**Study Guides**

**Discussion Guide**

1. We Beat The Street is a true story, a biography. How does the blending of real events into story form make for a successful telling of the lives of real people? Since the writer did not witness the conversations of the young men when they were growing up, how can the past be captured effectively and honestly?
2. The story of the three doctors is told in chronological order through the eyes of the young men as they progressed through hardships and triumphs in their lives. How does this method of telling the story affect the reader's response?
3. As you first meet Sampson, what kind of person does he seem to be? What seem to be his strengths and weaknesses? What personality traits does he have that make him potentially able to be a success? What strengths do you find in his family and home life? What negatives do you observe?
4. As you first meet Rameck, what kind of person does he seem to be? What seem to be his strengths and weaknesses? What personality traits does he have that make him potentially able to be a success? What strengths do you find in his family and home life? What negatives do you observe?
5. As you first meet George, what kind of person does he seem to be? What seem to be his strengths and weaknesses? What personality traits does he have that make him potentially able to be a success? What strengths do you find in his family and home life? What negatives do you observe?
6. How are the teenage years of the three young men similar to teens today? How is it different? What extra challenges did they face as teenagers?
7. What do you know of the city of Newark in general, and more specifically, the neighborhoods the young men lived in, from the descriptions given in the text? How would you describe the social structure, family structure, and cultural structure of the community?
8. The three young men found great strength, inspiration, and encouragement in music, particularly rap music. Explore the importance of artistic influences on individuals as well as groups of people. How can self-expression be used as a tool for helping or healing?
9. Describe the horrors of the brief prison incarcerations of Rameck and Sampson. How do those experiences change them for the better?
10. Describe the program at Seton Hall as described in the book. What is it about that program that allowed the three young men to become successful? What difficulties did they still have to overcome?
11. What is the attitude of the three young men concerning learning, studying, and acquiring knowledge? How did they deal with friends who looked down on them or made fun of them for excelling in school or for dreaming of college?
12. Discuss the strengthening friendship among the three young men as they go through college and medical school. How is each young man unique? What are the strengths and weaknesses of each? What does each individual offer that the other two need?
13. What makes a friendship? How can friends be both an asset and a liability? How does one keep the valuable friends and stay away from the negative friends?
14. Describe the feelings of the three doctors as they graduate from high school. Describe the feelings of the three doctors as they graduate from college.
15. Describe the feelings of the three doctors as they graduate from medical school. What have the three doctors learned about themselves, their past and their future as they complete medical school?
16. Explain the title of the book. Why does the title have more than one possible interpretation? Use specific examples from the book to support your answer.
17. Why don't more young men succeed like the three doctors? What social and cultural problems prevent their success? What can be done to increase the possibility of success in other young men such as these?
18. Discuss the instances of failure in the lives of the three doctors. Passing exams, getting the right placement, etc. How do these seemingly overwhelming obstacles help to make them stronger?
19. What predictions can you make about the three doctors in the next ten years? Will the three of them still be together as friends and colleagues, or will they have gone their separate ways? Explain your answer.
20. What did you learn about survival, success, endurance, hardship and determination from the reading of this book? How has it changed your thinking, if any?

Activities and Research

1. You are a reporter at one of the following scenes. Write the story for your newspaper.
   * The silly string incident
   * George's first day at the dentist
   * Sampson and the cleaning machine
   * The death of Razor
   * The young rappers
   * Ujima and the kids it helped
2. Supportive family and friends are often very important in the development of a life. How do the following people influence the Lives of Sampson, Rameck, and George?
   * Carla
   * Ma
   * Reggie
   * Miss Johnson
   * Jack
3. Research the program at Seton Hall and find out if it still exists and how effective it has been. Find out if there are other programs which offer such possibilities.
4. Write a letter to one of the three doctors in the book explaining your feelings about the events in the story. What advice would you off them? What questions would you ask them?
5. In journal form, write the life of a medial or dental resident for several weeks. Include as many details as you can find. (This should be available online)
6. Investigate the problem of drugs in school communities and neighborhoods. What steps can be taken by various agencies to help eliminate this problem? How can friends help other friends who seem to be enticed by drugs?
7. Investigate how crime is connected to emptiness in a community. Young people who have no social outlets, no place to go for fun or to play sports or to have positive experiences often tend to get into trouble as Sampson and Rameck did. What can be done to solve this problem?
8. Consider a career in medicine or dentistry. Find out how much college education is needed, how many years of study it takes, and what is required to become a doctor or dentist as the three young men became. What other occupations in the medical field are available? What are the requirements for those jobs?

Writing Activities

1. POINT OF VIEW PAPER
   * But the real reason," Rameck told her honestly, "is the applause. I love it when the curtains go up, when I hear the people in the room laugh or respond to what we're doing on stage. But mostly, I love it when the show is over and everybody claps and applauds and cheers. It's like they're all telling me I'm cool, I'm wonderful, I'm the best thing in the world."

Read the quote above and explain how the point of view of the speaker who makes the observation influences the description. What is the difference between a stage experience for an actor, and that same experience for the audience? Why is personal observation not always fair and unbiased?

1. DESCRIPTIVE PAPER
   * Consider a single drop of water," Reggie said one day when it was pouring rain. "Alone, it is harmless, gentle, and powerless. But everyone respects the power of the sea. You are an ocean. Pull together each drop of your energy to find yourself. No one can destroy the ocean."
   * Sampson could smell the breath of the excited dogs as they ran around furiously in front of the boys, snarling, growling, and barking at the two boys who trembled on the other side of the fence.

Using the passages above as a guide, write a descriptive paper that uses sensory imagery. Use vivid verbs and powerful adjectives and adverbs as you write. Use as many of the senses as you can--sight, sound, smell, touch, taste--as well as deep, rich colors.

1. NARRATIVE PAPER
   * The driver of the car was Razor Sizemore. His real name was Raymond, but everybody called him Razor because he was no skinny. Razor, who had stopped coming to Reggie's kung fu classes because he had become a runner for the drug dealers; Razor, with the sad smile and the desperation in his eyes; Razor, who had sat right next to Sampson in Miss Bellingham's math class just two days before. Razor, who died that crispy cool morning while running from police in a car that he had stolen, had just turned twelve years old."

Write a narrative paper from the point of view of the twelve-year-old who was driving this car. Tell what led up to the events that caused his death.

1. EXPOSITORY PAPER
   * Amari shuffled in the dirt as she was led into the yard and up onto a slightly raised wooden table, which she realized gave the people in the yard a perfect view of the women who were to be sold. She looked at the faces in the sea of pink-skinned people who stood around pointing to them and jabbering in their language as each of the slaves was described. She looked for pity or even understanding, but found nothing but cool stares. They looked at her as if she were a cow for sale.

Write an expository (explanatory) paper on slave auctions and how they were carried out. Tell about the financial and economic gains that slavery brought to the buyers and sellers.

1. COMPARISON PAPER
   * The stone slab was a lot heavier than little Sampson thought it would be as he tried to steady it. He trembled a little from the weight, but refused to give up. He felt like it was him against this piece of rock, and he was determined to be stronger than concrete that day. He held it as straight as he could, hoping they would get the wood lined up quickly."

Write a paper that compares the obstacles to the determination to overcome those difficulties? How does Sampson's struggle with the rock illustrate the larger problems we face in life?

1. PERSUASIVE PAPER
   * I know what you wish, and wishing ain't gonna change nothing! Can't nobody help you but yourself! You do what you got to do, and make your life something we all can be proud of." Ma always took the "tough love" stance with Rameck--giving him support, but never babying him.  
       
     "Yes, M'am," Rameck replied obediently. But he had no idea how to reach his grandmother's expectations. He couldn't even figure out how to deal with the next day."
   * But I don't plan to fail," George had replied with a grin. Sampson had just sighed and let the subject drop. Here in this hot jail cell, failure walked with him every day. It was difficult to see a bright outcome."

Write a persuasive paper that argues ONE of the following points:

* + All human beings are given strong spirits in order to withstand the difficulties of life."
  + Only certain individuals are given the strength of spirit needed to endure the difficulties of life."
  + Tough love builds tough individuals."

Whether you agree or disagree, your paper should address only one side of the issue. Use specifics from the novel to support your points.

1. PERSUASIVE PAPER 2
   * You don't understand," George said quietly. "It's hard to fit in with your boys if your grades are too good."  
       
     "Nonsense!" Miss Johnson replied. "You don't really believe that."  
       
     George grinned at her. "Yeah, I guess you're right. I guess I really don't care what they think of me."  
       
     "College is cool, George. If you can fit in there, you've got it made."  
     "Doesn't it take a long time?" George asked, chewing on his lip. He felt a combination of excitement and wonder.  
       
     "It takes four years to complete the first part of college," she explained. At the end of that time, you'll be four years older whether you go to college or not, so you might as well go and get as much knowledge in your head as you can."
   * Why do you think kids at school think making good grades is stupid?" George asked.  
       
     "None of us really has a blueprint on how to make it," Sampson said. "Right now, all I know is I can't let the streets swallow me. I have to get mine."  
       
     "And what will that be?" Rameck asked him.  
       
     "I don't know yet. But I want more than what I see everyday on the blocks."  
     "You got that right," Rameck said forcefully.  
       
     "You ever have trouble telling your boys that you don't want to do something?" George asked quietly.  
       
     "All the time," the others answered together.
   * When I was in school, a good grade could destroy a kid. High marks could open you up to ridicule, to name-calling, to being made an outsider. I never understood the mentality that made failing in school be equal to being cool. As far as I was concerned, kids who failed in school were losers. They couldn't get jobs, had no chance to go to college, had no hope for their future. I thought failing was pretty dumb. I still do.

Write a persuasive paper that argues ONE of the following points:

* + It is more important to keep the respect of friends than to get good grades."
  + Failing in school is really not cool."
  + Going to college is a possible goal for everyone."
  + Positive peer pressure is more important than negative peer pressure."

Whether you agree or disagree, your paper should address only one side of the issue. Use specifics from the novel to support your points.

1. PREDICTION PAPER
   * At the emergency room of Beth Israel Hospital, dozens of people sat in chairs in the small waiting room. Even though his foot throbbed like lightning and thunder, Sampson was fascinated with the place--the energetic and constantly moving nurses, the doctors who seemed so distant and self-assured, the people on the chairs, some patient and hopeful, some obviously in distress. . . .  
       
     . . . . Sampson watched as the doctor placed the films of his foot on a lighted panel on the wall. The inside of a small foot appeared, with the bones of five toes, five longer bones in segments, and several other bony structures he couldn't identify. He could clearly see cracks that didn't seem to belong there.  
       
     "Everything is so even and neat," Sampson said, marveling at the picture. "Except for the broken part."  
       
     The doctor, seemingly impressed by the boy's observation, pointed out the bones of the foot, and even named them for him. Sampson could have looked at the films for hours, but the doctor was busy and had other patients to see. He clicked off the screen and the room returned to normal."
   * Who would have thought that an ordinary trip to the dentist could turn into an extraordinary, life-changing event? I walked into that dentist's office unaware of the fact that he held the keys to my future in his interest in me. Something clicked when I looked at those dental charts, X-rays, and instruments. The dentist sensed my fascination and took the time to teach me and encourage me. He was eager to feed my inquisitive mind, and I was a willing sponge, soaking up all the information and inspiration he could give me.

Write a paper that shows how small, seemingly insignificant events can influence the rest of one's life. How does Sampson's fascination with the emergency room or George's early love of dentistry indicate information about their futures? How can that kind of fascination be used for everyone?

1. POETRY
   * You gonna teach us how to fight?" Razor asked.  
       
     "No," Reggie replied. "I'm going to teach you how to live."
   * Any fool can fight," Reggie said calmly. "It takes a man to know when to use his mind instead of his body. Repeat after me," he continued. "Toughen my sinews, harden my bones, strengthen my mind."
   * Sampson went home, relieved that once more he'd been able to navigate that delicate road between what was right and what was real.

Write a poem about one of the following topics, or any topic of your choosing that seems to fit the themes of the book:

* + The Power of Me
  + Learning to Live
  + Living and Making it
  + Inspiration
  + The Making of a Man
  + Right vs. Real
  + Death around the Corner
  + Survival
  + Success