Discussion Starters

- How well does Moore describe the culture of the streets, where young boys grow up believing that violence transforms them into men? Talk about the street culture — its violence, drug dealing, disdain for education. What creates that ethos and why do so many young men find it attractive?

- In writing about the Wes Moore who is in prison, Wes Moore the author says, "The chilling truth is that his life could have been mine. The tragedy is that my story could have been his." What do you make of that statement? Do you think Moore is correct?

- Oprah Winfrey has said that "when you hear this story, it's going to turn the way you think about free will and fate upside down." So, which is it...freedom or determinism? If determinism, what kind of determinism — God, cosmic fate, environment, biology, psychology? Or if freedom, to what degree are we free to choose and create our own destiny?

- The overriding question of this book is what critical factors in the lives of these two men, who were similar in many ways, created such a vast difference in their destinies?

- Talk about the role of family — and especially the presence or absence of fathers — in the lives of children. Consider the role of the two mothers, Joy and Mary, as well as the care of the author's grandparents in this book.

- Choose a quotation or selection from the book that was especially thought-provoking for you. Why is this portion significant? Explain.

- Why was the author haunted by the story of his namesake? What was the reason he insisted on meeting him in prison? Talk about the awkwardness of the two Wes' first meeting and their gradual openness and sharing with one another.

- From prison, the other Wes responded to the author's initial letter with his own letter, in which he said, "When you're in here, you think people don't even know you're alive anymore." Talk about the power of hope versus hopelessness for those imprisoned. What difference can it make to a prisoner to know that he or she is remembered?
• The author Wes asked the prisoner Wes, "When did you first know you were a man?" Talk about the significance of that question...and how each man responded.

• Has this book left you with any ideas for ameliorating the conditions that led to the imprisonment of the other Wes Moore? What can be done to ensure a more productive life for the many young men who grow up on the streets?

• There are turning points in each of our lives, defining moments that affect the path we take, although we may not realize it at the time. Can you pinpoint a turning point for each of the Wes’s? Has there been a turning point in your own life that you can point to that helped define the person you have become? Explain your answer.

• What are the main themes in the story?

• The author said he didn’t know the other Wes Moore but felt a connection with him. Have you ever felt a connection with someone you didn’t even know?

• Both Wes Moore and the other Wes Moore started off in the same place. Both grew up in single-parent households with working-class mothers, in neighborhoods filled with crime and drugs. At what point do you think their paths diverged, leading one to success and another to a life of crime? What was that life changing moment?

• What do you think about the author’s statement “if people expect you to do well in school, you will do well in school. And if people expect you to graduate, then you will graduate. And if people expect you to be on the corner selling drugs, then that’s what you will do as well”?

• The incarcerated Wes Moore says that instead of products of our environments, maybe we are “products of our expectations” and possibly those of others. What do you think he means by this? Do you agree? Why or why not?

• Does education play a key role in the path of each boy? How does the educational attainment of each boy’s mother play into their success or lack of success? Is education the only ticket out of a troubled life?

• Wes dedicates the book to “the women who helped shape [his] journey to manhood.” Discuss the way women are seen in Wes’s community. What impact do they have on their sons?
• The author says to the other Wes, “I guess it’s hard sometimes to distinguish between second chances and last chances.” What do you think he means? What is each Wes’s “last chance”? Discuss the differences in how each one uses that chance and why they make the decisions they do.

• Why do you think the incarcerated Wes continues to proclaim his innocence regarding his role in the crime for which he was convicted?

• Discuss the relationship between education and poverty. In your discussion, consider the education levels of both Wes’ mothers, how far each man got in his education, the opportunities they gained or lost as a result of their education, and their reasons for continuing or discontinuing their studies.

Book Themes
• Poverty
• Drugs
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