WHY I FIGHT
A NOVEL
BY J. ADAMS OAKS

Teacher’s Edition

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# Why I Fight
by J. Adams Oaks

JLG Guide written by Frank Coffin

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About the Author

J. Adams Oaks attended elementary school in Iowa City, Iowa, and spent his high-school years in Madison, Wisconsin. His family often traveled during the summer, wandering across the country, “stopping anywhere there was a point of interest.” These travels made him feel that “the world passing was something painted into my brain, filling my imagination with clouds and landscapes and constant newness. I loved it, but at the time, it was tough to be in the back seat of the old station wagon with my little brother for hours and hours.”

Mr. Oaks also attended a summer camp in Iowa and later became a counselor at that camp. One of the campers was a boy who was living with a foster family after he had burned down his parents’ house. Another camper was tall and “muscled like a jaguar,” and he didn’t know how to interact well with other campers because his life was tied up with an uncle took him around the country boxing. Later, in a writer's group, the author drew on these memories and came up with an image of a boy alone in his house burning the weekend comic section of the newspaper, lighting a strip at a time and letting it burn.

Mr. Oaks’s grandfather was a writer, and other family members are avid readers. He loved imagining the lives of other people, using his imagination to fill in gaps. He has always written, “because it makes me so happy.” As with any talent, though, “you have to practice and practice and practice. Read and read and read, and while you’re reading, look at what that author's doing. I watch a movie and try to figure out how the story was put together.”

J. Adams Oaks now lives in Chicago, Illinois. He received a master’s degree in fiction writing from Columbia College, Chicago. His stories, published in several magazines, have won Chicago Public Radio’s “Stories on Stage” contest and have also been performed and recorded at the Museum of Contemporary Art.

He works with the Chicago arts organization, Around the Coyote (named for a building nicknamed the “Coyote Building”), to curate the Re:Action Reading Series. He also is a member of Serendipity Theatre Collective’s story development team and lectures at Columbia College and the University of Chicago.

Why I Fight is Mr. Oaks’s first book. The novel was originally a short story that won a National Society of Arts and Letters regional competition.

You can visit his Web site at www.jadamsoaks.com to learn more.

Quotes are courtesy of J. Adams Oaks in JLG Monthly, May 2009.
Building Background Information:
Story Elements

The story of Why I Fight covers roughly six years in the life of Wyatt Reaves, from ages twelve-and-a-half to about eighteen. These are often tough years in young men’s lives as they try to figure out who they are and where they fit in the world around them, which is often a place where things a person doesn't fully understand affect him deeply—sometimes beyond what he can express in words.

Wyatt’s is a rough world, and as you can guess, he fights his way through it. You may have seen ultimate fighting, wrestling, or boxing on television. This is not Wyatt’s world. There are no cameras, no lights, no arenas or even rings, no fancy trunks or equipment. Wyatt fights in alleys, back rooms, and warehouses for whatever money his uncle can get—with some betting on the side.

Why I Fight is a work of realistic fiction, a novel in which the action seems to be taking place in the real world. The term “realism” is used so many ways it may be best seen as a term of contrast. Realistic fiction is not a folktale, for example, or a fairy tale, or science fiction. It is not usually romantic, and it may or may not have a happy ending or a message. It is an attempt to show the world as it is, or as the author or character sees it. To make the world of the book seem realistic, authors often focus on concrete details of the setting. They may represent speech in natural rather than formal written form. Characters seem genuine and deep, and they may be flawed or complicated.

A protagonist is the central character of a story. This character may or may not be “heroic,” but is the main figure. In realistic fiction, the protagonist may be complex and struggle with his or her own thoughts and feelings. Wyatt Reaves is the protagonist of Why I Fight.

An antagonist is a character who opposes the protagonist. The antagonist does not have to be a villain or a bad guy, just someone who opposes the protagonist in an important way. In realistic fiction, the antagonist may not even be a person at all. The antagonist could be a group or an institution, or even an unresolved issue in the protagonist's life. As you read Why I Fight, think about who or what serves as an antagonist.

Characters may be static or dynamic. Static characters do not change much as the story progresses. Things may happen to them, but events do not change their basic natures. Dynamic characters do change, though, in response to the events of the story. They may grow better or worse, wiser or more foolish, more likable or less likable, stronger or weaker. As you meet the characters of Why I Fight, look for ways in which the main characters change or don’t change in important ways.

As you read Why I Fight, decide which parts of the plot, the characters, and the writing make it seem realistic. Think about characterization, the way the author makes characters come alive. Think, as J. Adams Oaks does when he watches a movie, about how the story was put together.

For suggestions for further reading, go to page 34.
Prereading Activities

Book summary:
At age twelve-and-a-half, Wyatt Reaves and his family are homeless—and Wyatt is blamed for it by his parents. His father, whom Wyatt calls Fever, wants to kill him. Wyatt is rescued, more or less, by his uncle Spade, who takes him along as he travels the country, buying and selling junk and visiting lady friends. Wyatt, who has always been big for his age, eventually grows bigger and stronger, and Spade sees a chance to make money—by setting Wyatt up in bare-fist fights in back rooms and warehouses. With no school, no friends, and no home, Wyatt tries to figure out who he is and where he fits in.

Understanding Genre: Realistic Fiction

1. Based on what you read on page 4, explain in your own words what realistic fiction is.
   Answers may vary. Students’ responses should indicate consideration of the characteristics of the genre, including a sense of believable action and speech in a world that seems real.

2. Based on the summary above, why do you think Why I Fight is considered realistic fiction?
   Answers may vary. Responses should indicate that students understand that the characters, events, and settings purport to be actual.

3. What sort of details about Wyatt’s life would make the book seem most real to you?
   Answers may vary. Students may expect concrete details about the physical world, credible characters who act in believable ways, and realistic dialogue.

4. What questions about Wyatt and his situation would you expect Why I Fight to answer?
   Answers may vary. Most students will want to know what motivates Wyatt to fight, and how he came to live as he does.
Prereading Activities

Making Predictions
Read this partial summary of the plot and make predictions based on evidence from the book and/or from your prior knowledge or personal experience.

Neglected by his parents, Wyatt Reaves causes his family to end up in the City Shelter. Before his parents can strike back, Wyatt’s uncle, who goes by the name Spade, grabs the boy and leaves town. Traveling from place to place, living on shady deals and the kindness of Spade’s girlfriends, Wyatt leads a strange life without friends or school, and his home is often Spade’s big Chevy. Wyatt is big, though, and he learns that he can fight. When his uncle realizes Wyatt’s strength, he sets up fights for Wyatt, and with the money Wyatt earns, they keep traveling. Wyatt learns things in his rough world—some good, some bad—but what he wants to know most is who he really is and whether his life matters.

1. What kind of people do you think Wyatt’s parents are likely to be?

I predict: Answers may vary. Students’ responses should cite evidence from the plot summary that shows a relationship to the prediction. Most students will recognize the parents as neglectful.

Based on what evidence?

2. What kind of feelings do you think Wyatt has about his life?

I predict: Answers may vary. Some students may expect Wyatt to be angry and resentful about the way he has been treated.

Based on what evidence?

3. Set a purpose for reading based on your predictions above.

Answers may vary. Purposes should suggest a means for validating predictions through the reading.
Before You Read
Introducing Vocabulary
Define each of the words below, paying attention to the part of speech indicated. Then complete each sentence below with the correct word. You may need to change the form of the word.

1. peeved (adj.) irritated, annoyed
2. hi-fi (n.) common term for sound equipment in the 50s and 60s
3. swig (v.) to drink something in large gulps
4. lard (n.) a soft, white substance made from pork, similar to shortening
5. skitter (v.) to move about or run off quickly using small steps
6. banister (n.) a railing or stairway support
7. mildew (n.) a fungal growth or coating caused by dampness
8. lure (n.) a device used to attract fish to a line or hook

1. Good ventilation or a dehumidifier will prevent mildew in basements.
2. Grandma showed me the hi-fi she listened to when she was young.
3. The mice skittered away when the cat jumped on the porch.
4. Hold onto the banister while you’re going down those old stairs.
5. I felt peeved all day after I found out my best friend had lied to me.
6. My dad carefully chose the lure that would attract rainbow trout.
7. Instead of butter, the old chef liked to use lard when he cooked.
8. Nothing feels better than taking a big swig of cold water on a hot day.
After You Read

Analyzing the Writing: Point of View

1. Who is the speaker, or narrator, of *Why I Fight*? __Wyatt Reaves__

2. *Why I Fight* is written in first-person point of view. How do you know this?

   *Wyatt uses the pronoun “I” and seems to speak in an authentic voice.*

3. How does the author show when someone is speaking? *Besides using “I,” Wyatt’s language carries the impression of speech through variations in grammar and sentence structure. He also shows limited knowledge of some events or causes for them.*

Getting to Know the Characters

Readers get to know characters by paying attention to the information given by the narrator. Fill out the chart below using what you learned from Chapters One through Four. *Answers may vary. Possible answers suggested below.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Character’s Name</th>
<th>Character’s role in the story</th>
<th>Interesting facts or details about this character</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Wyatt</td>
<td>Boy who is the speaker of the story.</td>
<td>neglected and confused large for his age</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fever</td>
<td>Wyatt’s father</td>
<td>selfish a neglectful and abusive father</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uncle Spade</td>
<td>Wyatt’s uncle</td>
<td>travels constantly sells things has many girlfriends around the country drinks a lot</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nana</td>
<td>Wyatt’s grandmother</td>
<td>odd religious perhaps crazy collects pieces of glass is nearly blind</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Analyzing the Writing: Style

1. Your teachers tell you that writing correctly means following the rules of grammar and mechanics. However, in this book the author seems to disregard those rules. Why does the author do this? *Answers may vary. The author is trying to make the narrator more realizist by having him speak ungrammatically. He is not very educated, so it makes sense that he would not speak perfectly.*
2. In spite of the lack of correct grammar, the main character, Wyatt, has some deep thoughts and keen insights. Do you think that using correct grammar and appropriate language is always an indicator of someone’s intelligence? Why or why not?

*Answers may vary. Some students may feel that language is not an indicator of intelligence, but others may feel that it does reflect how much a person knows. Reasons will differ.*

3. Read the following phrases from these chapters and explain what Wyatt meant by each one:

   “You only get to see something for the first time once.” (page 7)
   *The experience of seeing something for the first time can only happen one time and that experience is important for forming an impression.*

   “The last thing I remember before I fell asleep was thinking how it was too quiet and too noisy at the same time.” (page 14)
   *Wyatt isn’t comfortable with complete quiet or with a lot of noise. He is probably used to a certain amount of activity. And he’s probably just generally nervous.*

   “You don’t really think about other people being different until you meet someone like Nana.” (page 19)
   *Until you meet someone who is not like you or the people you normally hang out with, you don’t realize just how hard some people’s lives are. Or how different they can be.*

**Responding to the Story**

1. Describe Wyatt’s relationship with his parents. *Answers may vary. They seem to care very little about him, except to express anger. Wyatt has learned to stay out of their way, but longs for attention.*

2. Why do you think Uncle Spade takes Wyatt with him? *Answers may vary. Spade seems to recognize that Wyatt is neglected and is in danger from Fever’s anger.*

3. Why does Wyatt find Uncle Spade to be so amazing? *Answers may vary. Spade pays attention to Wyatt, which he is not used to, and buys things for him, and lives a life unlike Wyatt has ever seen.*

4. How does Wyatt respond to Nana’s unusual nature? Why? *Answers may vary. Wyatt stays quiet and polite, because he is unsure how to act.*
Before You Read

Introducing Vocabulary
Writers choose words carefully to convey meaning, create images, or make a point. As a reader, you also bring meaning to words, because you automatically connect experiences from your life with what you are reading.

Define each of the following words. Then give an example of something from your knowledge or experience that connects you to the word and its meaning. The first one has been done for you as an example.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Word</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Example from your life</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>fillet (v.)</td>
<td>To cut and prepare boneless portions of meat, fish, or poultry</td>
<td>My mom usually fillets chicken so we don’t have to deal with the bones.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(page 28)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>frantically</td>
<td>In a desperate, anxious, fearful manner</td>
<td>Answers will vary.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(page 31)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>blaring</td>
<td>Jarringly loud or noisy</td>
<td>Answers will vary.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(page 33)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>carnival</td>
<td>A traveling outdoor amusement event with rides, shows, food, and games</td>
<td>Answers will vary.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(page 34)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>burden</td>
<td>A physical load or emotional responsibility</td>
<td>Answers will vary.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(page 46)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Making Predictions
1. Make a prediction about experiences Wyatt might have at Nana’s.
   *Answers may vary. Many students will predict that Wyatt will learn something from Nana, or discover something about himself.*

2. Make a prediction about Uncle Spade.
   *Answers may vary. He has already shown a restless nature, and lives exactly as he chooses.*
**After You Read**

**Checking Predictions**

Review your prediction about Wyatt’s experiences at Nana’s. What part or parts of your prediction actually happened?

*Answers may vary. Wyatt does not really learn much except that Nana is unusual, and he learns to try stay out of trouble. Spade shows a tendency toward unpredictable whims.*

What part or part of your prediction did not happen?

*Answers may vary. Some students may begin to look for things that will lead to Wyatt’s fighting.*

**Analyzing the Writing: Dialogue Conventions**

Written English uses standard ways to indicate dialogue or speech, most commonly by setting off spoken words with quotation marks and commas. Sometimes writers vary or abandon these conventions for effect. J. Adams Oaks has chosen not to use quotation marks at all. Instead, he indicates speech by placing a dash at the beginning of dialogue:

—Stop fooling, Spade said, elbowing me aside and pulling it out. Here. Take it.

If the speech was written in the standard dialogue form, it would look like this:

“Stop fooling,” Spade said, elbowing me aside and pulling it out. “Here. Take it.”

In most writing, it is best to use the standard form. Rewrite each of the following sentences using the standard form for showing dialogue or speech.

1. —Well, what’re you waiting for? Spade asked. (page 31)

   **Well, what’re you waiting for?” Spade asked.**

2. —Give me your magnifying glass, I said, suddenly excited. (page 37)

   **“Give me your magnifying glass.” I said, suddenly excited.**

3. —Okay, Clark said real serious. Do it as hard as you can. (page 38)

   **“Okay,” Clark said real serious. “Do it as hard as you can.”**

4. —It’s old Feegler. Come on, Clark whispered. This way.

   **“It’s old Feegler. Come on,” Clark whispered. “This way.”**
Getting to Know the Characters

1. What is Wyatt’s greatest fear at this point in the story?

   *Answers may vary, but Wyatt repeatedly expresses fear that he may be abandoned.*

2. What do Wyatt’s feelings about the fish show about him?

   *Answers may vary. Wyatt is bothered by killing the fish, and he seems to be a sensitive person capable of empathy. They also show the gulf between his thoughts and the rough world around him.*

3. How would you describe Spade’s attitude toward Nana?

   *Answers may vary. He seems to feel some responsibility toward her, trying to clean the place and leaving money around, but he is also used to her odd nature and does not try to change it.*

Responding to the Story

1. How did you feel about the incident with Clark at the quarry? What is the author’s purpose in including a scene like this?

   *Answers may vary. Most readers will be surprised and disappointed at Wyatt’s participation, which contrast with his earlier sensitivity about the fish.*

2. Why do you think Spade decided it was time to leave Nana’s at the end of Chapter Seven?

   *Answers may vary. Spade may have been getting restless, or have been trying to avoid having to deal with her potentially dangerous quirks.*
Geography & Math Connection

Spade has women friends in lots of places, and their locations seem to mark the travel routes that Spade and Wyatt take. In Chapter Six, Wyatt refers to women in Iowa, Minnesota, Texas, Utah, Tennessee, Washington, and Arkansas. Which of these states have you visited? Answer will vary.

Find these states on a United States map and lay out a route that begins with Iowa, goes to each of the other states, and then returns to Iowa. Use an Internet site such as Mapquest or Yahoo maps or Google maps to calculate the total distance covered if you went from state capital to state capital in this order:

1. Des Moines, Iowa
2. St. Paul, Minnesota
3. Seattle, Washington
4. Salt Lake City, Utah
5. Austin, Texas
6. Little Rock, Arkansas
7. Memphis, Tennessee
8. Des Moines, Iowa

You could reasonably cover four hundred miles a day by car. How long would it take you to travel your route if you averaged 55 mph?

Note to teacher: Based on an average from various map sources, the students should come up with an estimated total of 5,400 miles. At 55 mph, that would come out to about 98 hours, or 4 days.
Before You Read
Making Predictions
As this section begins, Spade and Wyatt are on the road again. Although it’s hard to know where their travels may take them, you can still expect some things to happen based on what you know about the story and the people in it. What do you expect will take place in the upcoming chapters?

I predict:  
*Answers may vary.*

Based on what evidence?  
*Answers may vary, but should be based on some detail from the text or the nature of the characters*

Analyzing Characters
Readers learn about people in stories by what characters say and do, just as we learn about people in life from what they say and do. Characterization is the way writers reveal the nature of people. Writers choose details in actions and speech to show who their characters are. What is Wyatt like? What is Spade like? How do you know what you know about them?

Fill out the two charts below for Wyatt and Spade. Focus on their personalities, not their physical qualities. *Answers will vary.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Three things I know about Wyatt’s personality:</th>
<th>Detail or description that shows me this quality:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. <em>He is lonely.</em></td>
<td><em>He fears being left behind; he would like to have a friend.</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. <em>He is unsure of himself.</em></td>
<td><em>Wyatt tries to stay out of the way and is polite and quiet in order to fit in as well as he can.</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. <em>He is thoughtful.</em></td>
<td><em>He observes things in close detail, thinks about them, and wonders what they should mean.</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Three things I know about Spade's personality:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1. He never settles down.</th>
<th>He travels around the country and has many girlfriends.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2. He is enthusiastic about his pursuits.</td>
<td>He includes Wyatt in some of his schemes, and is often energetic in</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. He is selfish.</td>
<td>He does not seem to concern himself with the feelings of others.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**After You Read**

**Checking Predictions**

How did your prediction compare with what happened in these chapters? What new circumstances or events arose that you didn’t expect?

*Answers may vary. Few readers would likely have predicted the stay at Lynnesha’s.*

---

**Getting to Know the Characters**

1. Describe Wyatt’s attitude toward Lynnesha.

   *Answers may vary. At first, Wyatt is polite and stays out of the way as usual. As Lynnesha begins to show concern for him, he begins to wonder and think about her. He recognizes Spade’s taking advantage of her.*

2. Wyatt has a horrible dream about piranhas. Where do you think the dream came from, and what might it say about his secret feelings?

   *Answers may vary. Perhaps the fish came from his being upset about the fish he killed. His sense of danger in the dream may come from the unsettled life he leads.*
Analyzing the Writing: Characterization

Readers learn a lot about how Wyatt and Lynnesha’s interaction through dialogue. Explain what each of the following remarks reveals about the person who said it.

1. (Wyatt) — Uh . . . well, where are we? I asked, leaning around the corner. (page 58)

   *Answers may vary. Wyatt again shows that he has no idea or control over where he is in life.*

2. (Lynnesha) — Franklin, you didn’t even tell the kid where you were going? she asked, pulling out a milk carton and some cheese from the fridge. (page 58)

   *Answers may vary. Lynnesha shows general concern for the boy and disapproval of Spade’s carelessness.*

3. (Wyatt) — I. Feel. Lost . . . My uncle, he travels all over all the time and he don’t care where he is. He just makes himself at home wherever. . . . (page 59)

   *Answers may vary. Wyatt restates his sense of homelessness, but he also opens up to Lynnesha as he has done with no one else.*

4. (Lynnesha)—I haven’t been around a lot of children before, she said, and looked me straight in the eyes. Wyatt? You’re a good boy, aren’t you? (page 60)

   *Answers may vary. Lynnesha shows concern for Wyatt.*

Making Connections

1. Wyatt’s life at the moment is probably a lot different from most young people’s. Yet he has feelings that we all recognize. Which of his worries are similar to worries you have or have had?

   *Answers may vary. Many students will recognize Wyatt’s insecure desire to fit in his surroundings. They may share worries about being abandoned or having to fight.*

2. There is often a big difference between what Wyatt says and what he feels. Is this realistic? Why?

   *Answers may vary. Most will agree it is realistic because many people do not share all their thoughts because they are unsure how they will be taken or are uncertain of the value of their ideas or fear rejection.*
Before You Read
Making Predictions
The book is titled *Why I Fight*. How do you predict the title will become more appropriate as you read?

I predict:
*Answers will vary. Many will expect there to be more fighting to come.*

After You Read
Checking Predictions
Was your prediction confirmed? Did things occur as you expected them to? How so?

*Answers will vary.*

Getting to Know the Characters
1. Wyatt doesn’t know how to capture the pig. Why does he hit it?

   *He cannot stand being laughed at, and when he is, he gets angry and hits the pig.*

2. Why does Spade tell Wyatt he can no longer reveal his real age?

   *What Spade is getting Wyatt to do is illegal and is a form of child abuse, no matter how good he is at it.*

3. In what ways does Wyatt change in these chapters?

   *Wyatt grows physically, but he also begins to act from his deep feelings and emotions. He begins to own his life.*

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4. In what ways does Wyatt’s relationship with Spade change in these chapters? *Answers may vary. Wyatt begins to question whether Spade should do some of the things he does, and makes his own judgments about them.*

5. Why does Gauge tell Wyatt he doesn’t want Spade selling around the gym? *Answers may vary. He probably thinks it’s illegal and he doesn’t want that activity around his guys or place of business.*

6. In what ways does Wyatt’s relationship with Lynnesha change in these chapters? *Answers may vary. Lynnesha and Wyatt grow closer when she cares for him. He is becoming very attached to her.*

**Analyzing the Writing: Verbs**

**Using Effective Verbs**

To convey meaning more effectively, writers use verbs that add color and power. For example, one of the contestants *heaved* the pig. He could have pushed it or thrown it, but *heaved* shows more specifically what the writer wants you to see.

Read each of the following sentences from the book. The verb is underlined. A more common synonym is shown. Explain why the author chose the verb he used instead.

1. —Sign up? the turtle lady *peeped*, stretching back her wrinkled neck so far I could see in her nose. (page 78)

*(said) Using “peeped” makes the woman’s voice seem small and scratchy, like a chicken or small animal.*

2. Half the kids *darted* toward the muddy pig . . . (page 82)

*(ran) Using “darted” shows the quick, sudden movements of the smaller children.*

3. So I’d *unfold* from the backseat and stand up, a head taller than any of the guys hoping for a job. (page 88)

*(straighten) Using “unfold” suggests both Wyatt’s size and the difficulty of getting out of the back seat.*

4. Wind started *whipping* through the trees. (page 90)

*(blowing) Using “whipping” shows the speed of the wind and the reaction of things blown by it.*
Responding to the Story
1. How did you feel as you read about Wyatt’s encounter with the injured bird?

   *Answers may vary. Readers may be bothered by the story. They will likely feel sorry for the bird, and for Wyatt, and may recognize how he battles down his emotions.*

2. What does Wyatt mean when he says “Turn your head off”?

   *Answers may vary. Wyatt does not want to think about what he is doing as he kills the bird. He uses the term to instruct himself not to think about it.*

3. What feelings do you think Wyatt is having toward Lynnesha at this point?

   *Answers may vary. Most readers will recognize that Lynnesha has become special to Wyatt at this point.*

4. Would your thoughts be similar or different from Wyatt’s as he faced his first fight? Explain.

   *Answers may vary. Many readers would find themselves more nervous or more concerned about the fight than Wyatt seems to be.*

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### Science Connection

**What’s a Fever?**

“Fever” may be what Wyatt calls his father, but in Chapter Fourteen, Wyatt experiences a real one—and it’s a dangerous matter. The body’s normal temperature is 98.6°F, and if it goes only a few degrees higher, serious damage—or even death—can occur.

Use reference books or the Internet to learn more about the causes of fevers and the risks that high fevers pose.

Write a paragraph or two about what you learned. Include information about when a fever is dangerous, what kind of damage one can cause, what treatments can help, and when medical help should be sought.

Did Lynnesha take the right actions?

*Answers will vary, but most will say she did exactly the right thing.*
Chapters Eighteen through Twenty-One
(Fifteen)
pages 115–141

Before You Read
Making Predictions
Now that Wyatt has a broken wrist, how do you think things will change between him and Uncle Spade?

*Answers may vary. Many students will predict he will take more charge of his life or try to influence Spade to improve his behavior.*

After You Read
Checking Predictions
How did the action in these chapters support or oppose your predictions above?

*Answers may vary. The birthday party and the visit to school are new elements in the story and were probably unexpected.*

Getting to Know the Characters
Characterization
1. Wyatt often uses incorrect grammar: “It wasn’t so bad having a broke wrist.”
   Why do you think the author has Wyatt speak like this?

*Answers may vary. These terms increase the illusion of voice in the novel. A character from Wyatt’s background and education might well speak this way, and so the sense of realism is strengthened.*

2. Although there are lots of things Wyatt doesn’t know, he is not stupid. How can you tell that Wyatt is an intelligent person?

*Answers may vary. Wyatt notices a lot of things, even if he can’t always explain or express them. He is curious and thoughtful, for the most part.*

3. How is Wyatt’s relationship with Lynnesha changing? Give an example from these chapters.

*Answers may vary. Wyatt is at peace in Lynnesha’s company and be wonders about her relationship to Spade. He also watches her physically as she does things, a sign of his growing attraction.*
Analyzing the Writing: Similes

The author sometimes uses a *simile* to describe something. A simile is a phrase that compares two things by using “like” or “as”: “She cried like a baby.” Underline the simile or similes in each example below and explain why Wyatt would make that specific comparison.

1. “The room spun with the faces of the ladies and Lynnesha and Spade and the ladies again, their words licking my ears like a slobbering dog, everybody talking and drinking and . . .” (page 118)
   *Answers may vary. This simile suggests the messy and uncontrollable nature of the conversations around Wyatt.*

2. “Bottles got pulled out of bags and cigars got lit, while I wavered like a tree in the wind, my dry mouth hanging open.” (page 119)
   *Answers may vary. This simile suggests the weakness and passivity that Wyatt feels under the influence of alcohol.*

3. “with huge teeth like house nails and scales like small knives . . .” (page 120–121)
   *Answers may vary. Wyatt has had experience with house nails and small knives, so he knows how they can cut and hurt. He also know the pain of filleting a fish.*

4. “As always, Sandy got the Chevy purring like a tiger.” (page 123)
   *Answers may vary. This simile suggests both the sound and the power of Sandy’s restoration of the Chevy.*

Responding to the Story

1. What are your thoughts about Wyatt’s introduction to alcohol?
   *Answers may vary. Most students will recognize that Wyatt is both legally too young and emotionally unready for this experience. Some will condemn Spade.*

2. Why do you think Spade got so angry at Wyatt at the school?
   *Answers may vary. Spade is embarrassed that he cannot supply what the school wants, and he has no documents or even legal custody of Wyatt. He is also out of his element, as is Wyatt, for neither of them is comfortable in worlds other than the one they know.*
Chapters Twenty-Two through Twenty-Six
(Clean Time)
pages 143–174

Before You Read

Making Predictions
Now that Wyatt won’t be attending school, what do you think he and Spade will do?

*Answers may vary. Many students will predict that Wyatt and Spade will go back on the road.*

The book could go on forever with Wyatt and Spade bouncing from place to place. What kinds of things think might change this pattern?

*Answers may vary.*

---

Mastering Vocabulary

Using Context Clues
A context clue is the information that is near a word in a sentence or paragraph that provides a hint about its meaning. These clues could be other words, its part of speech, information in the paragraph, or the situation in which a word appears. Find each of the words below on the indicated page in the book. As you read the passage where the word appears, try to figure out its meaning by using context clues. Then use a dictionary to check your definitions.

1. smirk (page 145) *A smirk is a mocking smile.*

2. graffitiing (page 147) *Graffiti is the act of drawing or writing on walls or public surfaces.*

3. flailing (page 150) *“Flailing” means waving about wildly in this context.*

4. clock (page 150) *In this context, “clock” means to strike someone.*

5. concoction (page 155) *A concoction is a mixture of many elements, here an exotic drink.*

6. winced (page 158) *“Winced” means drew back, possibly in pain.*

7. silhouette (page 167) *A silhouette is an outline or shadow against a background.*
After You Read
Checking Predictions
In what ways did things go differently from what you expected?
*Answers may vary.* Most students will have predicted the pair would go back on the road.

Understanding the Characters
1. What is “clean time” and what does it mean to Wyatt?
*Answers may vary.* “Clean Time” is how Wyatt refers to periods of time in which little thinking occurs. It is a passive, incurious, neutral state, equivalent to the “head off” term of an earlier chapter. It becomes a habit for Wyatt, who recognizes its usefulness for passing time, and its damage to one’s involvement with the world.

2. Why can’t Spade settle down and stay with Lynnesha?
*Answers may vary.* Spade is too restless to stay in one place for long. He is probably too lazy to keep up his end of a partnership. He is also too selfish, and not capable of the compromise that a relationship requires.

3. What does Wyatt expect of Fever when he sees him at Nana’s funeral? Why do you think he needs this?
*Answers may vary.* Wyatt deeply wants his father to say something to him, to engage with him in some way.

Analyzing the Writing
Time and Plot
A lot happens in these chapters. Sometimes long periods of time go by in a few pages. Other times, several pages are devoted to just a few moments.

1. What events in these chapters go by quickly but cover a long period of time? What does this compressed time show about Wyatt’s life?
*Answers may vary.* Wyatt goes through a year or so and many fights in just a few pages. This compression shows the sameness of his life, fights interspersed with “clean time.”

2. What events are focused upon slowly? Why does the author give these accounts in such great detail?
*Answers may vary.* For example, the author focuses upon the breakup of Spade and Lynnesha in great detail. This is an important event in terms of the plot, and the details make you slow down and pay attention to what is happening.
Chapters Twenty-Seven through Thirty
(The Deal Goes Bad)
pages 175–199

Before You Read
Making Predictions
Spade and Lynnesha have parted, and Wyatt has encountered his father. What do you think will happen next?

*Answers may vary. Most readers will speculate about the effects of these events on Wyatt and what he will do in response.*

After You Read
Checking Predictions
Did you foresee what would happen? What surprises did these four chapters bring?

*Answers may vary. Some readers, knowing the novel nears its end, may have expected Wyatt to break from Spade. Some may have expected him to seek Fever. Few would likely have predicted Wyatt’s going after Clark.*

Understanding Dynamic Characters
Dynamic characters are ones that grow or change as a story progresses. Some of the characters in *Why I Fight* don’t change. Nana remains about the same until she dies. Clark doesn’t seem to change much. Others do undergo some change, but their basic natures still remain.

For each of the following characters, list some ways they have changed up to this point in the story. Then list ways in which their basic natures have remained as they were when you first met them. *Answers may vary. Possible answers:*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Character</th>
<th>Ways the character has changed</th>
<th>Ways the character has remained as he or she was</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Wyatt</td>
<td>Grown strong, taken charge of his own life, knows what he can do.</td>
<td>Still wants to belong to someone, still uncertain as to how to go about finding his way.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spade</td>
<td>Weakened in relation to Wyatt, dealing drugs, lost his nicest friend</td>
<td>Still certain of his own ideas, still looking for deals, still self-reliant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lynnesha</td>
<td>Probably finished with Spade, may not see Wyatt again</td>
<td>Still a strong, determined person who can take care of herself.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fever</td>
<td>Older, weaker, less aggressive, and not a force in Wyatt’s life anymore</td>
<td>Still selfish, neglectful, and stupid. Still does not value his son.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Analyzing the Writing
Interpreting Point of View
Wyatt, the first-person narrator of Why I Fight, is a complex character. He often encounters things he doesn't understand. He often feels things deeply but isn't sure why and cannot express clearly what he does feel. Readers often have to interpret what Wyatt is experiencing, and they can understand Wyatt better than he understands himself.

Read each of the following excerpts and explain what is really happening in each, not only the action but also the underlying reasons for it.

1. [My brain] blamed [Clark] for ditching me, for picking those two darned Red Caps over me, for Spade, for Fever walking away, Lynnesha and Nana gone, for none of life being right. (page 179)
   Answers may vary. Wyatt is responding with anger to his lifelong isolation and loneliness, and the loss of his grandmother and Lynnesha, the only two people who ever cared about him at all.

2. I was hardwood walking, and I marched straight through the frightened crowd, shaking my head to splatter water over them as I said:
   —Spade, we’re getting out of this stupid place. (page 181)
   Answers may vary. Wyatt is like a robot, walking stiffly and leaving his “mark” on the people as he’s ready to leave this place behind him. He’s become the leader now.

3. By this time, after fighting for years, I was barely noticing pain. I just put the cuts and scrapes in Clean Time. It all goes away sooner or later. (p. 185)
   Answers may vary. He has learned how to shut off both the physical and emotional pain of his life. He expects nothing to bang around, even the discomfort of living .

4. I didn’t see it. I could hear the shouts and cheers and cusswords, and the thud of my own body slamming that hard dirt. It smelled like liquor. They turned off the lights. Everybody went quiet. My body disappeared. The radio lost its signal and the static buzzed. (page 186)
   These are Wyatt’s physical perceptions as he is knocked out and loses the fight to Ramon Caida.

Responding to the Story
1. What was your reaction to Wyatt’s bout with Ramon Caida?
   Answers may vary. Some readers will have been surprised at the loss.

2. How do Spade and Wyatt react to not moving around anymore? How are they changing?
   Answers may vary. Wyatt has grown up a lot, and can take care of himself. Spade’s treatment of Lynnesha outraged Wyatt, and Spade no longer has much of value to offer Wyatt.
Chapters Thirty-One through Thirty-Five
(The Parking Lot)
pages 201–228

Before You Read
Making Predictions
Wyatt wants to change his life. What can he do? How do you think the novel will end?

*Answers may vary.*

After You Read
Checking Predictions
Did the story end as you thought it would? In what ways was it different?
*Answers may vary. Some readers may have predicted his return to his parents.*
*Others will have been disappointed that he has not sought out Lynnesha.*

Analyzing the Writing: Flashback
A *flashback* is a literary technique in which the story goes back in time to show something that happened in the past. In Chapter Thirty-Three, Wyatt explains why he “took off” with Uncle Spade. This is a flashback.

1. When do the events in this chapter take place?

*These events take when Wyatt was twelve-and-a-half years old, and explain how he came to burn down his house.*

2. How do the events recalled in this chapter explain Wyatt’s attitude toward Fever and his mother?

*Answers may vary. These events show the pathetic loneliness of the small boy and the miserable life of neglect and abuse he faced at the hands of his parents.*

3. The final chapter of the book ends in the parking lot. Look back at Chapter 1. Where is Wyatt as he begins the tale? In what sense is the entire book a flashback?

*Both Chapters One and Thirty-Five take place just away from the parking lot that Fever has used Wyatt’s money to build. The story begins with older Wyatt explaining what has just happened, and loops back through his life until it comes back to the present.*

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Responding to the Story

1. Why is Wyatt finished with life on the road with Uncle Spade?

*Answers may vary. Wyatt sees that for all his travel, Spade is going nowhere. Wyatt wants more out of life than this, and cannot forgive Spade for striking Lynnesha.*

2. Why does Spade not argue when Wyatt says he wants to go to the city?

*Answers may vary. Spade sees that he no longer has any influence or control of the boy, who has grown up and wants to be his own man.*

3. What was Wyatt’s life like in his old house when he was twelve-and-a-half?

*Answers may vary. Wyatt’s life was terrible. He was alone for days on end, fending for himself, without friends or caregivers of any kind.*

4. How did Wyatt come to burn down his old house?

*Answers may vary. Wyatt held his own “birthday party,” and in sadness and frustration, began to tear and burn comic strips. His anger released, he was glad to see the place burn.*

5. How did Fever and Ma respond to Wyatt’s arrival at their apartment?

*Answers may vary. They responded cautiously but casually. It didn’t seem to matter much to them, so long as there was no immediate trouble.*

6. What did Fever know about Wyatt’s life on the road with Uncle Spade?

*Answers may vary. Apparently, he knew all about it, but just didn’t care where Wyatt was or what he was doing.*

7. Why does Wyatt agree to give Fever the money for the parking lot?

*Answers may vary. For all the neglect, Wyatt still wants to belong*
8. What finally causes Wyatt to snap and hit Fever?

*Answers may vary.* Fever blamed Wyatt for the failure of his scheme, berated him, swore at him, and finally smirked at him. Wyatt no longer had to take the abuse.

9. How does Wyatt feel as the novel ends?

*Answers may vary.* Wyatt says he is “okay with it,” and although it is not clear what he will do next, readers sense that he has learned enough to make his own way.

**Making Connections**

1. Wyatt begins Chapter Thirty-One by asking “Can you see yourself?” How does Wyatt’s question pertain to any young person?

*Answers may vary.* Many young people are trying to figure out where they fit in the world, and they try to square their observations of the world with what they can see of themselves.

2. Knowing what you know about Wyatt’s parents, would you have done as he did and returned to them? Why or why not?

*Answers may vary.* Most readers will not be as generous as Wyatt was.

3. What do you think Wyatt will do now? What would you do in his situation?

*Answers may vary.* Some may think he will find a way to keep fighting in order to make money. Others may think he will decide to go back to school. He might want to join the military and put his skills to the test.

4. Do you think you could be good friends with Wyatt? Why or why not?

*Answers may vary.* Most readers will like Wyatt, and would like to be friends with him, but some may note he is a loner who does not have many social skills, and though a good person, is one who is volatile when uncomfortable. Wyatt has things yet to learn.
**Martial Arts**

Wyatt is not really a boxer, but what little training he has serves him well. He learns to move, to stay light on his feet, and to protect himself.

All of the forms of martial arts require discipline and balance; any one of them and may take years of training. Some types of martial arts include boxing, wrestling, kickboxing, fencing, judo, karate, tae kwon do, aikido and savate.

Choose two of these or other forms of martial arts and find out more about them.

- What are their rules and characteristics?
- What are their histories?
- How does one learn them?
- What are the rankings or classes of accomplishment?
- How are they alike and different?

Present a brief report on the ones you choose.

In addition, compile a list of martial arts opportunities available in your area. If you were serious about learning one of these martial arts forms, how would you proceed?
Wrap-up

Reviewing Predictions
Turn to page 6 of this guide and review your first predictions. Complete the chart on the page.

Analyzing the Writing
1. How would you describe the writing style of Why I Fight to someone who has not read the book? (Focus on the style, not the events of the story.)

   Answers may vary. Most students will focus on Wyatt’s first-person voice. Others will discuss the unconventional grammar and realistic scenes.

2. Wyatt, the narrator, often speaks in ungrammatical forms. How did this affect your experience with the book as you read it?

   Answers may vary. For most readers, these variations heighten the sense of realism.

Thinking About the Genre
Realistic Fiction

1. One test of realistic fiction is whether the reader finds it believable. Do you think the story of Why I Fight is realistic? Why or why not?

   Answer may vary. Most readers will likely find the book realistic. Reasons will vary based on personal experiences or other criteria.

2. What things does the writer do to make the story seem realistic? Give some specific examples.

   Answers may vary. Wyatt’s voice, concrete physical details of the environment, vivid descriptions of people and the fighting may all be cited.

3. This story seems to be set in the present. Could it have been set in any other time period? Why or why not?

   Answers may vary. There does not seem to be much in the story that could not have taken place anytime from 1950 or so onward.
Thinking About the Story Elements

Explain each of the following story elements as they apply to *Why I Fight*.

1. The central character of *Why I Fight*, Wyatt Reaves, goes through many changes as he accompanies his uncle for five years. Summarize some of the things Wyatt learns. *Answers may vary.* He learns to fight. He learns to observe people carefully. He learns to trust his inner perceptions. He learns to rely on his own judgment. He learns that some people cannot be helped. He learns to be an adult.

2. The first chapter and the last chapter take place in the same place and the same time. Explain how setting the story as a flashback helps the story seem more complete. *Answers may vary.* The story begins and ends in the same place, with Wyatt having learned who he is and how to get along in the world. The story of Wyatt’s travel and growth from that faraway time when he burned his home to the present when he knows who he is has ended.

3. What is Wyatt trying to understand in these years? *Answers may vary.* Wyatt wants to know more than anything how to fit in and be cared about in the world. He also wants to understand why his own parents did not care about him.

Making Connections

1. Wyatt’s life is probably different from yours. What feelings, attitudes, and challenges do you have in common? What things are different? *Answers may vary.* Many students will identify with Wyatt’s search for identity and his desire to know how to do the right things in the world.

2. What new things did you learn from this book? How do you think knowing these things will affect you from now on? *Answers may vary.* Many students may remark on journeying through a world that they would not have known about or imagined. Others may comment on the squalor in which young Wyatt lived.

3. Would you recommend *Why I Fight* to a friend? Why or why not? *Answers may vary.* Most students will respond that the book is worth their friends’ reading because of its strong voice, unique tale of life on the road, and appealing central character.


Library Applications

Research

Boxing: The Sweet Science

The sport of boxing, nicknamed “the sweet science” for its necessary combination of technique and courage, has had many notable champions. Some of these champions have symbolized the times in which they lived in larger-than-life ways. Boxers such as John L. Sullivan, “Gentleman Jim” Corbett, Jack Johnson, Joe Louis, Rocky Marciano, and Muhammad Ali represented their eras as well as their skills.

Have students select a boxer (one of the above or another who equally represents the sport and his time) and learn more about his life. Students should research:

- Biographical information about the person
- Information about the time and place in which he lived
- Notable fights in the boxer’s career
- Personal details of interest about the individual
- Why he was an important figure in the sport
- What he represented beyond the sport

Students may use books, magazines, newspaper articles, or the Internet to learn more about the subject. Guide students in effective research skills, including how to find and evaluate sources, especially on the Internet.

Writing: Road Trip Journal

The narrator of Why I Fight seems to be telling a story orally, but in another way, the book can be considered a journal of his travels from ages twelve-and-a-half to seventeen. It is rich in details, thoughts, and feelings. Have students keep a personal journal about their lives for a week or so. Ask that each entry include:

- A clear record of events
- Concrete details about physical experience: sights, sounds, touch
- Personal responses to events: thoughts, emotions, questions, concerns

Ask students to be as honest as Wyatt when they write in their journal. Explain that the audience for the journal is themselves. It may help to suggest that they write as if they are trying to explain their daily life to someone else, an anonymous observer, as Wyatt seems to be doing in Why I Fight. Students need not share their journals with anyone.
Using Local Resources
Fun in Your Own Backyard
Most towns and cities have at least one martial arts studio where students, younger and older, can learn the philosophies, techniques, and history of one or more kinds of martial art. Students who have some interest or curiosity about these arts could be encouraged to interview the master, or sensei, of one of those establishments.

The student could create a presentation based on the following:

➢ Interview of the person who teaches the martial art
➢ Photos taken (with permission) of students as they take a class or compete in a tournament
➢ Research about the history of the sport
➢ Comparison and contrast of two different martial arts

The presentation could be as a written report, an oral report, a PowerPoint presentation, or other audio-visual production.

Perhaps the library could invite a special speaker to come in and talk about his or her martial art.

Discussion Time
Anger Management
Anger is a common emotion, and in and of itself, it is neither good nor bad. However, sometimes people have trouble controlling their anger, and as a result they find themselves behaving negatively.

Encourage students to talk about anger: in general, in others, and in themselves. As they discuss the topic, make a list of:

➢ synonyms for anger
➢ ways anger is harmful to one’s physical health
➢ ways anger is harmful to relationships
➢ ways anger is harmful to one’s mental health
➢ ways anger can be helpful
➢ negative ways to use anger
➢ positive ways to use anger
➢ alternatives to anger

If it seems this is a good topic for your school to research further, contact a mental health professional to meet with your staff and/or to do a school-wide presentation about anger, bullies, or other appropriate topics.
Suggestions for Further Reading

**Fiction books about boxing and martial arts:**


**Nonfiction books about boxing and martial arts:**


**Other relating to travel and coming-of-age journals:**


**Books on anger:**

### Correlations to National Standards for Grades 9–12

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<th>Standard Objective</th>
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