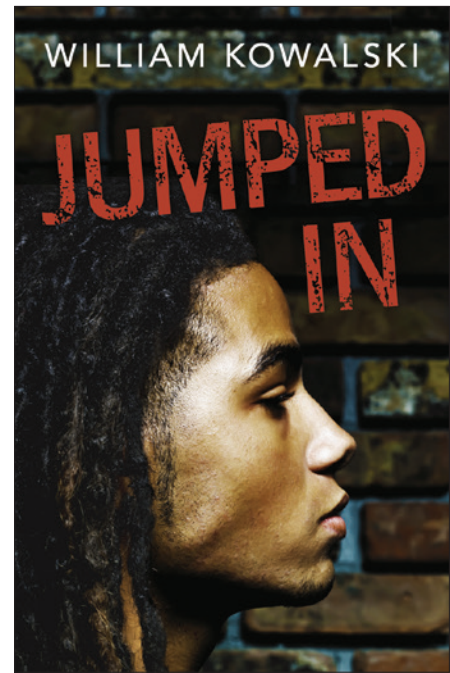


READING GUIDE



JUMPED IN WILLIAM KOWALSKI

Reading level: 2.8

Interest level: Adult

Themes: diversity, inner city, community, gangs,
poverty, racism, addiction, violence, education

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Summary

Rasheed is a 16-year-old who keeps a low profile in his neighborhood. He's stopped going to school because there's too much violence—even just getting there is a feat of heroism, considering the dismal social conditions of the city streets. He tries to fly under the radar of the neighborhood gang, the E Street Locals, for fear they'll try to induct him into their drug ring. It's nothing that interests him: because of the Locals' drug activity, his 19-year-old sister Daneeka is wheelchair-bound and has been for a decade, having been struck while sleeping by a stray bullet from a gang fight. Rasheed's mother is chronically depressed, unavailable to her children and addicted to her daughter's painkillers.

Rasheed spends his days behind the dumpster at the 7-11, where he can get a wireless signal, watching old TV shows like *Leave it to Beaver* and *The Brady Bunch*. He idealizes the simplicity of the characters' lives and wishes his life could only be so neat and tidy. The ocean of disparity between the social advantages of white people versus those of black people is not lost on him. He is embittered by what he sees as having had the misfortune of being born into the underclass.

Sometimes Rasheed crosses the invisible class line and goes to wander around on the university campus. He filches food from the student union and sits in the library, imagining that he, too, might one day go to college. One of those mornings, he is hassled by a uniformed police officer who wants to know why he's hanging out where he so obviously doesn't belong. Rasheed lies, saying he's taking the criminal justice program. The cop backs off when an attractive white girl, Lanaia, rises to Rasheed's defense, covering for him and telling the officer that the young man actually lives in residence. Rasheed is mystified yet pleased by the fact that she sticks up for him.

On a Friday, Rasheed heads back to campus to see whether he can locate Lanaia again. As he makes his way there, a car full of Locals approaches. Rasheed is worried to see their leader, Boss, in the passenger seat. The car stops and Boss beckons Rasheed over. It's the moment he has been avoiding for years. Boss asks why Rasheed doesn't want to run with them, then tells him he used to know Rasheed's father. He surprises Rasheed by telling him that his father, also a Local, actually used to be his close friend. It's still not enough to tempt Rasheed to join. The last thing he wants

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is to hang out with the criminals who shot his sister and ruined his family. He is terrified that his life will turn out like so many other young men's lives in the hood: in and out of detention until an early death, while causing pain to everyone around them.

Back on campus, Rasheed runs into the police officer again. Officer Townsend hassles Rasheed, and Rasheed shoots back that the man should instead go look for a real crime to investigate. In exchange for not being escorted off the campus, Rasheed agrees to a deal: if he can get a bunch of students to stop skateboarding on a nearby staircase, the cop will lay off and let him keep hanging around. Rasheed succeeds, telling the young men that what they're doing endangers people nearby, and sends them packing. Impressed by the boy's willingness to take a risk in the name of enforcement, Officer Townsend buys him lunch. The two talk, and Rasheed admits to feeling satisfied when he's able to help keep people safe. Lanaia stops by to say hello and Rasheed, flush with his recent success in running off the skateboarders, asks for her number. She gives it to him.

In order to be able to call Lanaia, however, Rasheed needs money to buy phone minutes. He swipes a woman's wallet from her bag and buys a phone card, then takes himself out for breakfast. Afterward, just as he is texting with Lanaia, a cop car whoops to the curb and Rasheed gets randomly stopped, searched and interrogated. When Rasheed refuses to tell the police where he just was, they harass him, threaten him with jail and demand to know where he got the money in his pocket. Suddenly, another car screeches up: half a dozen Locals have come to his defense. They intimidate the police, setting Rasheed free—but now he owes the gang for the favor.

A short while later, Rasheed is jumped in: kicked and beaten senseless at the Locals' neighborhood hangout, then awarded the black head rag. Now he's part of the gang, selling crack on the street corners, farther away from his criminal justice dreams than ever. As soon as he's allowed to go home, Rasheed calls Officer Townsend and makes him a deal.

The next day, as planned, Rasheed dials Officer Townsend's number and slips his phone back into his pocket. Now his phone can record all the goings-on in the Locals' hangout. When Rasheed utters his code word, the police storm the place and conduct the massive bust they've been waiting for. Rasheed is shot in the process. He is visited by his dead father while in intensive care, and learns that his father tried to do the best he could with the crummy hand he'd been dealt. His father tells Rasheed his time isn't up yet—he still has work to do.

When Rasheed comes to, his lung is healing well, many Locals have gone to jail, and Lanaia is keeping him company. She promises to help him get his GED first, then find funding and scholarships, so that he can pursue his criminal justice dreams.

Questions for Discussion

1. At the beginning of the book, Rasheed asks whether the hood makes people crazy, or whether crazy people make the hood. What do you think?





2. In chapter 1, Rasheed says:

And if I see a cop, I know I need to run like hell, or my ass is gonna get beat. It doesn't matter if I didn't do anything wrong. I was walking while brown. Around here that's a crime.

This bias that Rasheed sees against African-American people is very real, especially in urban areas in the United States. But what would things look like if law enforcement and the judiciary emphasized understanding and rehabilitation, rather than distrust, force, coercion and detainment?

3. As you see it, why does life in the E Street Locals not appeal to Rasheed? What makes him different, when so many other youth are accepting of, if not eager about, joining gang life?
4. Explain how Rasheed idealizes the lives of people on “old TV.”
5. While sitting at the university and watching student life go by, Rasheed reflects that the girls there probably only want a guy with lots of money and good grades with a car, who's from a good family (ch. 2). Is he right? Would his assessment have differed, say, 15 years ago? Why are those old scripts still so powerful?
6. In chapter 3, when Rasheed falls asleep in the library and is shaken awake by Officer Townsend, he notices all the other students staring—people who “had the good sense not to be born into minorities.” Discuss the philosophical implications of this wry observation.
7. Rasheed sometimes approaches the world as though he is an alien entity studying the beings called humans. Essentially, he follows the wisdom that *You are a spiritual being having a human experience*. What is the psychological and emotional advantage in taking this approach to life?
8. In chapter 5, Rasheed says the rule of living in the hood is not to get involved if you see a problem. You just keep moving. Talk about how this reaction to human misery has spread throughout the wider culture. When did things begin to change? And how did it get so complicated?
9. Rasheed's father used to belong to the Locals. That was back when the function of gangs was to look out for the people they protected. But it's been a long time since the Locals behaved with that kind of honor, reflects Rasheed. *Now they're just a bunch of wasted punks*, he thinks (ch. 8). How much do you know about the way gangs evolved? Discuss what you know of gang culture today.
10. In chapter 7, Rasheed steals a woman's wallet and takes her cash, then throws the rest of the wallet into a sewer. Here are his thoughts around his actions:

I don't feel bad about stealing. There is the law, and then there is justice. Just because some things are illegal doesn't mean they're wrong. What's wrong is that some people have so much while others have so little. Sometimes a little stealing can actually make things right again.

Discuss his reasoning. How is he right? How is he wrong? Explain.

11. Most adolescents and digital natives default to texting or communicating via social media instead of picking up the phone and dialing. How has this shift away from real-time, verbalized communication affected our social wellbeing? Our emotional wellbeing?
12. In chapter 12, when Rasheed is dying after being shot, he crosses briefly into a place where he is able to connect with his dead father. His father tells him that you can choose everything in your life—even the very life you're born into, depending on what you have to learn. What do you think?



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13. *Jumped In* ends with Rasheed realizing that the only moment that matters is the one that's happening right now. As you see it, why do so many of us live as though the future—or the past—somehow matters more?
14. As you see it, what is the central theme of this book? Do you consider the story to be a parable?
15. Write a different ending to *Jumped In*.

