Stick about it. Stick asks if Sam would like to leave and he's tempted but knows their parents always know if they try to sneak out, even in the large crowd. It's cold and Sam eventually gives in to the discomfort and agrees to leave. The boys are near the edge of the crowd when a fight erupts. An older woman is being beaten to the ground and Stick jumps into the fight. A white man uses a broken beer bottle and cuts Stick's temple. The boys begin to run but Stick is soon exhausted from blood loss and Sam knows he has to get Stick to the emergency room.

In the hospital, one nurse is openly rude and asks if the boys had been at the demonstration. Sam says they were and that Stick fell. The nurse says they'll have to wait despite the fact that Stick is bleeding heavily but another nurse takes Stick to a room. The rude nurse asks Sam if he can write and tells him to fill out a form. When he struggles with the first letters, she takes it from him and begins to ask questions. She quickly makes the connection between Stick and their father, who is well-known for his civil rights activism.

Roland and Marjorie arrive and take control of the situation. Roland enters Stick's room and says that when he began work with Martin Luther King, Jr., he took "an oath of nonviolence." He says he expects the same from Stick. Stick argues that an old woman was being hurt and asks if his father thinks he should have stood by and watched. Roland doesn't answer.

Later, Sam is in the waiting room with his parents. He says he has to go to the restroom and wanders down the hall where he sees a gift shop. There are mittens for two dollars, fifty cents, and Sam is wondering if he has enough money in his pocket to buy them for a girl at school, Maxie Brown. Just then the man running the gift shop confronts Sam, calls him a thief and makes him empty his pockets. Sam is mortified and angry but insists on buying the mittens anyway.

When Stick is finally released from the hospital, it's dark outside. Ty and Jerry are there and Sam is outside before he figures out they are trying to protect the family from reporters waiting for them. One reporter asks Sam "what really happened," but Ty steps in and rushes the family on to the car. Once Marjorie, Stick, and Sam are inside, Roland makes a statement before entering the car himself. The family arrives home, Sam is



sent to his room while Stick is questioned by their father. When Stick enters the room the boys share, Sam expects to be called to the living room but Stick says he took all the blame, meaning Sam is off the hook. Sam wants to go tell the truth - that he'd wanted to leave the rally - but Stick says it will serve no purpose and convinces him to leave it alone. Sam later hears Stick crying, a sound that upsets him because "Stick never cried."

Chapter 1 Analysis

Sam and Stick share a room and are very close. In one corner of the room stands a huge building block structure. Sam is interested in architecture and remembers a time several years earlier when he and Stick had spent an entire morning mapping out a castle in their bedroom. They'd used all their building blocks to make the base and Sam had then wanted to tear it up in order to build something else. Stick had insisted they leave it and they had, over the years, continued to build onto the structure. It is now an incredible castle that continues to grow as the boys periodically get more blocks. This structure represents the unity between the two boys. Later in the story, Stick hides a handgun in the structure and Sam is furious. That gun signifies everything that's different about Stick's methods of enacting change and the methods of Roland. For Sam, that discord represents the difference of opinion that will eventually tear the family apart. When Stick is killed, Sam destroys the structure.



Chapters 2 and 3

Chapters 2 and 3 Summary

In Chapter Two, the family gets ready to go to church on Sunday morning. At the breakfast table, they discover their father reading the paper which has a picture of Stick and Sam leaving the hospital. The headline reads, "Childs's sons beaten at protest." At church, the family takes their usual seat in a packed crowd. After church, Sam and Stick are required to be polite to the group of women the boys have dubbed "the old goat patrol." Stick does only what's absolutely required, leaving Sam to field questions alone - a deviation from their usual routine in which Sam depends on Stick to be charming.

At home, Sam expects additional chores but finds the only punishment is silence that makes Sam very uncomfortable. The phone rings in the afternoon and it's Coretta, Dr. King's wife, who has heard about the incident and is calling to check on Sam and Stick.

Sam remembers a night some six months earlier when Dr. King had been visiting. Tension was high because of Dr. King's presence. One of Stick's friends, Clarence Willis who is nicknamed Bucky because of his large front teeth, comes in through the boys' window. He and his family are on the streets and he often sleeps on the floor in the boys' room. Usually, Stick gives Bucky a magazine to read. On this particular night, Bucky has information on the Black Panther Party to read. Stick stops Bucky from talking about the organization.

In Chapter Three, everyone at school wants to know if Sam is alright after the fight at the demonstration. Sam would like to skip school but his mother works in the school office and he knows she'll probably find out. Roland wants both Sam and Stick to attend college. Sam thinks Stick would make a good lawyer, like Roland, but Sam wants to be an architect. That afternoon, Sam plans to give the mittens to Maxie but changes his mind.

That evening, Roland's best friends - Fred Wood and Leon Betterly - arrive at the house. Sam notes that both are always involved in the demonstrations Roland organizes and that Roland doesn't have to ask them to be. Later, Sam asks Stick how to approach Maxie with his gift. Stick advises Sam to simply present it and hope for the best. The next day, Stick does so and Maxie invites him to walk her home. Maxie lives in an apartment in a poor neighborhood. When he's leaving her apartment, Sam sees Stick accepting a box from a boy in a car. When Sam asks about it, Stick says it's a book and changes the subject.

Chapters 2 and 3 Analysis

Sam has met Dr. King on several occasions and is familiar with the man's thoughts and ideals. When Marjorie answers the phone and indicates she's talking to Dr. King's wife, Coretta, Sam is upset. An important part of Sam's nature is his desire to please others.



He knows that his actions from the previous day have created problems and that his father is upset over the fact that the boys were involved in a fight. Sam believes Dr. King will have the same attitude. Roland does preach nonviolence and has pushed the boys to adopt the same attitude. However, he doesn't say what the boys are supposed to do when faced with a situation such as the older woman being beaten during the demonstration. Sam says that almost everyone - including Coretta - views the boys as victims in the situation but that his father doesn't see it this way. An important aspect of the story and one that Sam comes to realize later is that Roland is constantly in the limelight. His actions are scrutinized regularly and he feels the pressure to do everything correctly because of that. He believes this transfers to the boys as well and he probably worries that transgressions on their part will hurt the civil rights movement.

There is a definite sense of foreboding when Sam asks Stick what he got from the boy in Maxie's neighborhood. Stick obviously doesn't want to tell Sam what it is and the reader never knows for certain that the item is a gun in a box, but it seems possible considering later events though it might also have been information about the Black Panthers. Sam notes that Stick is keeping a secret from him and that he doesn't want to know what the secret is.



Chapters 4 and 5

Chapters 4 and 5 Summary

In Chapter Four, Sam meets Maxie at six thirty one morning at her request. She invites him to go with her for breakfast at school and when Sam arrives, he's surprised to see Stick among the young men dishing up oatmeal for a large group of students. Maxie is surprised that Stick is Sam's brother and Sam is surprised to find out that Stick is working with the Black Panthers. Maxie's older brother, Raheem, is also working the breakfast line. Bucky is there and Sam learns from Maxie that Bucky has recently gotten a job at a garage and that he's paying the bills for his mom and younger sister. That afternoon, Sam is walking Maxie home when they encounter Bucky. He's in a rush to return to work after delivering some parts. Someone shouts his name and he turns to look but continues to rush down the sidewalk. He bumps into two police officers and quickly apologizes. They begin to ask him questions, including why he's in such a hurry. When the officers ask for Bucky's name, he doesn't respond and they begin to hit him. They beat him mercilessly until he's on the ground, bleeding. Sam watches in horror but is unable to do anything to help. At one point, Bucky's eyes catch Sam's and he's pleading for help but Sam stands motionless. Bucky realizes he's on his own and is beaten, then put into a police car and hauled away.

Sam and Maxie part, Maxie asking what they're going to do and Sam saying he doesn't know. When he arrives home, his mother asks about his day and he doesn't initially tell her about Bucky's beating. Stick doesn't come home for dinner. Later, Fred and Leon arrive with the news that Clarence had assaulted officers and Sam speaks up, saying he'd witnessed the events and that Bucky was innocent of wrongdoing. Roland questions Sam further. Leon then reveals that the Black Panthers are protesting Bucky's arrest at the police station and that Stick is with them. The three head downtown.

In Chapter Five, Sam digs through Stick's books and finds a magazine about the Black Panther Party. The publication includes a list of ten demands they plan to make on the government. Sam reads about the organizer, Huey Newton, who preaches that blacks should take up arms to insist on their rights. Sam is intrigued but it's opposite the teachings of his father. Stick and Roland return and Stick announces his intentions to continue protesting with the Black Panthers though Roland says it's not acceptable. The following morning, Stick is gone when Sam gets up. Sam is searching for a particular shirt and can't find it among his drawers or in Stick's. He sees a scrap of material from the base of the block castle and pulls at it, discovering it's a handgun wrapped up in a shirt. Sam is furious that Stick brought the gun into their bedroom and even angrier that he hid it in the castle. Sam wears the shirt to school and confronts Stick at the breakfast. Stick says he's "holding it for a friend."

That evening, Roland questions Sam more about the police attack on Bucky. Later, Stick leaves the bedroom through the window and asks Sam to "cover" for him. Roland

discovers Stick is missing and positions himself in the boys' bedroom so he'll know when Stick returns.

Chapters 4 and 5 Analysis

Bucky is an important character because his arrest later is the catalyst for several other events. Bucky is genuine in his efforts to do the right thing though he will later have to stand up for himself in order to do that. Bucky's father was killed in prison and though the story is not presented in great detail, it seems obvious his father was innocent of the charges against him. Bucky and his family - his mother and sister - are soon out on the street and scrape by until Bucky lands a job at a garage. With that step, Bucky is unable to consider going back to school and the cycle of poverty is perpetuated.

The block castle in Sam and Stick's room is the place Stick chooses to hide the handgun he brings home. Though it's not clear why he has the gun, he says it isn't his. Sam is angry that Stick brings the gun into the house but he is furious that Stick chose to hide it in the castle. In Sam's mind, that castle represents his relationship with his brother and the lives they have built together. Stick seems remorseful about the situation when Sam confronts him.



Chapters 6 and 7

Chapters 6 and 7 Summary

In Chapter Six, Sam doesn't know when Stick returns that night but he wakes as Stick is preparing to leave the house the next morning and most mornings after that. Spring arrives and Sam and Maxie are walking home one day, reveling in the warmer weather. Suddenly there's a crowd of people pouring into the streets. Sam asks someone passing by what's happened and the man says Dr. King has been shot. Sam doesn't want to believe it but soon hears it on a car radio as well. Sam thinks about Dr. King and all the things he's done over the years of Sam's life. He remembers King walking in a demonstration nearby and eating chicken pot pie at Sam's house. Sam is suddenly angry and he watches as others express their anger by knocking out windows and setting fires. Sam himself is overcome with emotion and he picks up a brick, breaking the window of a store. Sam kicks in the store's door and is about to enter when Maxie calls his name. He rushes to her and they leave the scene behind, hurrying to what they hope will be safety. They reach an alley and Sam decides they'll go to his house. They make it safely and Marjorie says that Maxie should remain with them that night. Maxie is embarrassed that she doesn't have a phone but Roland says he has to go out anyway and promises to let Maxie's family know she's safe. Maxie sleeps with Marjorie. In the middle of the night, Stick wakes Sam, saying he just had to be sure everyone was alright.

A few days later, everyone gathers at Sam's church for a memorial service for Dr. King. On the way home, the family sees a group of militants at the park. The leader is saying, "The cops don't own this block" and, "We are not slaves any longer," which receives approval from the crowd. Roland says the group will end up getting themselves killed.

In Chapter Seven, Roland goes to Atlanta to attend Dr. King's funeral. Sam goes looking for Maxie and sees that her neighborhood is "a mess of glass and garbage." Maxie is outside with some friends and she immediately tells Sam she needs to get away from the neighborhood. Sam is ashamed because he'd come looking for her for comfort without realizing that she would need comforting as well. Maxie says Raheem is now firmly with the Panthers. She asks what Roland says about the situation and Sam says his father insists the civil rights movement is bigger than one man and that King's peaceful work must continue. At home, Stick and Roland argue. Stick asks how Roland can be so passive and Roland says this setback to the civil rights movement is not a reason to stop the work. Stick says he doesn't believe the work should stop either, but does believe it can no longer be passive. Stick informs his father that he's joined the Black Panthers and Roland says he can't live at home and be a member of that organization. Stick leaves. Sam chases Stick and tries to argue him into returning home. Stick says he doesn't have a choice, but that he has to do what he believes is right.



Chapters 6 and 7 Analysis

Sam's reaction to the news of Dr. King's death is violent and immediate. He lashes out and a storefront becomes his target. Sam says that doing something destructive and violent seems a better option than doing nothing.

The gulf forming in the family is seen on the evening after the memorial service for Dr. King. As the family passes the park, they see a group of militant young people shouting about rights. While the group is not identified as Black Panthers, it seems likely that they are. Roland says the members of the group are going to face violence for their actions and he obviously fears for their safety. Stick, however, obviously approves of their methods. Sam notes that his father and brother, at that moment, "weren't in the same car. They weren't even on the same road."



Chapter 8

Chapter 8 Summary

In Chapter Eight, three days pass and Stick has not returned home. Marjorie and Sam are talking about the situation one evening and Marjorie says that Stick hasn't been attending school. When Sam asks where his father is, Marjorie says Roland is probably searching for Stick. There is a meeting of the Black Panthers that evening and Sam wants to go but his mother refuses to let him leave the house after dark. Sam considers the situation and realizes his mother has made a choice for him. He could stay at home and explain that his mother wouldn't let him leave the house for the meeting. Instead, he decides that he really wants to go and leaves through the window.

Sam talks to Stick upon his arrival at the meeting. Sam almost tells Stick their mother cries often over Stick's departure but decides not to say anything. Sam takes a seat by Maxie and they listen as Leroy Jackson opens the meeting. Leroy says their purpose is to "make Chicago a better city." He says white children are taught to be proud of their history and to "claim their future" while black children are taught the opposite. Leroy then says there's no future in waiting for the government to change things for the black community.

Leroy then reveals that a leader of the Black Panthers, Bobby Hutton, was killed by police during a raid on Black Panther headquarters in Oakland, California. Leroy says Bobby is the first of the Black Panther members to die for their cause, but predicts he won't be the last. The meeting breaks up with those present urged to volunteer for various activities, and Maxie signs up for many. Stick tells Sam good-night and says again that he simply can't bring himself to compromise on this point. Sam leaves and is rushing toward home when he encounters his father. Sam lies to Roland, saying he'd been helping Maxie with homework and that his mother knew he'd left the house. At home, Roland and Marjorie argue over the situation, she saying that Sam is quickly learning to follow in Stick's footsteps. The argument escalates and Marjorie says that Roland has to be able to say something to get Sam home. She says that she doesn't care what Roland's message is from behind the podium but that the boys are now finding their own way and that there is truth other than what Roland says.

Sam is then confronted by his parents who want to know why he felt the need to attend that meeting. Sam can't explain but says he feels everything is spiraling out of control and he'd needed to see if there was something he could do. Roland says there is to be a demonstration at the courthouse, calling for Bucky's release, and that he wants Sam to help him plan it. Sam notes that he's too tired to object and agrees. Before he goes to bed, Roland says that Sam is to stay away from the Black Panthers.



Chapter 8 Analysis

Marjorie says that Stick and Roland are too much alike and that's why they have clashed on the subject of how to gain civil rights. Sam disagrees, saying the two are nothing alike because he's looking at the fact that Roland is in favor of non-violent opposition while Stick is in favor of doing whatever is necessary, including taking up arms. However, Marjorie goes on to point out that Stick and Roland see the means to a solution differently but are equally focused on playing a role in getting there. She says both are stubborn in their inability to give in to the other.

Sam is amazed as Leroy talks about the changes the Black Panthers hope to create. As Leroy speaks, Sam realizes it's very similar to the message his father preaches. However, with Leroy's words, Sam suddenly begins to believe the change might be possible. It seems that Sam has spent a great deal of his life hearing about civil rights and has seen little change over the course of his lifetime. He has little faith that the peaceful demonstrations of his father's group will make a difference.



Chapters 9 and 10

Chapters 9 and 10 Summary

In Chapter Nine, Maxie is waiting for Sam when he leaves school the next day but he says he's grounded and has to go straight home. Maxie obviously senses something else is wrong and Sam hesitates, wanting to tell her that Stick has left home, but doesn't. At home, Sam discovers his father's effort to organize a demonstration is all over the living room. Sam looks at a newspaper clipping of Roland and Dr. King. Sam remembers that day and the sea of people who were there. Roland points out that there were no guns there that day and that the whole world noticed that march. He says Sam should remember that now. Roland and Sam spend the afternoon working out details and Sam says the situation is familiar to him so that he is pleased to be doing something constructive for Bucky without having to defy his father. Sam realizes there's a lot of planning that goes into a demonstration, from making phone calls to applying for permits.

The next afternoon, Maxie is waiting for Sam. Though he knows he has to go home, he agrees to walk with her. Maxie knows there's something wrong and Sam finally says that Stick has left home. Maxie asks why Sam didn't tell her about it sooner and Sam says he'd hoped it would be solved before now. Maxie feels that Sam has lied to her by not telling her about the situation and Sam doesn't want to talk about it. Their conversation then turns to the Panthers and Maxie says the organization is doing more than walking and complaining. Sam, touting his father's stand on the topic, says the militants attract police attention. Maxie points out that Bucky hadn't done anything and had been arrested anyway. The conversation grows more heated as Maxie asks Sam to join her for breakfast and Sam says he doesn't want to anger his father. Maxie counters, saying Sam doesn't know what his father's reaction would be. Sam, knowing that Maxie's father doesn't live with the family, says if she had a father she might not be living "in the ghetto." He's immediately ashamed of having said it and it's obvious Maxie is horribly hurt. She walks away and Sam knows there's nothing he can do to fix the situation.

In Chapter Ten, Maxie goes inside without looking back and Sam says he didn't expect her to say anything more. It begins to rain harder as he heads for home. Then he sees Roland's car. When Roland pulls up beside Sam and rolls down the window, Sam asks if his father came to get him because he hadn't come straight home. Roland says he'd only come to offer Sam a ride because it's raining. Sam refuses and walks the rest of the way home. When he reaches the house, his father is waiting in the car and they go in together. Marjorie asks why Sam is so wet and Roland says Sam has inherited his mother's "stubborn streak." Marjorie counters, saying that Roland isn't stubborn at all which prompts the two to laugh together. The next day, a Saturday, Sam spends the day helping his father. There are dozens of details to be dealt with and Sam is impressed that his father can handle questions from others helping with the organization. Roland



tells Sam that Maxie is welcome to join them and Sam says he'll tell her when he sees her.

A few nights later Stick wakes Sam at the window. Sam opens the window but Stick is injured and can't get through on his own. Sam helps him by putting a chair through the window for Stick to climb in on. Marjorie knocks on the door and Stick hides. Marjorie notes a blood stain on Sam's pants and he says it was a paper cut though it was obviously more. When Marjorie leaves, Stick goes to sleep on the bed. The following morning, Marjorie wakes Sam and he fears she'll find Stick there but Stick has already gone. There's a note that reads, "Where is it? I need it." Sam knows it's from Stick and that he's referring to the gun which Sam has moved from the block castle to a box under his bed.

Chapters 9 and 10 Analysis

Sam's comment to Maxie about her father comes out before he thinks about it. Maxie's situation is that her father is absent though she apparently knows him. Sam's comment is likely a result of his own fears and worries. Sam will later apologize and Maxie will explain that his comment hurt her so badly because she fears that people will judge her because of her father. When Sam says that Maxie goes inside without looking back at him, he adds that he hadn't expected her to respond. It's important to note that Sam apparently realized how badly this would hurt Maxie and that he wanted to strike out at her. This could be partly because Sam has seen how settled Maxie is with regard to her plans and opinions. While Sam is torn between his dedication to his father's way of protesting and his emerging interest in the Black Panthers, Maxie is set on supporting the Black Panthers. Sam is jealous of this confidence. Later, when Sam is at home, he knows that Maxie won't talk to him again and that means she won't be pushing him to do things with the Black Panthers. Sam hopes he will be able to settle back into his father's lifestyle though he feels it won't be enough.



Chapters 11 through 13

Chapters 11 through 13 Summary

In Chapter Eleven, Sam goes to the place where the Black Panthers are feeding the children breakfast. Raheem is there and asks what happened between Sam and Maxie. Sam admits that he'd hurt her feelings. Raheem doesn't insist on knowing what happened between Sam and Maxie but does insist that Sam make it right.

That afternoon, Sam looks for Maxie but can't find her. He goes to her apartment building and buzzes her apartment but she doesn't answer. While he's there, there is a kid named Charlie who is running with a box when two police officers stop him. One of them is digging around in the box and then Charlie drops the box. There's a very tense moment as Sam realizes the situation could escalate just as the confrontation with Bucky had. Just then a car pulls up. Raheem, Leroy, Stick and another friend get out of the car. Raheem and Lester each have rifles in their hands. Leroy asks if Charlie has broken some law or caused a problem. Leroy suggests the cop "holster that nightstick" and the cops demand that the boys put their guns away. Leroy says that as long as there are no laws being broken, there's no reason for the police to remain. The officers initially say the four boys will "be sorry you pulled this stunt" but leave anyway.

When the four have also left in their car, Sam discovers Maxie has joined him on the sidewalk. Sam apologizes for his comment about Maxie's father and she says he was right. Then she turns to leave. Sam asks if she's still mad and she responds, saying she'd thought Sam wouldn't be the kind of person to judge her for where she lives and who her father is. Sam asks if there's anything he can do to make it better but she says she has things to do.

When Sam arrives home, Stick is there, rummaging through Sam's things in search of the gun. Sam refuses to say where it is though Stick threatens to fight him. Soon the two are fighting and Stick tries to hold Sam far enough away to avoid Sam's blows but Sam kicks him, which turns the fight more violent. They crash into the castle and some of it falls. Roland enters the room and Stick almost immediately leaves. Sam almost tells his father about the gun, thinking Roland will take it away and end Sam's responsibility with regard to the weapon, but he doesn't.

In Chapter Twelve, the morning of the demonstration arrives. Sam has permission to miss school to attend the event. Sam is about to leave but he pulls the shoebox from its hiding place under the bed. He fears Stick will come by while he's gone and that he'll search until he finds the gun. Sam wonders if Maxie might be impressed by the fact that he has a gun in his possession, and if that might make a difference in their current argument. Sam is debating what to do when his father calls out that it's time to leave. Before Sam can do anything with the gun, Roland enters the room and Sam conceals the gun behind his back, then slips it into the waistband of his pants. Roland is still watching and Sam has no opportunity to return the gun to its hiding place. Instead, he



conceals the weapon under his shirt and follows his father from the room. Passing a mirror, Sam realizes the weapon can't even be seen. Sam reassures himself that at least Stick won't be able to find the gun as he and his father leave the house.

Sam is up front during the demonstration, near his father. He notes there is a different perspective from this position than where he is usually standing among the crowd looking up. The prison vans arrive and Bucky is wearing an orange jumpsuit and handcuffs. There are Black Panthers gathered in one spot and Maxie is among them. When a fight breaks out, the Panthers begin filtering through the crowd and Sam watches as Stick goes toward the fighting. Stick is soon being beaten up by a man and Sam rushes in. When he reaches Stick, Sam pulls the gun and points it at the man, demanding he let Stick go. Their father is soon in the midst of things and Stick takes the gun from Sam.

In Chapter Thirteen, Leroy grabs Sam and rushes him away. Stick and Leroy get Sam into a car nearby and they leave the scene. Leroy puts the gun in the glove compartment. Sam is relieved that Stick is with him and notes that he'll let Stick figure out what to do next. There is a conversation about the whites who were present during the demonstration. Leroy says there are whites who were involved and seemed supportive "only as long as our freedom doesn't interfere with their superiority." Leroy says those people are hypocrites though they can't see it themselves and the blacks don't recognize it until there's some action that reveals it. There is some conversation about Sam becoming more involved in the Black Panthers but Stick intervenes, saying Sam is too young to understand the implications or to make his own decisions. Sam is furious that Stick would make the decision for him. They argue but Stick insists that Sam go home.

Sam arrives at home to find his mother seated in front of the television. She barely notices him until he speaks to her and then she reaches out and touches his cheek. She seems amazed that he's alive and Sam turns his attention to the television. He watches as his father begins to speak. Then someone walks up to Roland, the camera tilts and someone else screams, then Roland falls to the ground.

Chapters 11 through 13 Analysis

Raheem says there is a tendency among the people who live in the poor black neighborhoods to see the poverty around them and to accept there's nothing better in their futures. He says he won't let that happen to Maxie. This brotherly devotion to Maxie is admirable and it seems that Raheem takes responsibility for Maxie's well-being and for ensuring she has a better future. However, Raheem will later be willing to throw it all away in order to get revenge against the police officer who shoots Stick.

The handgun Stick hides in Sam's room becomes a symbol of the differences of opinion between Roland's group and the Black Panthers. Sam hates the fact that Stick put the gun in the castle. That building block structure symbolizes the lives the boys have built and their brotherly relationship. The fact that Stick hid a gun there makes Sam angry



because Stick has put his own opinions ahead of Sam's. Sam's refusal to give Stick the gun back stems from Sam's attempts to keep Stick safe. Sam is torn between his need to live up to his father's expectations and his own emerging ideas that a passive stand will never prompt the changes Roland seeks.

Sam's confusion on the issue of prompting change is seen clearly in the moments after he leaves the rally. Sam knows that his father has always advocated non-violence. Sam also knows that if he is following his father's teachings, he should feel bad for pointing the gun at the man. However, Stick was in trouble and Sam had seen it as the only means of ensuring Stick's safety and he doesn't feel badly about his action. This conflict is the basis of Sam's confusion at this point and it will take more time before Sam comes to a decision about which path to take - that of his father's teachings or that of the Black Panther's actions.

Sam's relationship with Stick is seen clearly after the demonstration at Bucky's trial. Sam is dependent on Stick's strength in times of trial. When Sam leaves the demonstration, he does whatever Stick tells him to do. When Sam realizes his actions have changed things, he doesn't know what to do but knows that Stick will decide for him. However, a short time later Stick decides that it's time for Sam to go home and Sam is furious that Stick would try to decide for him. This is an example of one of the minor themes of the story - Sam's coming of age.

Leroy puts the handgun in the glove compartment after leaving the demonstration. This is later very important and the presence of that gun leads to Stick's death.



Chapters 14 and 15

Chapters 14 and 15 Summary

In Chapter Fourteen, Sam asks his mother what they've just seen and she says it was a replay of the moment Sam's father was stabbed. The attacker had simply walked away. Sam says the "law would not protect" Roland because Roland has used his "dangerous tongue" to ignite thought. Sam says they have to go to the hospital but they don't have a car. Sam tries a couple of neighbors but finds no one at home. They consider going by bus but the yard is quickly flooding with reporters. They sit in front of the television for an hour and the doorbell rings continuously. Stick arrives and when Sam and Marjorie step outside, there are two rows of Panthers holding the crowd back so Sam and his mom can pass through to a waiting car. Leon arrives as Sam and his mom are getting into Leroy's car.

At the hospital, they discover Roland is in stable condition though the stab wound had been serious. Marjorie becomes angry and says it's Stick's fault that Roland was stabbed. Sam tries to intervene, saying it was actually his fault because he'd had the gun. Sam pleads with Leroy to explain what really happened to Marjorie but Leroy says he "doesn't see it that way." Marjorie demands that Stick and his friends leave and that they leave Sam alone. The Black Panthers who are there leave the hospital. Sam follows them outside and pleads with Stick to stay. Raheem says Stick will return but Sam sees Stick's walking away as a betrayal. He's hurt by the action and knows that his father is the one person he can count on to always be there. Sam returns to the hospital.

In Chapter Fifteen, Sam and Marjorie remain in the hospital overnight, sleeping in chairs. The next morning they are allowed to see Roland. The first thing Roland asks Sam is whether Stick is safe and Sam assures his father of that. Roland makes room on the bed and asks Sam to sit with him. When Sam returns to the waiting room, Stick is there and asks about Roland. When Sam assures him their father is alright, Stick tells Sam it's time to go to the Black Panther meeting. Sam is furious, saying he'll get there by himself but Stick insists. They arrive and Sam feels immediately as if he's in a familiar place. Sam discovers that members of the Black Panthers have been covering Bucky's shifts at Roy Dack's garage so that he has a job when he's released from jail. Lester puts Sam and Maxie to work, stuffing envelopes requesting donations. Lester points out that fundraising is how the Panther's community efforts, including breakfast every morning, are funded. He also reveals that the Panthers are paying for Bucky's lawyers.

Sam walks into the kitchen just in time to hear Leroy say that Stick should talk to Sam "about it." Sam discovers that Bucky's attorneys have asked Sam to testify but Roland said no and no one is willing to go against him. Sam immediately says he'll testify but Stick says Sam doesn't realize the full impact his testifying could make and that there could be retaliation. Sam returns to the hospital and talks to Roland about it. Roland



points out that testifying would put Sam even more in the public eye. Roland tries to make Sam promise he'll never pick up another gun but Sam can't bring himself to make that promise. Roland says Sam can testify if Stick will come home. Sam says Stick will come home when Bucky is released from prison. Roland returns home a few days later.

Chapters 14 an 15 Analysis

When Roland returns home, Sam says he's decided to testify and that he's sorry Roland thinks it's wrong. Roland says he doesn't believe it's wrong which makes Sam angry. Sam points out that Roland had decided Sam wouldn't testify without even asking Sam if he wanted to testify. Sam has trouble understanding that Roland is trying to do what's best for his cause but is also struggling to keep his family safe in what he knows is a dangerous situation.

There's an interesting conversation between Roland and Sam. Roland tries again to impress on Sam the seriousness of having picked up a gun. Sam says the gun "wasn't even loaded," which he seems to somehow think makes his action acceptable. The reader has to remember at this point that Roland doesn't know where Sam got the gun or even why he had it at the event. While Sam's determination to keep the gun away from Stick could be considered an honorable action, the fact that he had the gun at all is dangerous and could have prompted a greater outbreak of fighting at the demonstration.



Chapters 16 through 19

Chapters 16 through 19 Summary

In Chapter Sixteen, Sam meets with Bucky's lawyers. Clive Billings is a friend of Roland's and works for the NAACP. Eric Richman is a white lawyer hired to defend Bucky. Eric warns that the prosecutors could try to get information from Sam about the Black Panthers though Bucky's lawyers will try to keep that from happening. Leroy's wife enters the apartment with her daughter and a stack of papers. She reveals that Roland has been helping with some of the research for the case, a fact Sam finds difficult to believe. Sam and Stick argue about the situation and at one point Sam points out that Roland hates everything about guns and violence. Stick asks how Sam has not figured out that Stick also hates guns and violence. Stick says the Panthers are making positive changes in their neighborhood. They've begun the breakfast program and have plans for a free medical clinic. Stick says the Panthers are making people realize blacks have to fix things for themselves without waiting to be accepted "into the white mainstream." Stick points out that he and Roland want the same thing but have different ideas of how to make it happen.

In Chapter Seventeen, Maxie and Sam go to the courthouse and wait their turn to testify. Sam notes his brother seated on one side of the room with the other members of the Black Panthers and his parents seated on the other side, despite the fact that Roland isn't yet supposed to be out. The jury is all white and Sam wonders if they have the ability to acquit Bucky. After they testify, Sam says he feels as if he hadn't done enough. When the jury returns, they discover that Bucky has been found not guilty. Sam and Maxie return to their former status as boyfriend-girlfriend, a fact that Raheem approves. Raheem says he is going to pick up Bucky and invites Sam to go along but refuses to allow Maxie. Raheem and Sam pull the four shotguns from Leroy's car and put them in the trunk. Raheem and Sam pick up Stick and they go to pick up Bucky.

The mood in the car is jubilant until the police pull up behind the car and flash the lights and siren. Raheem points out the speedometer and says they weren't speeding. Stick says it's better to simply pull over and Raheem does so. The officers call for the car's registration and Stick opens the glove compartment. The handgun is seen by everyone at the same time and the cops fire into the car then order everyone out. Sam is pulled out and realizes Stick's hands are covered in blood coming from his chest. Sam tries to get to Stick but it's evident the police are looking for a reason to shoot again and Raheem urges Sam to get on his knees. He does but manages to maintain eye contact with Stick for several minutes. Sam says he's sorry but Stick assures him it's going to be okay. Sam is alarmed at how calm Stick is.

In Chapter Eighteen, Raheem and Sam are in a cell together and no one will tell them about Stick's status or where they've taken Bucky. Raheem says he'd known "they" weren't going to let Bucky simply walk away but that he hadn't expected the situation to arise so quickly. When the officers come to get Sam, Raheem urges him to stay quiet,



not saying anything or answering questions. Sam asks to call his father and the police offer to tell him about Stick if he'll just answer a few questions. The officers say Sam's father is on the way and continue questioning him. They say they'll be taking fingerprints from the guns in the trunk and Sam knows his fingerprints will be on some of them. Then Roland arrives and puts an end to the questioning. Sam is released and keeps asking for Stick though he knows from the look on his father's face that Stick is dead. Roland tells Sam to get in the car but Sam runs away.

In Chapter Nineteen, Sam thinks back over the previous hours and feels an overwhelming hatred for the white people who took Stick's life. He is soon near the lake and that's where he is when Maxie finds him. Maxie offers to take Sam home but he says he can't go back there. She asks him to come home with her instead and he agrees. When they get there, Roland is waiting. Sam feels betrayed but Maxie says Sam needs to be with his family. Sam finally agrees. As he is walking out, Raheem whispers to Sam that he'll find the policeman who shot Stick and get revenge. Sam nods. At home, Marjorie is frantic and grief-stricken. The house is full of people. The next day, Roland tries to talk to Sam about what happened but Sam refuses. Alone in his room, Sam tears down the castle in a moment of rage and hurt. He then takes Stick's jacket and tapes over the bullet hole before putting it on.

Chapters 16 through 19 Analysis

When Sam hints his disbelief that their father might actually be working to help their case, Stick becomes furious. This prompts an argument between the two boys and Sam starts to walk away. Stick says that Sam had always walked away from anything that becomes boring or difficult. Sam is still young and this tendency is somewhat to be expected but Stick pointing it out to Sam makes him realize he has to take this more seriously if he wants to be taken seriously.



Chapters 20 and 21

Chapters 20 and 21 Summary

In Chapter Twenty, Sam arrives at the cemetery. Raheem says he has the name and address, which Sam knows means Raheem plans to kill the officer who shot Stick. Maxie notices that Sam is wearing Stick's jacket. Raheem says the jacket is too big for him but Leroy says Sam will "grow into it." Sam talks to Bucky, saying he and Raheem plan to kill the cop but Bucky declines. Bucky says he's grateful for Stick's friendship but that he doesn't think Stick would have seen revenge as an answer. Sam tries to make Bucky feel indebted but Bucky says whatever he owes Stick is his own business. Leroy tells Raheem that killing the officer will bring retaliation down on the Black Panthers and that this isn't the message the Panthers want to send. Raheem refuses to listen. During the service, Sam wavers and Raheem is there, pulling Sam back against his own body in order to provide Sam support. Sam sees his father crying and hates the fact that he's in pain, but hates even more his own role in bringing about that pain. Sam says he can make it right by avenging Stick's death. Sam walks to the coffin and touches it one last time, then tells Raheem it's time to go.

In Chapter Twenty-one, Sam and Raheem leave the cemetery. Sam realizes he's sitting in the seat where Stick was killed. They drive for a while and Sam sees the building that's been designated for the free clinic. Sam suddenly realizes revenge isn't the right answer and tells Raheem to stop. Sam tells Raheem that Stick wouldn't have wanted him to kill a cop but would have wanted him to work on the programs that Stick supported, such as breakfast and the clinic. Sam asks Raheem to take him back to Stick's funeral. There, he tells his father to go on home with Marjorie and pledges to be home later. Leroy assures Roland he'll bring Sam home.

Leroy later drives Sam home. Leroy says Roland is proud of Sam. When Sam questions it, Leroy says he and Roland talk together often, discussing ideas, methods, and other aspects of the civil rights movement. Sam struggles, trying to decide how to follow his heart to support the Black Panthers but knows doing so would hurt his father. Sam finally decides that he will stand firm in this decision though he plans to go home, be with his parents and continue school as usual while doing his work with the Black Panthers.

Chapters 20 and 21 Analysis

Sam and Stick have discussed the "rock and the river" and Leroy and Sam discuss it again after Stick's death. The analogy is that some people are like a rock while others are like the river. Each tends to see the lives of the other and sometimes wish they could change. The rock remains stationary without ever seeing what lies beyond the next bend of the river. The rock is strong and stable but sometimes wonders what lies

beyond. The river knows what lies beyond and is always moving, filled with turmoil and rage, but sometimes looks at the stability of the rock.



Characters

Sam Childs

Sam is thirteen years old as the story opens. He is the youngest son of Roland Childs, a civil rights activist who follows the teachings of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Sam is struggling with his identity as the son of this family because he feels that his father's peaceful demonstrations haven't created the changes quickly enough. Sam is struggling also with his independence. He has grown up with his father's demands and ideals, and there's a part of him that feels disloyal thinking there might be another way to think. However, he is learning about the militant group, the Black Panther Party, and when he witnesses the strength of their methods, he wonders if this might be the better alternative. Sam is a strong character though he believes he is not. This is the result of always standing in the shadow of his father and older brother. Sam is also anxious to live up to the expectations of others. For example, he is upset that his actions might have disappointed his father but even more upset that his actions might have come to the attention of Dr. King, a man Sam greatly admires. Against the backdrop of the civil rights movement in Chicago, Sam is also struggling to make friends, establish his first relationship with a girl, and to come to terms with his changing family situation. Sam wants his life to remain as it was before his brother introduced him to the Black Panther Party and he came to question his father's methods.

Steven Childs

Steven Childs is Sam's older brother and known to Sam as "Stick." Steven has always been willing to stand up to his father and goes out of his way to protect Sam. When the boys are in trouble for leaving a demonstration, Stick claims it was his idea and keeps Sam out of trouble. In some cases, Stick seems to resent this role but he likely takes it on willingly. When Stick begins working with the Black Panthers, he doesn't push Sam to join. He says Sam has to make his own decisions and believes Sam doesn't fully understand everything involved. While Stick isn't against Sam's joining the Black Panthers, he is against Sam joining while he is so young. This is another example of Stick's desire to protect Sam. Stick is, in many ways, a typical young black man living in Chicago during this time period. He is struggling to find his role in the world and sees his father's methods as being too passive with too few real results. Stick is dedicated to his friends. When Bucky is arrested and jailed, Stick takes turns with several others at the garage where Bucky works in order to ensure Bucky's job is still there for him when he's released from jail. Stick is killed as the book draws to a close and his death creates one final hurdle for Sam who must choose whether to seek revenge for Stick's death or work toward the ideas Stick had for bettering their community. For the purpose of clarity, he is referred to as "Stick" throughout this study guide except in direct quotations.



Roland Childs

A civil rights activist who believes in passive actions such as demonstrations, Roland Childs is a close friend of Martin Luther King, Jr., and has spent a great deal of time working toward rights for the black community. He is a stern man but seldom raises his voice. He is the father of Stick and Sam.

Marjorie Childs

Mother of Stick and Sam and wife of Roland, Marjorie Childs works in an office at the school Sam attends. She supports the cause that is so important to Roland but wants to keep her family safe above all else. She is a strong woman but struggles when Roland is stabbed and when Stick is killed.

Maxie Brown

A girl in Sam's class, Maxie Brown is very pretty and Sam is looking for a way as the story opens to further their friendship. Maxie is a strong-willed girl and worries that people will think less of her because she lives in a run-down apartment building and her father isn't there. Maxie takes up the cause of the Black Panthers quickly and supports their ideals.

Clarence Willis

Known to his friends as Bucky, Clarence Willis is living on the streets for a time until he gets a job at a garage. Bucky is rushing back to work one day when he bumps into two police officers. His action prompts the officers to arrest him and Bucky is taken to jail but released after Maxie and Sam testify on his behalf. Raheem tries to get Bucky to go with him to kill the officer who shot Stick but Bucky refuses, saying he is grateful for Stick's friendship but won't kill a police officer.

Leroy Jackson

A member of the Black Panthers' local efforts, Leroy Jackson believes in standing up for what's right but opposes killing the police officer who killed Stick. Leroy is dedicated to the cause but is also dedicated to his family and friends.

Raheem Brown

A young man who is a member of the Black Panthers, Maxie's brother, and Stick's friend, Raheem Brown is driving the car when the group picks up Bucky from jail. Raheem is somewhat more militant than many of the young men and decides he wants



to get revenge for Stick's death. He gets the identity of the officer who shot Stick and plans to kill the officer. He is angry when Sam backs out, refusing to go along.

Lester

Another of the members of the Black Panther Party, it's Lester who explains to Sam that fundraising is an important role in the organization because it costs money to keep the programs going.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. is a civil rights leader who preaches non-violence as a means of promoting civil rights for blacks. King is a friend of Sam's family and Roland answers largely to King's dictates. Sam is furious when King is assassinated.



Objects/Places

Chicago

Sam and Stick live in Chicago with their family.

Mittens

Sam buys mittens for Maxie at the hospital gift shop in an effort to gain her favor.

The Castle

Made of building blocks, the castle has been a project of Sam and Stick for years and is where Stick hides the handgun he says he's holding for a friend.

Atlanta

Dr. King's funeral is held in Atlanta.

Black Panther Party

The Black Panther Party is a group of militant blacks who believe they have to fight for their civil rights.

Oakland, California

Where Bobby Hutton was killed in Oakland, California.

The Glove Compartment

The gun is in the glove compartment when the officers shoot Stick.

Roy Dack's

Roy Dack's is the garage where Bucky is working when he is put in jail.



The Cemetery

Sam is at the cemetery when he tells Raheem he wants to go kill the police officer who shot and killed Stick.

The Free Medical Clinic

A program to be funded by the Black Panthers, the building designated for the free medical clinic is what Sam sees that makes him change his mind about killing the officer who killed Stick.



Themes

Civil Rights

The fact that blacks should have the same rights as whites is an overriding theme of this story. The violation of civil rights and the efforts by various groups to change that drives the majority of the action in the story. There are several examples of the lack of civil rights, especially seen in the situation that leads to Bucky's arrest. Bucky, as a character, is an example of a young man seeking to take care of his family. He is young - not yet out of high school - but is holding down a full-time job to pay the bills so his mother and sister are fed and housed. As Bucky rushes down the street one day to get back to his job, he bumps into two police officers. Though he apologizes, the officers take action that ends with Bucky being severely beaten and jailed. When Bucky's case is coming to trial, none of the dozens of witnesses is willing to speak out on his behalf other than Sam and Maxie. Everyone else is afraid to testify for fear of retaliation by the police, which is another indication of the lack of civil rights. The most important violation of civil rights is seen in the scene in which Stick is shot. The police pull the car over almost as soon as Bucky is released and it's then that Stick is shot. Later, in the jail, Raheem tells Sam he'd known the police wouldn't simply let Bucky leave the jail and return to his life. They'd expected the police to retaliate after Bucky was freed, but hadn't expected it to be that soon.

Different Ways of Enacting Change

The overall theme of this story is a desire for change but equally important is the fact that there are two views on how this should be accomplished. Sam's father preaches non-violent demonstrations as a way to prompt change while the Black Panthers believe this approach isn't strong enough. Sam is caught in the middle of the two groups and it takes a great deal of time for him to make a decision as to which is right. Sam's father is a leader who has embraced the teachings of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. King's philosophy is of peaceful demonstrations and Roland points out that many of those demonstrations have captured the attention of the entire nation. Roland believes in doing everything to avoid violence but the Black Panthers believe that stand is too passive to achieve anything. Sam notes that he has seen the same kinds of demonstrations his entire life and believes the attitudes toward civil rights aren't changing quickly enough. Sam is impressed when he sees several members of the Black Panthers, armed with guns, stand up to police officers who are bullying a youngster. The mere presence of the young men with guns is enough to stop the situation. While the group is militant, the leader of the local Black Panthers, Leroy, is against outright violence. When Raheem plans to kill the officer who shot Stick, Leroy says that's not the message the Black Panthers want to send. This is an important distinction indicating the group's leaders aren't willing to be passive but also believe revenge is not the answer.



Friendship

An important example of this theme is seen when Raheem plans to kill the officer who killed Stick. Raheem's actions are wrong but the plan to avenge Stick's death is prompted by the fact that Raheem is Stick's friend. Another important example of friendship is seen when Bucky is jailed. His friends, many of whom are members of the Black Panthers, rally to help free him. Sam has many friends of his own and their concern for him is seen after he and Stick are involved in a fight at a demonstration. Sam says everyone asks about him the next day at school. Though these people may not have been his best friends, they all showed friendship through their concern. Another of the examples of friendship is seen in the brief interaction between Roland and his two best friends, Leon and Fred. Sam notes that Leon and Fred attend every demonstration Roland organizes and have faced all kinds of situations, including riots, "fire hoses and police dogs." The important aspect of this is that Sam says Roland never has to ask either for help or to join him. Their friendship and loyalty is so deep that they simply show up whenever they might be needed, either for work or for support. Yet another example of this theme is seen in the relationship between Sam's family and that of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. King spends some time with Sam's family and King's wife calls to check on Sam and Stick the day after Stick is injured in the demonstration.

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Description

Style

Point of View

The story is written in third person from the limited perspective of Sam Childs. Sam is thirteen and is struggling with the changing world around him throughout the story. His efforts to understand what's going on and the deeper implications of the situation become important to the limited perspective. An example of this is seen as Sam is prepared for court by the attorneys for Bucky. The two men are making Sam aware of what he should expect when Leroy's wife arrives. She is carrying papers she says were gathered at "Roland's suggestion." When Sam discovers his father has been working on the case, he hints that his father might sabotage the case because it's being supported by the Black Panthers. Stick is immediately furious at Sam's short-sighted perspective and tells him that he simply doesn't understand. At this point in the story, Sam believes his father is vehemently opposed to the Panthers and that he will fight against them. He also believes the Panthers would be opposed to Roland's group and his methods. This is not the case though it takes Sam some time to realize it. The reader is locked in Sam's limited perspective and is led to believe the two groups are battling against each other until Sam comes to learn the truth. Another important aspect of this limited perspective is seen when Roland is stabbed. The reader doesn't know whether Roland survives until Sam makes that discovery. The same is true when Stick is shot and the reader is led to believe Stick is dead but doesn't know for certain until Sam knows.

Setting

The story is set in 1968 in Chicago. Both the physical setting and the historical setting are real. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. had followers who led demonstrations just like the ones discussed in this story and the black community of Chicago played an important role in the civil rights movement of the era. There are several events, places, and people who are real which likely makes the story more real for some readers. There are several specific settings within the story and these are not described to any great degree of detail. For example, several scenes occur at the Childs' home. It's known there is a living room, kitchen, and that the boys share a bedroom, all on the ground floor of the house. Few other details are given but this is acceptable to the story. The specific settings are incidental to the overall story. A setting that is described to a greater degree is the neighborhood where Maxie lives and the apartment where Panther business is conducted. Sam goes to Maxie's apartment but she doesn't answer the door. He manages to get inside and the building is a shambles. The halls stink of "garbage, urine, and other thick smells." On the subject of the apartment where Panther business is conducted, Sam describes the clutter and the feeling that he belongs here. There are some other specific settings, including the school, the school yard where the Panthers provide a free breakfast for youngsters, and the church where Sam's family attends.



Language and Meaning

The story is written in a straight-forward style and is divided fairly evenly into dialogue and narrative. The narrative is probably not realistic but is written for the target audience. For example, the use of curse words would have been common to the people and situations in this story but those don't appear in the book. There are some slang words used, such as "gotta" and "outta," and these add a level of believability that might not otherwise exist. There is some imagery used by the author in an attempt to better convey the emotions of the situations. For example, after Sam learns that Dr. King has been killed, he notes that people are angry and hurt. The author presents it in these words: "Sadness and anger curled through the street, a wave of hurt. It tasted bitter, it looked ugly." The personification of the hurt and anger creates an image of the emotions filtering down the street as the news spreads. The author's statements that these emotions had taste and appearance furthers that image. The story has several emotional scenes. One of these is seen when Sam is at the cemetery and almost falls. Raheem quickly pulls Sam to him, lending his body to provide support for Sam. There are several scenes like this that are presented in a way meant to convey emotion on the part of the reader and to prompt the reader to imagine what the characters saw and felt.

Another important example of the imagery of the story is seen in the castle built in the boys' room. This represents their lives together as a united force. Stick's putting the gun inside the structure sullies that unity in Sam's mind. Yet another symbol in the story is Stick's leather jacket. The Black Panther's use those jackets as symbols of dedication toward their cause. When Sam puts it on for the first time, he patches the bullet hole with tape. The patching of the hole is symbolic of the hole Stick has left behind in the lives of his family and friends and Sam's patching it seems a symbolic step toward healing. The fact that Sam puts on the jacket indicates his desire to follow in Stick's footsteps with the Panthers.

Structure

The story is divided into twenty-one chapters. The lengths of the chapters vary somewhat. The story is presented in chronological order with a few flashbacks. The story opens with Sam and his family at a demonstration march. Sam indicates this is a common occurrence. His view of his family members is used to introduce those characters. The story progresses as Sam struggles to deal with his changing world and to find his role in it.

In Chapter Four, Sam learns that his brother is involved in the Black Panthers. In Chapter Six, Sam learns of the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Over the next few chapters, Sam comes to learn about the Black Panthers and begins to believe their methods may be more effective at creating change than his father's passive methods. In Chapter Thirteen, there's a fight at a demonstration and in Chapter Fourteen Sam learns his father was stabbed. Soon after, Sam learns his father has decided Sam won't testify in the case of a young black man's false arrest but Sam decides he will. In



Chapter Seventeen, Sam does testify and the young man is found innocent but then Stick is shot by police and dies. In Chapter Twenty, Sam agrees to go with Stick's friend Raheem to kill the cop who shot Stick and in Chapter Twenty-one, they leave the funeral intending to seek revenge. Sam sees the building that's been designated a free clinic for the neighborhood and remembers Stick's pride when he talked about the creation of this program, one of many sought by the Black Panthers. Sam realizes he can't seek revenge and returns to the cemetery though he pledges to devote himself to the Black Panthers. In the author's note, the author offers history on the Black Panthers, the civil rights movement, and says that Sam and those from his community are fictional.



Quotes

"We sat in our usual place, in the center section, fourth row from the front. Close enough, I supposed, so that God would definitely know we were there, but not so close that we appeared to be hogging too much of the Holy Spirit."

Chapter 2

"Also, you shouldn't avoid doing something worthwhile just because you're afraid of what might happen."

Chapter 3

"I met Bucky's gaze and he knew. He saw me standing there, saw that I wasn't coming to his rescue, that he had been betrayed."

Chapter 4

"I kicked the door until it caved in. I didn't know why. Because I was there, because it felt less bad. Less bad than doing nothing."

Chapter 6

"Maybe now I could return to Father's world, bring all of myself back to the place I'd started from. Maybe I could learn to ignore the gnawing in the pit of my stomach telling me it wasn't enough."

Chapter 10

"The law would not protect father. They would always find a reason to strike down a black man, especially one with a sharp mind and a dangerous tongue."

Chapter 14

"I held my breath to keep from laughing, or crying, out loud. Did they have it in them to give Bucky the benefit of the doubt?"

Chapter 17

"Do you hear me? If you go near him, they will shoot you."

Chapter 17

"They could Do anything they wanted. Why had I even testified? What was the point?"

Chapter 18

"He spoke in my ear. 'I'm going to find the cop who did this. You can count on that.'"

Chapter 19

"A strong arm wrapped around my neck from behind. Raheem pulled me back against him."

Chapter 20

"Tonight, I would Go home, eat dinner with Father and Mama, and sleep in my own bed."

In the morning, I would go to school. But from now on, I would be with the Panthers."
Chapter 21



Topics for Discussion

Describe Sam. What kind of character is he? What are his strengths? His weaknesses? What are the struggles Sam has during this story? How does he resolve them?

Describe the philosophy of Roland with regard to enacting civil rights. How does that compare to the ideas of the Black Panther Party? Which do you believe is right? Why?

Describe Stick. What are his strengths and weaknesses? How does he compare to Sam? Is he a likeable character? Why or why not?

Describe the lives of Sam and his friends during this time period. What is the incident in the hospital gift shop that shows the discrimination faced by blacks during this time? List at least two other instances of discrimination from the story.

Describe Sam's family. What are the different attitudes expressed by members of his family with regard to enacting civil rights? What is Sam's attitude about the teachings of his father? About the ideas of the Black Panthers? Why is Sam torn over this issue?

Who is Maxie Brown? What is her attitude about the teachings of the Black Panthers? Describe Maxie's family. Do you believe her home situation has anything to do with her attitudes about the Black Panthers? Why or why not?

Who is Raheem? Leroy? Lester? Bucky? Ty? Jerry? Fred? Leon? What is the role each plays in the story? How is each connected to Sam and his family?