Way Past Cool Short Guide

Way Past Cool by Jess Mowry

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BOOKRAGS

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Overview

Some may find reading this novel difficult. Way Past Cool may be the bluntest, most straightforward novel about innercity teenage gangs—especially junior high school gangs—ever published, delving deeper and more harshly into the lives of innercity street life than even S. E. Hinton's landmark novel The Outsiders (1967; please see separate entry). The almost hopeless lives that Way Past Cool's youngsters endure and the way they accept brutality as an everyday part of their lives can be very disturbing to read. Mowry compounds the edgy uneasiness of his story by showing how gang members have concerns common to most American young adults—such as homework, getting along with difficult teachers, watching children's programs on television, and striving to fit in with other kids by wearing fashionable clothing and shoes. This mixture of ordinary adolescent cares with the "rules" of gang behavior and the frankly presented violence and cruelty of the teens' lives make the events in Way Past Cool exceptionally troubling. Often shelved in the adult sections of libraries because of the profane language of its characters and its candid presentation of youthful attitudes toward sex, as well as its violence, Way Past Cool is not for the faint of heart.

About the Author

Much of Jess Mowry's life is still a mystery, even though he has attracted the attention of Hollywood and the literary community. One published account of his life says that he was born in Oakland, California, but the publishers of his novel Way Past Cool, Farrar Straus Giroux, claim he was born in Mississippi. In any case, both sources list his birth on March 27, 1960.

Mowry grew up in Oakland, where he was raised by his father.

Educated only through the eighth grade, he spent much of his teenage life on the streets of Oakland, even working briefly as a bodyguard for a drug dealer. As an adult, he has worked as a garbage hauler and yard cleaner. A strong concern for the welfare of youngsters led him to volunteer to work with children's organizations, bringing with him the experience of once being a youth on the streets of Oakland.

In 1988, using money he earned by recycling aluminum cans retrieved from dumpsters, Mowry purchased a used typewriter for eight dollars and began writing stories about early adolescent gang members living in the grittier parts of Oakland. These stories became Rats in the Trees, which won the PEN Oakland/Josephine Miles Award in 1990. At the time these stories were published, Mowry called a bus his home.

With the publication of Way Past Cool, he went from struggling for publication to the New York Times best-seller lists, receiving praise for his realistic account of the lives of early adolescents in the toughest parts of Oakland. In Way Past Cool, he demonstrated his mastery of the dialect of the young people who were his subjects and his ability to present their lives without sentimentali ty. Its sharp portrayal of unpleasant lives with unflinching candor has resulted in the novel often being placed in the adult section of libraries rather than the young adult section. Way Past Cool attracted the interest of motion picture producers, but Mowry soon earned the reputation of being hardnosed about how his work would be presented. The author turned down large offers of money in fear that the subject matter of his work would be compromised by Hollywood producers searching for a good story. It took until 1998 for Way Past Cool to be made into a motion picture. His insistence that the young people of his fiction be honestly presented, even to the point of rejecting money that would make his life considerably more comfortable, has probably made a permanent imprint on the public perception of his persona—as a selfless man more committed to children than to himself.

Way Past Cool may be partly autobiographical, although one should be very cautious about drawing conclusions about the life of the author from what is, after all, a work of fiction. Mowry has lived in the neighborhoods he describes in Way Past Cool. He may well have been a gang member, and he claims to have been a bodyguard for a drug dealer, the job of Ty, one of the principal characters of Way Past Cool.

Mowry worked as a scrap collector and was still working as one when he began his writing career; this is the work Ty proposes to do after he stops being a bodyguard.

Throughout the story, Mowry likely draws on his work as a counselor for Oakland children, as well as experiences with his own children.

Setting

The events in Way Past Cool take place in an impoverished section of Oakland, a region of abandoned businesses and decaying homes where plumbing rarely works properly. The homes of the characters tend to be apartments that have been made out of buildings intended for other uses. For instance, Lyon lives across the hall from his mother because their home was originally an office building, and Lyon and his mother sleep in what were separate offices.

The only businesses that seem to survive in the depressed neighborhood of the Friends, the name of the gang to which the teens belong, are small groceries, a fastfood outlet with bullet-proof glass separating the workers from the customers, liquor stores, and brothels. The area also has churches, places that are no refuge from the rage and flying bullets that are a part of daily life. The novel opens with a sensational scene of junior high schoolers dodging bullets in a drive-by shooting. It is a scene from the land of the dead, with hard, dirty surfaces, garbage, dumpsters, and an apartment building whose residents peek out at the youngsters and then hide.

The landscape of Way Past Cool is dirty, dark, and hostile; its inhabitants live in perpetual anxiety—to let one's guard down is to risk death. Grown-ups rarely make appearances in the lives of the Friends; parents are off working themselves into early graves or sleeping exhausted at home.

Other adults may be dangerous—drug addicts, even police officers who care little for the welfare of gang members. Still, one adult makes a brief appearance to check on how the Friends have dealt with a crowbarwielding addict and to point out to the youngsters the importance of getting an education so that they may find better lives for themselves. It is one of the principal ironies of the novel that the gang members half-believe that going to school is important, even though death is likely to take most of them before they have a chance to graduate from high school.

Social Sensitivity

As the section on "Themes and Characters" suggests, everything about Way Past Cool is socially sensitive. A particularly sharp social issue is the relationship between the Friends and the police. For example, police officers suggest that the Crew, a gang that shares a border with the Friends, are out to kill the Friends. Curtis asks whether this is true: Gordon shuffled his wrinkled papers.

"Naw, that just dogshit, man. Cops always sayin stuff like that. They like seein us fight. Hope we kill each other."

"Why?"

"Save them the trouble," said Lyon. "One time I read this book. Tell where back in the olden days some of them .. . liked to get us fightin so's they could watch us and laugh over it."

412 Way Past Cool The comparison of the police to the Ku Klux Klan expresses the attitude of the gang members toward the police, whom they perceive as not just ineffectual in protecting people but as outright hostile toward poor black people. Having the two policemen in the novel take bribes from Deek seems to be pushing the point too much and may even detract from the message about the sources of hostility toward policemen. Once the two officers are shown to be taking bribes to leave Deek alone, their role shifts from being harassers and representatives of a malevolent police force to merely being part of the drug plot. Their evil ceases to be representative of a degenerate police force and becomes one with the evil of drug dealing.

The presentation of religious faith in Way Past Cool is likely to disturb some readers.

From the point of view of Ty, churches are frauds, and he expresses hatred for God, who is, he believes, "our father who deserted his children!" He even shoots up a church, sending worshipers into hiding and terrifying the minister. Given his contempt for religion, it is hard to believe that he would be willing to attend church with Markita, even after he has chosen to change the direction of his life.

Even though the novel's characters are angry toward American society and believe themselves caged in their frightening world, the ethics of Way Past Cool are fairly conservative, and overall it assigns villainy to no particular social group. The drug problem is one that gang members deal with daily; they loathe addictive drugs and despise both addicts and dealers. Thus Deek is a far more hateful enemy than even the police.

The novel offers details of how Deek, himself still in his teens, operates his business.

It is a lonely life he leads; he lives in a hideaway with his bodyguard and has only prostitutes as visitors. His success depends on the foolishness of people, and he has nothing but contempt for his customers.

The novel implies that his business would dry up if people used common sense, but finding customers, unfortunately, seems only too easy.

Choosing young people to distribute his drugs is a tougher business. There are those who are like the young man Ty beats, youngsters looking for easy money so that they can spend it on flashy junk. They are great sellers for a brief time, but they burn out quickly, apparently from sampling the drugs they sell. Further, their flashiness calls attention to them, and Deek prefers sellers who are not noticed: "Deek preferred the quiet kids: the lean and ragged and hungry ones." These sellers are better for long-term selling.

Deek is one the people who profit from the misery of impoverished neighborhoods.

As far as the Friends are concerned, his trade makes their neighborhood even more miserable than it would be without the illicit drugs. Indeed, during the course of the narrative, they deal with a mugger who tries to steal a child's shoes so that he can sell them for money to buy drugs and they chase away an addict who lurks in the halls of Lyon's apartment building. Markita and anyone who has to walk the streets at night, even for only a few blocks, fears the addicts who commit crimes in order to buy drugs.

Others who profit from the misery of inner-city life also come under fire. For instance, here is the novel's take on rap music: Deek had an old Too Short disk in the deck: the "raw and uncut" album that white boys played loud while mall cruising in their jacked-up Japanese four-byfours. Maybe raps like that were supposed to tell the world how bad black dudes were, but after you'd told everybody . ..

about ten million times, it just sounded stupid ... like a little kid who'd just learned a naughty word and was running it by everybody in sight to check out what sort of reactions he got.

It is interesting that racial issues are not a big part of the story of a black ghetto. White people tend to be abstractions, somebody who lives far away and cares nothing for impoverished blacks. The attitude of most of the characters in Way Past Cool is that white people are not so much hostile as indifferent to their plight. The notion is most often expressed as white people just do not care about the death of a poor black person, but it is sometimes more broadly expressed as nobody of any race who lives outside the ghetto cares about what happens to the people who live there. In fact, homeless whites are noticed. A soon-to-bedead gun for hire asserts to Deek, "Shit, you know thangs gotta be some bad when white folks start livin like niggers!"

This last quote brings up one of the aspects of the novel that will undoubtedly offend some readers, the use of very objectionable language. The word "nigger" appears often,

usually as a putdown by one black of another black, but also as a selfdescription. It may be seen as representative of how the inner-city youngsters view themselves. It is very likely that young adult readers have already heard all the expletives, but it may prove startling to see them in profusion. Their presence in the novel may be defended in the same way the expletives in Adventures of Huckleberry Finn may be defended: They are the authentic patois of the place, time, and characters depicted. To leave them out might be dishonest.

Sex is another issue that arises several times in the novel. As might be expected, the notions of sex among characters in their early teens are crude and incomplete.

There are a few references to masturbation, although curiously, the youngsters use euphemisms for that particular sex act. There is an allusion to homosexual experimentation that is so brief that it could be missed without careful reading. The mentioning of prostitutes partly adds to the depiction of poverty in Way Past Cool and adds to the depiction of Deek and Ty's lives as empty of any real human warmth.

Perhaps more worrisome than any of the social issues that Way Past Cool forthrightly deals with is the romanticization of the characters. This trait was perhaps unavoidable in a novel that wants its audience to view the world from the eyes of its young, violent characters. Still, Ty is not really a hero, even though he kills Deek. Throughout the novel, he is a brutal thug arid killer.

Lyon dies heroically from the point of view of the gang members. He is "way past cool" by giving up his life to save the other youngsters, and he has been the novel's most thoughtful, sensitive figure. On the other hand, he deals with a derelict in his apartment building by setting the man's hair on fire and kills a police officer. Granted, the officer, who accepts bribes from Deek in exchange for protection, is not an innocent victim, but killing police officers is obviously conduct that should not be glorified.

Literary Qualities

In form and structure, Way Past Cool is a fairly traditional novel. It has a classic opening, designed to draw readers into the plot with exciting, suspenseful action, then a period during which characters and situations are described, with a gradual rise in action to a climax in which all the principal characters are drawn together in one place where a confrontation resolves the conflicts that have been the engine of the plot. Following the shootout is an anticlimax in which details of the shootout emerge. Thus, in the structure of its plot, Way Past Cool is in the great tradition of Shakespeare, sharing much in common with a multitude of fictional works that follow the classic patterns of Western literature. It is in particular in the tradition of modern American literature, striving to convey a truth of American culture through realistic dialogue and vivid imagery the way Mark Twain and Ralph Ellison have done.

Where Way Past Cool deviates somewhat from the traditional pattern is in the presentation of its characters. There is no single protagonist or even two or three protagonists until the novel nears its climax. Instead, the figures of Gordon, Lyon, and Ty, who emerge as the main actors at the end, compete with several other characters, such as other gang members, Markita and Leroy at the fast-food restaurant, and Danny (aka Furball) Ty's brother, early in the novel.

Gordon, Leon, and Ty slowly emerge as the doers in a story that is more about how they interact as a community than about the life or survival of any one figure.

Themes and Characters

There are no heroes in Way Past Cool.

Only Markita, a teenaged single mother working long shifts and going to night school, has any of the qualities of a heroic figure, and even she knows the ways of violence. Fundamentally, the novel is about violence, about how violence shapes the lives of everyone in the small territory of the Friends. This is not to say that Way Past Cool is about nothing else. It is in fact a complex novel that can be fully understood in terms of how several themes are used to create a sophisticated portrait of a society in which the fear of violence is always present, in which such fear shapes everything people do, and in which acts of violence alter lives completely from what they were only a day before.

Mowry binds together his narrative about a neighborhood by using three principal motifs: the "cage" motif, the "rules" motif, and the "cool" motif. He further ties together the development of his characters with a recurring image, that of batteries. The "cage" motif represents both the physical world of the neighborhood and the psychological lives of the novel's characters, binding physical reality to the spirits of the people living in that reality. The character of Lyon is often compared to a lion in the narrative.

Presented as a caged creature, he is someone whose abilities should entitle him to range freely in life, but is restricted by circumstance to.a few square blocks and a life limited by violence. Ty sees himself as a caged animal, and he views the other characters as being trapped in cages. He uses this idea to excuse his own cruel, vicious behavior. His brutality is, he thinks, part of his being trapped, caged into a life he cannot escape. Characters attribute the building of the "cage" to differing sources. Commonly, they see white people as the builders, seeing their caged lives as expressions of the predicament of being a black minority in a non-black society. Others believe that the builders are the residents of the neighborhood themselves. Deek, a drug dealer, is particularly contemptuous of the residents of the neighborhood, attributing their lack of intelligence to his ability to recruit drug dealers whose illicit trade contributes to the decay and violence of the neighborhood.

He is particularly disdainful of the gang members: "You [Ty] know same as me that to them .. . bein BAAAAD is the only thing in the world that matter .. . all the time braggin bout their blade scars or bullet holes, strippin off their shirts to show em.

Black kids got nuthin else on their tiny little brains. An all the time the real world is laughin at em cause they locked up in places like this where all they can do is be Hbad' to each other!"

The "rules" are a code of conduct for those who dwell within the "cage." The Friends and other gangs have what they call "rules," and they respect the "rules" as if they were laws. The "rules" govern not only conduct within a gang but the interactions between gangs. For instance, the "rules" lay out which gang controls what territory and are so explicit that territory can be traded, as in the case at the end of the novel when two

gangs exchange one square block for another. The "rules" even include ambassadors ("bassadors") and a code governing how ambassadors are to be treated.

Throughout Way Past Cool, the "rules" are contrasted to the law, which is not only impotent when it comes to protecting the innocent, but is often hostile and downright stupid, according to the characters in the novel. One of the underlying principles of the "rules" is that if a rule is stupid, then it is invalid. For the characters in the novel, the "rules" are an effort to tame the violence, to bring common sense and sanity to a region where outside authority is not respected. Much of the behavior of the characters must be understood in terms of the "rules" and their hope that the "rules" can provide some structure in the chaos of drugs, bullets, and universal suspicion. The "rules" are strictly enforced (unless proven stupid); the penalty for violation is death.

The "cool" motif is referred to in the novel's title. To be "cool" is important when to be hot is to be out of control, where being out of control means vulnerability that can lead to sudden death. "Cool" allows rival gangs to communicate with each other without violent confrontation. Leaders especially are expected to be "cool" when confronting each other and when their gang members are in danger. It is "cool" that prevents panic during the opening sequence of the drive-by shooting. When the black van is recognized for what it is, gang members respond quickly and intelligently to Gordon's warning and hide. On the other hand, "cool" has its price; Gordon exposes himself to gunfire and shoots his gang's only gun at the van because as gang leader he must show his fearlessness and concern for the safety of his Friends. He accepts the possibility of his own sudden death as part of being a leader. In fact, he is "way past cool," as is Curtis, who is wounded in the back by the gunfire and refuses medical attention. He later allows Wesley, leader of a rival gang, to pull off his bandage to see the wound, and he does not show any pain, holding it in. This, too, is "way past cool."

Who is "cool" and who is not separates the characters of Way Past Cool into separate groups. For instance, when the Friends are stopped and hassled by police officers, they are "cool," controlling themselves. The sarcastic and condescending policemen are not "cool." Also not "cool" are Deek the drug dealer and his bodyguard Ty because they incite violence and use violence to control people. In the ethos of the Friends, to be both violent and "cool" a person must behave within the "rules." Thus protecting a third grader from a mugging and protecting parents and neighbors from threatening drug addicts is "cool" because the "rules" say that one must protect one's own. Keeping illicit drugs out of one's neighborhood is an especially important way of protecting one's own. It is a significant motivation for the killing of Deek in the climax of the novel, and through the development of the motif of "cool" the plot builds to the violent confrontation, in which youngsters accept their own deaths as part of the "rules" and part of being "way past cool."

410 Way Past Cool For all the discussion of violence in Way Past Cool, it is not a novel of action. It is dominated by descriptions of places and characters and by dialogue. The actual events of violence are rare and scattered through the narrative; the "threat" of violence seems more important than the acts themselves. This is not to say that the violent acts are not important. They are significant events that show the decay of moral

values in a society in which the invented "rules" of thirteen-year-olds are more functional than laws or churches. But the violent events are not the main part of the novel and serve primarily to develop characterization.

Characters are also compared to automobile batteries that have been abandoned for scrap. Near the end of Way Past Cool, Ty reflects on the battery image while he beats a street dealer who owes Deek money from drug sales: Now he thought of those piles of old batteries, their cells dead and empty, and the plates that had once produced power all warped and dry and falling apart.

The small boy's lying and babble seemed to filter through a dirty fog. It didn't matter: Ty had heard it all before, too many times for it to touch him anymore. In a way it was like "being" a battery .. . a jumper battery that had had its juice sucked down so often trying to start worn-out engines that it would never hold a full charge again; The young people (Ty is a teenager) in Way Past Cool are like the batteries. Asked to do too much and to take on responsibilities that they are too young to understand, the youths burn out prematurely.

Characterization is presented primarily through descriptive exposition and through dialogue, rather than through action. The descriptions are sharp, detailed, and extensive. For example, here is how Deek is presented: His clothes were always fresh, like they'd never been sweated in, and his top-line L.A.s never seemed to see sidewalk. He wore enough gold around neck, wrists, and fingers to pay a month's wages to a whole Burger King crew. Markita had to admit that if she had only one word to describe his chubby-cheeked, double-sided face she'd have to go with "cute"—like the Beaver might have looked at sixteen if he'd been black and pigging for years on junk food—though his golden eyes glinted as hard as the real thing. His hair was sheened and sparkly, and long in the old Michael Jackson style, like he could care about being hip or trendy.

The novel's dialogue is punchy, sharply expressing the personalities of the characters. For instance, much can be learned about the real intelligence of the stupidlooking Gordon by his manner of speech.

To a gang member who would like a bullet wound to show off, he says, "Gettin shot more like make you way past DEAD! Ever hear of somebody bein actual shot in the arm real-time? That ain't nuthin but TV dogshit, sucker." Later he expresses his gang's hostility toward police by remarking, "Cops got a way of turning everybody into nothin." He may be more child than man, but he is a leader, and he has intelligence behind his words.

Elsewhere, the fundamental personality of Lyon is captured in his assertion, "Cool dude use their minds, man," while he counsels Marcus, a third grader who was almost mugged for his shoes. The incident also says something about the lack of awareness of the youngsters' parents when Gordon tells Marcus to get some dirt on his new, expensive shoes. Marcus bemoans the fact that making his shoes dirty will upset his mother. It is as if the older generation has no idea what is happening to their children.

The characters often speak in cliches, occasionally seeming more like a mouth piece for Mowry than individual figures.

For instance, Lyon, the most intelligent of the novel's characters, offers sage remarks here and there: "... ain't nobody gonna be happy nowheres till everybody happy everywheres, no matter what color they be" (Lyon to Gordon).

". .. if you ain't loved when you little, it major hard to learn lovin at all" (Lyon to Gordon).

"Most people lose the good part of their hearts when they get older" (Lyon to Curtis).

Ringing somewhat more true are the assertions of lesser characters: "Way I see, the whole .. . world tryin to keep you on your.. . knees when you ain't gots no money!" (Furball to Lyon).

"Black pride an brotherhood be a long time dead, stupid, case you ain't figured it out yet" (Deek to Ty).

The language is the authentic dialect of the streets of Oakland rendered without editing the earthy, profane phrases, and it contributes much to the development of the characters as authentic human beings.

Topics for Discussion

1. Way Past Cool is very topical, using slang, references to music and television, and clothing that are typical for young adults in Oakland in the late 1980s and early 1990s. As slang and fashions change, will audiences still be able to understand what the novel is talking about? Will it still seem relevant to the lives of inner-city youngsters?

2. Way Past Cool has many comments such as this by Lyon to Gordon that "ain't nobody gonna be happy nowheres till everybody happy everywheres, no matter what color they be." Explain why these assertions make or do not make the novel too preachy.

3. Ty spends much of the novel despising God, so why does he agree to go to church with Markita at the end of Way Past Cool? Why is Ty angry with God?

4. Is Way Past Cool a good way to learn about street gangs?

5. Who is the main character of Way Past Cool? How do you know?

6. What are the characters' attitudes toward death? What influences their attitudes?

7. What are the "rules" and why are they important? How do they work?

8. What does "way past cool" mean? Why is it important to Way Past Cool?

9. Is Deek correct in insisting that residents of the Friends' neighborhood are the ones responsible for their own problems? Explain why or why not.

10. Are the profanities in Way Past Cool appropriate in a novel? Should Way Past Cool be censored? Should young adult be prevented from reading Way Past Cool?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. How authentic is Mowry's depiction of the life of inner-city gang members?

Where does he go wrong? What does he get right?

2. What are the techniques Mowry uses to develop characters in Way Past Cool?

Which characters are most fully developed? Which are the most vividly depicted?

3. What are death rates for teenagers in poor neighborhoods in inner cities?

How do they compare with the death rates of teenagers who do not live in poor neighborhoods? What are major causes of death for young adults such as Way Past Cool depicts?

4. What is the history of youth gangs in America?

5. How do police handle street gangs? Do they function like the police in Way Past Cool?

6. The narrative of Way Past Cool often implies that most of the problems the Friends deal with are caused by poverty. Where does the money to buy drugs come from? Are there other sources for some of the problems? How might the poverty and other sources of misery be eliminated?

7. How closely does the motion picture version follow the plot of the novel version of Way Past Cool? Are the roles of any characters expanded in the motion picture? What themes are preserved in the motion picture?

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Related Titles/Adaptations

Rats in the Trees consists of several short stories about a pubescent gang's life in a small area of Oakland and is thus a precursor to Way Past Cool. Like Way Past Cool, Six Out Seven may be somewhat autobiographical, telling as it does about a young African American who flees Mississippi only to find racism in Oakland. Babylon Boyz tells of young adults discovering a cache of cocaine and of their struggle to decide whether to sell it and use the money to better their lives or to destroy it so that it will not further poison a neighborhood already hurt by drug abuse. In these books, plot is seldom important, with coincidences contriving to propel events in unlikely directions, but the characterization is often masterful, and the issues are real ones that real-life youngsters Way Past Cool 415 must deal with. Departing from realistic plots, Ghost Train (please see separate entry) differs from Mowry's other works published so far by incorporating supernatural events into its narrative. Lyon's mystical powers hinted at in Way Past Cool are pointedly present in Ghost Train's Remi.

In 1998, Way Past Cool was made into a motion picture. Jess Mowry and Yule Caise are credited with writing the screenplay.

Adam Davidson directed the motion picture. Terrence Williams, who plays the role of Ty, is probably the best known member of the cast. Lyon is played by Wes Charles, Jr.; Gordon is played by Roger Neal; Deek is played by Wayne Collins; and Markita is played by Luchisha Evans.

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