

DISCUSSION GUIDE

Disney • HYPERION BOOKS

ABOUT THE BOOK

McCutcheon Daniels is a sixteen-year-old underground Mixed Martial Arts (MMA) fighter from Detroit, Michigan. Battling opponents in a cage is not the life McCutcheon chose; it is the one forced on him by his abusive and violent ex-boxer father. After every brutal match he uses his share of the money he's earned to support his five-year-old sister, Gemma. Although McCutcheon believes fighting is his only option, his science teacher, Mr. Freedman, notices his intelligence and encourages him to enroll in an exclusive charter school. He refuses at first, but the encouragement of the charter school's headmistress, a student tour guide named Kaitlyn, and Mr. Freedman lead him to reconsider. McCutcheon's desire to obtain an education comes up against a powerful opponent, however: his father, and the gang that makes money from his fighting, will not let him walk away without significant sacrifice.

COMMON CORE ALIGNMENT

This guide is aligned with the College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards (CCR) for Reading in the areas of Literature, Writing, and Language. The broad CCR standards are the foundation for the grade level-specific Common Core State Standards. Each question and activity in this guide includes a reference for a specific grade level strand, domain, and standard.



GUIDING QUESTIONS

Teaching note: For each of the guiding questions, please encourage students to support their claims with textual evidence.

- 1** McCutcheon Daniels continuously faces adversity and is desperate to “get out” of his current situation. Consider a classic novel with a main character who struggles, such as *Oliver Twist* by Charles Dickens. How is McCutcheon’s modern-day journey similar to that of the main character in the classic novel? In each story, which aspects of the main character’s trial are specific to his or her time period? What can teens learn from both journeys? (*Reading Literature: Range of Reading and Level of Text Complexity: RL.8.10; RL.9.10; RL.10.10*)
- 2** If a reader only examined the names in the novel, it might seem that “the Priests” represent good and ‘Damien Demon Daniels’ represents evil in McCutcheon’s life. How are the names misleading or accurate? Use examples from the novel to support your responses. (*Reading: Key Ideas and Details: RL.8.1; RL.9.1; RL.10.1*)
- 3** The Latin phrase hanging on the wall of Radiance Academy reads: *Pugnare ad consequi, consequi ad da. Fight to Achieve, Achieve to Give.* In your opinion, is this phrase applicable to McCutcheon’s life? Why or why not? Use details from the book to support your response. Who are famous individuals or people in your life that you believe represent this motto and live according to it? (*Reading: Craft and Structure: RL.8.4; RL.9.4; RL.10.4*)
- 4** Examine McCutcheon’s daily dialogue with his sister: “Who’s tough?” “I’m tough.” “How tough?” “So tough.” “And why are we tough?” “Cause that’s the way we get out.” What does saying this mean to McCutcheon and his sister? Provide examples from the text. How is McCutcheon’s dialogue with his sister similar to Radiance Academy’s motto? Which aspects of the dialogue and the motto contradict each other? (*Reading: Craft and Structure: RL.8.4; RL.9.4; RL.10.4*)

- 5** In the story, many of the individuals who enter into the world of underground Mixed Martial Arts (MMA) have backgrounds in one fighting style (e.g., boxing, Tae Kwan Do, judo). McCutcheon, on the other hand, has been exposed to only MMA (a combination of styles) since childhood. What are the benefits and challenges of knowing only one fighting style versus MMA? In your opinion, based on McCutcheon's fighting strengths and weaknesses, which tactical style should he learn more about? Provide examples from his training sessions or cage matches. (*Reading Literature: Key Ideas and Details: RL.8.1; RL.9.1; RL.10.1*)
- 6** At the conclusion of a violent underground MMA match McCutcheon wonders, *What was I becoming?* How does the author create different points of view between McCutcheon and Bam Bam? Which of McCutcheon's and Bam Bam's characteristics overlap inside and outside the ring? How does the dynamic between Bam Bam and McCutcheon make the story more dramatic? (*Reading Literature: Craft and Structure: RL.8.6; RL.9.6; RL.10.6*)
- 7** McCutcheon's mother is an important character in the story. However, in the majority of the novel she is discussed through memories. Explain how she influences the series of events and McCutcheon's actions. What do McCutcheon's memories of his mother reveal about his character? Support your answer with evidence from the text. In your opinion, why does McCutcheon choose to tell Kaitlyn the story of his mother leaving, but not the reason he believes she left? Have you ever shared only half or parts of a story? Why or why not? (*Reading Literature: Key Ideas and Details: RL.8.3; RL.9.3; RL.10.3*)
- 8** Based on the interactions between McCutcheon and his sister it is clear that they are very close. However, there are many times where he feels joy, disappointment, and pain in relation to caring for her. Use examples from the text to describe the range of emotions he feels toward his sister throughout the novel. How do these examples enhance the story and the development of McCutcheon's character? (*Reading Literature: Key Ideas and Details: RL.8.1; RL.9.1; RL.10.1*)

- 9 The central idea of a novel is often discovered through the key events, unveiled emotions, and major character experiences. In your opinion, what is the central idea of the text? Use details from the story to support your answer. (*Reading Literature: Key Ideas and Details: RL.8.2; RL.9.2; RL.10.2*)
- 10 Mr. Freedman is a teacher who offers support to McCutcheon throughout the story. Use examples from the novel to describe how their relationship develops and impacts McCutcheon's decisions. How are Mr. Freedman's and McCutcheon's experiences similar? What can they learn from each other? (*Reading Literature: Key Ideas and Details: RL.8.3; RL.9.3; RL.10.3*)
- 11 In the final chapter of the novel McCutcheon makes the difficult decision to walk toward the white van. At that moment every character is likely experiencing very different thoughts and emotions. Describe the perspective and feelings of the following characters at the moment: McCutcheon, Kaitlyn, McCutcheon's mother, Mr. Freedman, and Gemma. How do these different points of view make the final scene more intense? (*Reading Literature: Craft and Structure: RL.8.6; RL.9.6; RL.10.6*)



CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS: RESEARCH AND WRITING

Mixed Martial Arts (MMA) is a key component in the novel. Create a group of three students and assign each person one fighting style to research (e.g., boxing, judo, Tae Kwan Do, karate, jiu-jitsu). Each participant should research his or her assigned fighting style and describe the important aspects of that tactical approach, its history, the years of required study, and famous individuals trained in that art. Once every group member has completed the research assignment, students should engage in a debate about which fighting style is the most valuable and effective. (*Speaking and Listening: Comprehension and Collaboration: SL.8.1; SL.9.1; SL.10.1*)

In the story, McCutcheon considers the benefits of remaining in school and attending college. Have each student research a four-year college or university that offers science majors within the undergraduate degree program. Students should then create a PowerPoint presentation for their classmates about that university or college. Each presentation should include images of the school, entry requirements, geographic details, history, cost (including scholarship opportunities), specific science majors, and benefits for graduates. (*Speaking and Listening: Presentation of Knowledge and Ideas: SL.8.5; SL.9.5; SL.10.5*)

Throughout the novel, McCutcheon participates in underground MMA, a sport that requires a great deal of discipline and years of training. Use the Internet and related books to research MMA. Create a three-to-five-page summary of your findings that includes a clear introduction, the history, benefits, and challenges of the sport, types of potential injuries and ways to prevent them, and a clear conclusion. (*Writing: Production and Distribution of Writing: W.8.6; W.9.6; W.10.6*)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Alan Lawrence Sitomer was California's 2007 Teacher of the Year. In addition to being an inner-city high school English teacher and professor in the Graduate School of Education at Loyola Marymount University, Mr. Sitomer is a nationally renowned speaker, specializing in engaging reluctant readers, and received the 2004 award for Classroom Excellence from the Southern California Teachers of English and the 2003 Teacher of the Year honor from California Literacy. Alan's previous books include *The Hoopster*, *Hip-Hop High School*, *Homeboyz*, *The Secret Story of Sonia Rodriguez*, *Nerd Girls: The Rise of the Dorkasaurus*, and *Nerd Girls: A Catastrophe of Nerdish Proportions*. Alan is also the author of *Hip-Hop Poetry and the Classics*, a text used in classrooms across the United States to engage disengaged students.



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Q&A WITH ALAN LAWRENCE SITOMER

I Throughout the novel there are many vivid descriptions of Mixed Martial Arts (MMA) cage fights, training exercises, fighter characteristics such as cauliflower ear, and culture. Did you know a significant amount of information about MMA before writing the novel? How did you prepare to write this novel?

While I am not a cage fighter by any stretch of the imagination, I have always *loved* sports, so going behind the scenes of MMA to dive deeply into the training, the work ethic, and the heart and guts of the athletes was a ton of fun for me. The fact is, these fighters are some of the best-conditioned athletes on the planet. Doing this part of the research turned out to really open my eyes in many ways about the inner warrior that exists in all the sport's participants. So on one hand, yes... I had to do a ton of learning. On the other hand, I think that's true of almost any book. In my opinion, for an author to successfully build a credible world in the land of YA fiction, they are going to have to spend some time on Google. As they say in all the arts, "God is in the details."

2 In the story McCutcheon is an athlete who has a dedicated work and training ethic. In your own life, when have you needed to dedicate time and training to something? What was the result?

This might be my favorite aspect of this novel, because I believe that no matter who you are or what you pursue, going after your goals with tenacity, diligence, hunger, and so on is an essential component to success. In my own life, I work my butt off! (McCutcheon, however, is an outright *monster*.) Yet I don't say that with regret, because I love what I do. When your vocation matches your avocation, you're a lucky person in this world, and I'd encourage all young people to, as Joseph Campbell once famously said, "Follow your bliss." Making sacrifices to achieve something meaningful only sweetens the joy of attaining your goals.

3 The phrase *Pugnare ad consequi, consequi ad da* ("Fight to Achieve, Achieve to Give") is one that inspires and connects many characters in the story. What does this phrase mean to you? How does it connect to your life?

I am a huge fan of mottoes, creeds, battle cries, and so forth. In fact, throughout the history of literature they have been used to spectacular effect. ("All for one and one for all!") For *Caged Warrior* the phrase *Pugnare ad consequi, consequi ad da* ("Fight to Achieve, Achieve to Give") could mean so many different things to so many different characters that its appeal was instant to me. And then I saw why: because it's a creed that everyone—including myself—can relate to. Why? Well, my feeling is that at the end of the day, human beings live in two worlds. On one hand, they want to strive, achieve, and attain. It's almost as if the gene of ambition exists in our collective DNA. On the other hand, however, I also believe people actually want to give. They want to be a part of something bigger than just themselves. Community, generosity, benevolence . . . these things are also woven, in my opinion, into our DNA. Thus this phrase really combines two elements into one saying that resonates at a deep level—at least for me.

4 Similar to McCutcheon, many young adults are torn between doing what they desire and listening to the expectations of others. What type of advice do you give to teens who feel this way?

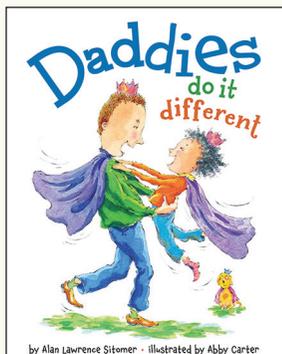
It's not easy being a teen today, and the pressure to conform, fit in, meet the expectations of others, and so on is a very real phenomenon. In my own life, I certainly felt that pressure growing up—and I was a kid who, I am sure, many would say “marched to the beat of his own drummer.” Yet on the inside, I had nagging doubts. My best advice is to be patient, remain open, build your own inner sense of self-esteem, and listen to your heart. Lots of people think they know what's best for you, but in life you are going to be the one who has to live with the choices you make, so discovering these answers for yourself is critical. And they don't come easy all the time. Remain committed to the search, however, and you'll find your way.

5 In the past you were a high school English teacher. Are there many similarities and/or differences between you and Mr. Freedman? How do you believe teachers can best connect with and reach students?

Mr. Freedman is the teacher we all aspire to be—or have—in our lives. In fiction it's much easier to create a character such as this, but in reality, well. . . reality kicks us all in the stomach sometimes, and while I'm proud of my work in the classroom, no one is perfect. Having said that, I do feel that education is shifting toward a much more student-centered model for learning, and that's something I feel is long overdue. Connecting and reaching kids only really happens one student at a time, and when kids turn into data on an administrator's spreadsheet instead of real people with real lives (and real issues and real strengths and real challenges and so on), the whole process of learning is submarined by bureaucracy. The way to reach and connect with kids isn't rocket science. In fact, it's fairly simple: become a good listener and students will unveil these answers to you all by themselves.

BOOKS BY ALAN LAWRENCE SITOMER

Picture Books

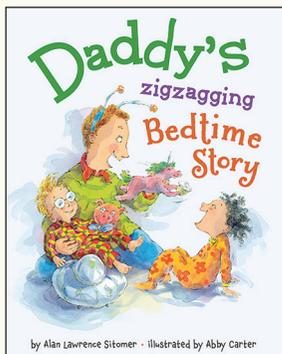


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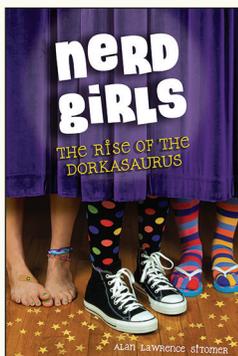
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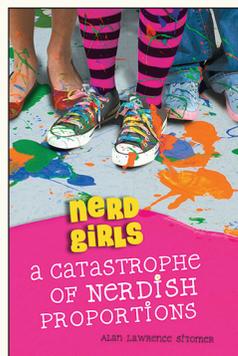
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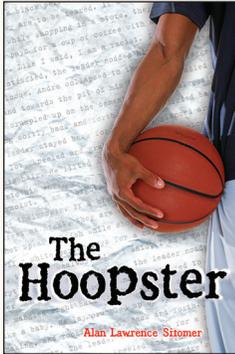
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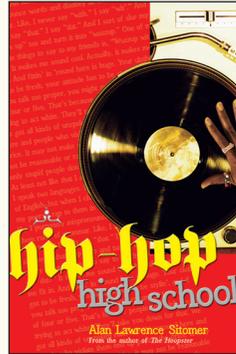
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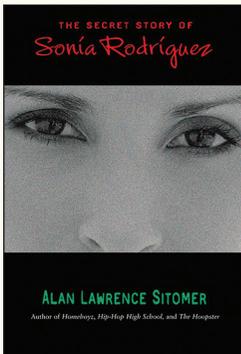
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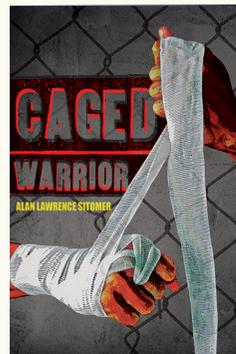
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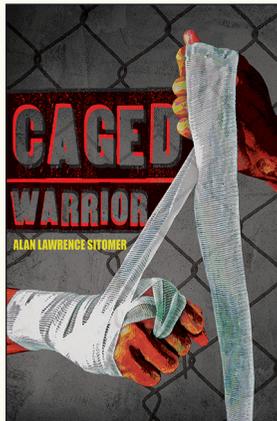
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This guide was created by Dawn Jacobs, who has a doctorate in Special Education: Learning Disabilities and works to improve academic outcomes for all students through teacher development, instructional design, and research in the areas of response to intervention, social support, and parent involvement.

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