

Reading and Resource Guide for Educators



About This Guide

This guide was compiled by the author with the assistance of Iowa K-12 educators. It contains questions to guide a reading of *We Heard It When We Were Young* as well as framings that one could use in AP level high school curriculum.

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Suggested Timeline for a Course

For a four week unit, (20 school days) the reading per day of *We Heard it When We Were Young* averages to about 11 pages per day or about 30 minutes of listening time per day.

Other Memoirs/Suggested Readings

- *The Other Wes Moore: One Name, Two Fates* by Wes Moore
- *The Glass Castle* by Jeannette Walls
- *Crying in H Mart* by Michelle Zauner
- *Born A Crime* by Trevor Noah
- *Educated: A Memoir* by Tara Westover

Overall Formative Argument Essay Suggestions

1. Many people have experiences in their childhood that leave lasting scars and questions. There is, however, not a general consensus on how to deal with the memories and damage created by those experiences. Author and Illustrator Jarrett Krosoczka said, "My grandfather would always tell me, 'If you dwell on the ghosts of the past, they'll haunt you.' I have found the opposite to be true: if you ignore the ghosts from your past, they'll haunt you and never let go." Write an essay that argues your position on Krosoczka's claim that ignoring the difficult parts of your past will make it impossible to move on from them.
2. Whether it is identity, values, or cultural traditions, many believe who we are is shaped and determined by our beginnings in life. One such individual, author Malcolm Gladwell states, "Who we are cannot be separated from where we're from." In a well-written essay, develop a position on how much an adult's identity is influenced by their origins.

Pre Reading Discussion Questions

1. Think back to the community you lived in when you were a young child. How would you describe the culture of the community where you grew up? How much or little do you think this community shaped who you are now?

Prologue Discussion Questions

1. After Renteria's incident with the couple in the prologue, he says, "This wasn't a scene that played out in grainy black-and-white video on school projectors, or in the sanitized texts of beat-up books you threw in your backpack to be forgotten by the time you got home. No, this happened right here in my hometown."
 - a. What do you remember about the instruction and material presented to you in school about topics of discrimination?
 - b. How do those materials juxtapose with what you learned about these topics through personal experiences?
 - c. Why do you think the discrepancy between these two exists?

Part 1: Welcome to West Liberty Reading Discussion Questions

1. In part 1, the reader sees many moments of Renteria's honesty. For example, when he ponders that many first generation kids assume they're smarter than their parents, and later when he describes a game he played with his friends with a homophobic name. Did you notice any more of these types of moments as you were reading? What do you think these honest moments bring to the novel?
2. Chuy's mom reacts to Chuy's disinterest in working on the lowrider with his father by saying, "you do nothing with your dad." What do you think that Chuy's mother understands at this moment that Chuy can't yet grasp? How do you think she feels when he leaves?
3. "As time ravaged the lowrider, my dad and I grew more distant." What other symbolic objects did you notice in part 1?
4. When Renteria's dad goes to the hospital, he finally begins to see him as more deeply human, and decides he wants to get to know him better. Why do you think this change is able to occur at this moment? Have you ever had a moment when you were able to see someone more clearly?
5. What ways can members of a community push past what Renteria calls "the surface level Fs [food, festivals, and fun]" in order to better understand the people they see around them every day? Why is this so important?

Part 2: Fistfights and Quinceañeras Reading Discussion Questions

1. In part 2, Renteria refers to "the difference between the freedom offered to boys and girls" in his and one other family. What difference do you notice in your family? How does it compare to what Renteria describes about his observations of his own?
2. Renteria introduces Javier in this section. When Javier asks Chuy why he is crying, Chuy admits that there could have "been genuine concern and curiosity" in his question. The reader gets to see Chuy's experiences building up to his confrontation with Javier, but we only get glimpses into Javier's life. What do you think are some of the factors that lead up to Javier's reaction as this bathroom conversation escalates?
3. We see Chuy and Nancy's relationship begin to shift. What moments in your life have led to shifts in your relationships? How do they compare and contrast to Chuy and Nancy's journey?
4. Towards the end of part 3 Nancy and other young women are brought into class and asked questions about pregnancy/motherhood. What was your reaction to the teacher's decision to create this "lesson"? What was your reaction to Nancy's statements?

Part 3: Lessons in B-Boying Reading Discussion Questions

1. In Ruben's letter he writes, "You're like a brother to me" and he tells Chuy that he loves him. Are there people in your life who you, like Ruben, consider to be your chosen family? What are some reasons that, like Chuy, one might have to distance themselves from friendships they've had their whole lives?
2. During the battle Renteria says, "This was home." Has anything ever felt this right to you? What does Renteria get from his chosen home in this moment that he is not getting elsewhere?
3. Interpret Renteria's statement at the funeral: "I wasn't supposed to be there—or rather, I should've been there all along."
4. Renteria ends part 3 by reflecting with Hai about Nate as he knew him. What is the importance of not only telling your own story, but keeping the stories of those no longer with us alive as well?

Part 4: What Bonds Us Together Reading Discussion Questions

1. Part 4 explores many topics surrounding eating disorders: body dysmorphia, physical side effects, secrecy, toxic praise, etc. What does Renteria's exploration of his own personal experiences with these topics do to address the stigma surrounding them? Are there particular moments about these topics that stood out to you more than others? Explain why you chose these passages.
2. "If there was anything I could say to make it better. But nothing worked." The reader sees Renteria take on an almost caretaker role in his mom's life in these moments. What do you think his mom needed in these moments? What do you think that Renteria needed in these moments?
3. Renteria contemplates, "The insidious thing about my outlook on breaking is that I regarded it as my savior." Throughout this section, the author at times speaks in these religious terms: savior, sins, penance. Analyze why you think that Renteria uses religious language in certain moments. What do you think this adds to his descriptions?
4. After recounting Eric's almost-death, Renteria concludes with: "boys will be men, and men will drink." Did you hear any similar messages growing up? What are some ways that people can break from the toxic gendered messaging we are taught when we are young?
5. Take a moment to re-read the letter from "A former West Liberty citizen and graduate." What do you think drove this person to write to Renteria? How do his statements reframe how you feel about the key players of the novel? What about the people who you grew up alongside?
6. The last line of the novel reads: "...quitting Casey's felt like self-love. It felt like I was in control of my life for the first time in a long time." Why do you think this is such a big moment for Renteria? What are some of the other turning points for Renteria in the novel? In your own life?