



GROUNDWOOD STUDY GUIDES

My Story Starts Here Voices of Young Offenders

Written by Deborah Ellis



Deborah Ellis, activist and award-winning author of *The Breadwinner*, interviews young people involved in the criminal justice system and lets them tell their own stories.

CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS

Ages 12 and up / Grades 7 and up

JUVENILE NONFICTION / Law & Crime / Communities, Citizenship education / Addictions

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BOOK DESCRIPTION

Jamar found refuge in a gang after leaving an abusive home where his mother stole from him. Fred was arrested for assault with a weapon, public intoxication and attacking his mother while on drugs. Jeremy first went to court at age fourteen (“Court gives you the feeling that you can never make up for what you did, that you’re just bad forever”) but now wears a Native Rights hat to remind him of his strong Métis heritage. Kate, charged with petty theft and assault, finally found a counselor who treated her like a person for the first time.

Many readers will recognize themselves, or someone they know, somewhere in these stories. Being lucky or unlucky after making a mistake. The encounter with a mean cop or a good one. Couch-surfing, or being shunted from one foster home to another. The kids in this book represent a range of socioeconomic backgrounds, genders, sexual orientations and ethnicities. Every story is different, but there are common threads — loss of parenting, dislocation, poverty, truancy, addiction, discrimination. The book also includes the points of view of family members as well as “voices of experience” — adults looking back at their own experiences as young offenders.

Most of all, this book leaves readers asking the most pressing questions of all. Does it make sense to put kids in jail? Can’t we do better? Have we forgotten that we were once teens ourselves, feeling powerless to change our lives, confused about who we were and what we wanted, and quick to make a move without a thought for the consequences?

PRE-READING QUESTIONS

Students will need to keep a record of their answers here for one of the exercises after reading the book. If this discussion is taking place as a class, designate a student to act as secretary to take notes on the answers to these questions. If students are reading the book individually, recommend they write a journal entry using the below questions to record their answers.

1. Consider the title of this novel: *My Story Starts Here: Voices of Young Offenders*. What words stand out to you? What do you think this book will be about?
2. Read the description on the back cover of the book. What do you think you will learn from this book? What aspects of the book will be challenging or difficult to understand? In what ways do you hope this book expands your understanding of incarceration? What is the main source material for this book? How do you think the book will be structured?
3. The description on the back cover ends with a question: “Does it make sense to put kids in jail?” What do you think? Is it okay to put young people behind bars? Why or why not?
4. Until now, what has been your personal experience with law enforcement and crime? Even if you have never committed a crime, perhaps you know a police officer or know someone who has been incarcerated. How have your experiences shaped your perception of these issues? How have your views on crime and incarceration been affected by news outlets, movies, television shows or other media?

POST-READING DISCUSSION QUESTIONS AND ACTIVITIES

RE-EXAMINING OPINIONS

1. Before reading *My Story Starts Here*, you were asked whether or not it makes sense to put kids in jail. How would you answer now? In what ways has the book changed, deepened or challenged your views on youth incarceration?
2. What surprised you most about the stories you read in this book?

IT'S COMPLICATED

As a class, list the struggles, lifestyle factors and issues that act as precursors to youth being incarcerated in this book. After gathering a substantial list, examine each item one by one. Draw arrows to other items to show different stages and factors that can eventually lead to incarceration. In the end, this will be quite a complicated map. Consider the following questions:

- What does this tell us about the issue of youth incarceration and how we should address it as a society?
- Which precursors seemed to surface more often or correlate more significantly with youth incarceration? Why do you think that is?
- Are there any examples from public media and current events that also demonstrate how complicated these issues can be?

CHAPTER CHATS

In small groups or as a class, give each student the opportunity to lead a discussion of one particular story or chapter in *My Story Starts Here*. The questions they formulate should not only indicate a grasp of the story and the issues involved, but also draw other students into the important themes that emerge in that chapter. In the course of leading this discussion, students may also wish to connect the story in the book with a similar event in current events.

TED TALKS

Ask each student to adopt the persona of one of the individuals who shared their story in this book and prepare a TED Talk–style speech on an issue related to the themes of the book. Possible topics include: how to address youth incarceration, what being incarcerated taught the character about a particular issue, or what society can learn from young offenders. To prepare this speech, it may be useful as a class to view resources available online about what makes a good TED talk, and discuss creative ways to act out a persona.

DEBATE: PUNITIVE AND RESTORATIVE JUSTICE

Split the class into two groups to debate a pertinent social issue that arises in the book, for example: punitive vs. restorative justice models. Students will prepare as a team for the debate by researching the pros and cons of the side to which they've been assigned. For a suspenseful twist, the instructor could ask the entire class to prepare arguments and examples for *both* sides of the issue, only revealing their assignments at the time of the debate. This encourages students to learn both sides of an issue and makes for a more challenging debate.

RESTORATIVE JUSTICE WEEK

Restorative Justice Week takes place during the third week of November and seeks to expand public understandings of restorative justice approaches to crime. Contribute to this important effort as a class by developing an event or media project to share with your school or community during the next Restorative Justice Week. Students could:

- Record a podcast episode or series of interviews with youth in their area whose lives have been influenced by restorative justice.
- Film a video or public service announcement that could be aired on the school's media channels or on public television.
- Create a display or bulletin board infographic that can be placed prominently in the school for the week.
- Invite a speaker or organize a panel discussion during an assembly.

In planning events like this as a class, ensure that every student has a job. Students could be involved in project management, create materials, draft questions or sketches, locate materials or plan and promote.

IN YOUR COMMUNITY

Ask students to reflect on the following questions:

1. What happens to young offenders in your community?
2. What are the particular factors that drive crime or incarceration among youth in your area?
3. What policies shape young people's experience of the legal and judicial system over time?
4. What programs and organizations are at work in your community to support young offenders, and what can others do to help?

Ask students to research these questions by looking online or by interviewing policy makers or organizational affiliates in your community. Then ask them to write a response essay about how the situation of young offenders in your locality is similar or dissimilar from the stories in this book.

LEARNING THROUGH SERVICE

There are many suggestions for how individuals and groups can make a practical difference in your on issues related to youth crime and incarceration in *My Story Starts Here*. Prompt students to pick one of those suggestions — or come up with an idea of their own — and develop a service project to implement it, either on their own, with a group, or with the entire class. Then, students will write a response essay summarizing the three most valuable lessons they've learned through this experience. Students should make sure to mention any ways the people and situations they've encountered in real life reminded them of those they read about in *My Story Starts Here*.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY



Deborah Ellis is the author of the international bestseller *The Breadwinner*, which has been published in twenty-five languages. She has won the Governor General's Award, the Middle East Book Award, the Peter Pan Prize, the Jane Addams Children's Book Award and the Vicky Metcalf Award. Recently named to the Order of Canada, Deborah has donated \$2 million in royalties to organizations such as Women for Women in Afghanistan, UNICEF and Street Kids International. She lives in Simcoe, Ontario.