

FIST STICK KNIFE GUN

A Personal History of Violence in America

Geoffrey Canada

TEACHERS' GUIDE

Patricia Rigley



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“I think the one thing in common for children in this situation is that their age of innocence is over at a very young age. The reality of their lives is sometimes too harsh for these children to handle and it hits them very hard. They miss part of their childhood to learn to fight in the war they face every day—home.”

—Crystal, age 12

“Life in our time has become violent and a challenge for survival for young people living in the inner cities. Guns and drugs are around every corner, in the alleyways, or in the open.”

—Tex, age 13

He ain't brave,
he's petrified,
petrified of being gunned down
and petrified of not being
accepted by the respected older guys.

—Helen, age 12

cries filled with pain and desperation
echoed down block unanswered.

No pity,
no remorse,
no mercy,
in South Bronx battle for survival
true heart is necessary.

—Joanna, age 13

For who is left to turn to
When security and trust
Have been gunned down
Common sense has surrendered
And only fear looks on
Untouched?

—Emily, age 12

A Note to Teachers

As these excerpts from the poems and essays written by my eighth grade English students indicate, Geoffrey Canada's *Fist Stick Knife Gun*, a poignant account of his coming-of-age on the streets of New York City's South Bronx, is the basis for one of the most vital and successful units I teach.

Adolescents barely beyond their own childhoods are touched, angered, and inspired by Geoff's true story of struggling to break out of the streets in which survival meant downplaying one's intelligence while the choice of weapons escalated and the deaths of friends became commonplace. My students are fascinated by this book from beginning to end: by Geoff's story of how his mother taught her sons to go out into the street and defend themselves, by the tale of the knife that injured Geoff's finger and why he kept the scars, by his return to the place he wanted so desperately to leave, and by the end of the book and the fates of Geoff's friends.

In their essays, poems, and discussions, many students identify with the events and ideas in the book. The South Bronx is not really that far from some of their personal experiences, or, at least, from the world they witness in newspapers or on television. Students are eager to examine this world, to discuss it, to try and make some sense of the violence in our society and to discover, through their own voices, ways in which they can follow Geoff's lead. They are inspired to have an effect on a society in which a simple fist fight escalates into bullets shattering the hopes, dreams, and futures of innocent and peaceful children.

How to Use This Guide

The following questions draw out students' thoughts about and reactions to *Fist Stick Knife Gun* and help them understand the people, events, conflicts, and issues the book introduces. Depending on your style, these questions can be used in large or small classroom discussions, in tests or quizzes, in homework assignments, or as part of any innovative classroom exercise you create.

In my classes, I integrate these questions into my lessons in reading comprehension, spelling, punctuation, and grammar. But most importantly—especially if you teach social studies or any other related course—they educate students, validate their experiences, and serve as touchstones for very animated and involved classroom discussion. *Fist Stick Knife Gun* grabs students at all levels of ability.

Optional Lesson Plan Ideas

This guide moves through the book from beginning to end, addressing several chapters at a time. Following is the lesson plan I've developed over many semesters; it can guide you through several weeks of study, or it can be cut, condensed, and/or rearranged to fit your own interests and time frame.

Everything mentioned in this plan is included in this guide, with the exception of excerpts from Richard Wright's *Black Boy* and the poems listed in numbers 14 and 20, below. Your school or public library should have these.

1. Students read the first chapter of *Fist Stick Knife Gun* in class.
2. Students take home and read "The Street," an excerpt of Richard Wright's *Black Boy*.
3. Students have two days to complete a homework assignment of writing an essay comparing the incidents in the first chapter of *Fist Stick Knife Gun* with the incidents in "The Street."
4. The essays are read and discussed in class.
5. Students continue to read and take notes on Chapters One through Ten of *Fist Stick Knife Gun*. I present the questions about these chapters as a test and allow students to use their notes as they write short essays in response to the questions.
6. We discuss Chapters One through Ten.
7. Students read and take notes on Chapters Eleven through Fifteen. I present the questions about these chapters as a test and allow students to use their notes as they write short essays in response to the questions.
8. We discuss Chapters Eleven through Fifteen.
9. For homework, students read Chapter Seven of *Black Boy* and make notes regarding imagery in Wright's writing; themes of prejudice, ignorance, and racism; and details of Wright's personal experiences.
10. We discuss Chapter Seven of *Black Boy*.
11. Students read and take notes on Chapters Sixteen through Twenty-Five. I present the questions about these chapters as a test and allow students to use their notes as they write short essays in response to the questions.

12. Students prepare journal reflections on selected excerpts from *Fist Stick Knife Gun*.
13. Students share the quotes they've selected for journal entries and discuss their reflections.
14. For homework, students read four poems: "Primer for Blacks" by Gwendolyn Brooks; "To Be Young, Gifted, and Black" by Weldon J. Irvine, Jr.; "Mother to Son," by Langston Hughes; and "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," by Langston Hughes.
15. Students write notes on these poems as they connect them with the ideas and incidents in *Fist Stick Knife Gun*. We spend two days analyzing and discussing the poems in small and large groups.
16. Students pick out some of the most poignant scenes or ideas in *Fist Stick Knife Gun* on which to base an original poem. As homework, they write the first drafts of their original poems.
17. First drafts are shared in class, and students give each other positive feedback regarding the best aspects of the poems. Students write their second drafts as homework.
18. Students share and discuss the final drafts of their poems and create original covers for *Fist Stick Knife Gun* or drawings illustrating the poignant events in the book.
19. A bulletin board of the covers, illustrations, poems, essays, and reflections is displayed in the school hallway.
20. Students memorize a poem; either "I Dream a World," by Langston Hughes or "The Road Not Taken," by Robert Frost. After their recitations, the class discusses the connections between the poems and *Fist Stick Knife Gun*.

Questions for Chapters One through Ten

1. Describe the incident with the jacket when Geoff says he "first became aware of violence." What does it tell us and why do you think he includes it in the beginning of his story?
2. Describe how young Geoff lost his "innocence" regarding trust and friendship through the incident with the boy with the ringworm.
3. In Chapter Three, Geoff talks about some of the "rules" of the street

regarding fist fights and tells about the fight he had with David. Explain this incident and your thoughts about what he learned from it.

4. In his work at the Robert White School in Boston, Geoff had a unique way of handling a situation with two boys who were anxious to finish a fight they had started. Explain. How did Geoff's experience help him understand what to do?
5. Geoff was in class 6-1 at PS 99. Explain what this meant regarding his intelligence and "reputation." How did he keep his "reputation"?
6. Describe two incidents that made Geoff admire Mike.
7. Carefully describe the incident in which Kevin had to "prove" himself. What do you think he proved, and why was it important to him?
8. Give some specific details about Geoff and the incident with the man shooting the gun. What lessons did Geoff learn?
9. A man who had been fighting with Kevin pulled a gun on Mike, Kevin, Geoff, and the others. Describe the incident and what Geoff learned from it.
10. It is significant that Geoff never had his finger fixed. Describe the incident connected to the wounded finger and Geoff's reasoning about it. Explain your thoughts about his decision.

Questions for Chapters Eleven through Fifteen

1. In Chapter Eleven Geoff discusses the Rockefeller Laws on drugs. These laws were passed during the term of Governor Nelson A. Rockefeller in New York during the early 1970s. Describe the laws and the effects they had on the drug traffic and drug dealers of New York.
2. In the same chapter, Geoff talks about heroin and cocaine. Explain what you learned about them.
3. Describe what Geoff calls the "altar of violence" in America's ghettos: the "heroes," the idea of a "rep," and the "businessmen." Explain the stories of Charles and Hector in these terms.
4. What is Geoff's philosophy regarding the teaching and use of martial arts? How did he develop it?
5. Explain Robert's dilemma and Geoff's thoughts about it. What do you

think about it?

6. What happened to Luis and how did this lead to a serious incident affecting Robert?
7. Describe Geoff's gun. Where did he get it, how did it influence him, why did he feel he needed it? What did he finally do with it and why?
8. What do you understand about the Rheedlen Centers for Children and Families? How did Geoff's experience lead to his commitment there?
9. Who was Joe and what happened to him? How did this affect Ramon?
10. How did Geoff handle the situation? Should things have been different?
11. Choose one of these topics to describe: the situation with the boy waving the knife at the Center or how the boy with the handgun almost put an end to the community dances. How was the incident resolved? What were the risks and were they worth taking?

Questions for Chapters Sixteen through Twenty-Five

1. When a group of young men went to the Rheedlen Center to play basketball, a serious situation arose for Shawn and Geoff. How did this happen? How was it resolved?
2. Describe the work of Marian Wright Edelman and some of the powerful facts Geoff learned at two dinner meetings with her and others. How did Geoff use this knowledge?
3. How do you think young African-American males and police officers see each other? How do you think police officers see poor communities? How do their views affect how they treat each other?
4. How did Geoff and his colleagues choose the location for the first Beacon School? What activities are provided in these schools? How do they help?
5. Geoff and two girls walked away from a shocking, violent scene. Explain what happened and their reaction to it. What do you think about their choice and why?
6. Describe two key events that occurred when Janet Reno visited Harlem and the Rheedlen Center. Why do you think these are important? What do they show about the community and about Ms. Reno?

7. While working on creating the Peacemakers Program, Geoff was reminded of a personal incident regarding trusting an adult. How did this memory inform his actions?
8. Explain at least two of the actions Geoff says government must take to eliminate some of the violence in our streets. Why do you think he believes in them? Do you?
9. In the final chapter, we learn some details about Geoff's adult personal life and, in particular, about the incident involving Alex. What happened, and why do you think Geoff includes it in the book? How is it important to our understanding of him and his commitment to what he does?

An Assignment for Personal Reflection

Read each of the following quotes from *Fist Stick Knife Gun* and choose one from each chapter on which to write a journal reflection. Connect the quote to events in the book, to observations made in class discussion, or to events in your life or the lives of the people you know. You may also choose to relate the quotes to what you know about adolescence, violence, preparing children for success and survival today, or how poverty, weapons, and the early loss of innocence affect many young people.

Chapter Sixteen

"I found myself thinking more like a military strategist than a human services executive."

"But I had lived many years where my life didn't depend on the subtle clues that those who lived on the streets could read like an encyclopedia."

"But the angry young men aren't the enemy."

Chapter Seventeen

"The suffering of poor children as they try to cope with a world that crashes upon them like a tidal wave, drowning so many, and so many washed out to sea to flounder and pray for rescue."

"The 1983 handgun slump taught the industry that it could not take sales for granted and forced its members to rethink how they marketed their product."

"I looked at Marian Wright Edelman and the look of disgust on her face told it all."

“The problem with a used gun was that you didn’t know if it had any ‘bodies’ attached to it.”

Chapter Eighteen

“When you see the problems of crime and violence in these simplistic terms you begin to develop solutions that are also simplistic.”

“Most times the closest the poor come to justice in America is the police, and so they often think American justice stinks.”

“I was happy when I no longer looked like a young man because this afforded me a little protection.”

“Did the long tough prison sentence deter people from selling drugs?”

Chapter Nineteen

“This was a block that people who could afford to had long since fled, a block you could find in any city in America.”

“The night before we were to open the Countee Cullen Community Center at that school, Joe and Shawn asked to see me. ‘They killed a young man right next to the entrance of the school last night,’ Shawn reported. ‘Shot him dead.’”

Chapter Twenty

“Many think of outside agencies and ‘do-gooders’ as carpetbaggers, there to make a quick buck off their misery and then move on.”

“They decided they wanted a ‘play street.’”

“Rheedlen’s Beacon program at Countee Cullen is designed to help rebuild the Central Harlem community that surrounds it.”

“We discovered long ago that we cannot save children without making as strong an effort to help their parents.”

“There are many exciting things happening at our Beacon School.”

Chapter Twenty-One

“Chicago is a city under siege.”

“This is Union Avenue, ain’t no cops coming here.”

“She hugged him back, unaware that this was a person who only a short time before had considered all law enforcement people the enemy.”

Chapter Twenty-Two

“There is a war raging in our inner cities across this country, and our children are the main combatants.”

“One of the key components of our Peacemakers program is involving the children themselves in designing effective anti-violence strategies.”

“People often say to me that there seems to be a bias against poor minority children who do well in school, that they are actually punished by other kids for being ‘smart.’”

“There is no doubt in my mind that if I’d had access to a gun I would have been prepared to use it that day.”

Chapter Twenty-Three

“The fact of the matter seems quite simple to me. Either we address the murder and mayhem in our country or we simply won’t be able to continue to have the kind of democratic society that we Americans cherish.”

“But there are things that government could and should do right away to begin to end the violence on our streets.”

Chapter Twenty-Four

“Young men in Harlem know death.”

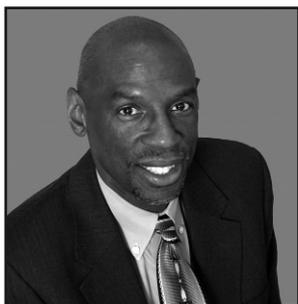
“How ironic to have figured a way to get out of the South Bronx, a way to find the peace that was so elusive to me as a child, only to be right back at the same place thirty years later.”

Chapter Twenty-Five

“The city is cutting youth services again.”

“This is also part of the act—all the attention to detail keeps him from feeling ashamed.”

“And if I could get the mayors, and the governors, and the president to look into the eyes of the five-year-olds of this nation, dressed in old raggedy clothes, whose zippers are broken but whose dreams are still alive, they would know what I know—that children need people to fight for them.”



About Geoffrey Canada and *Fist Stick Knife Gun*

Comments from critics:

“[Geoffrey Canada] is one of the few authentic heroes of New York and one of the best friends children have, or ever will have, in our nation.” —Jonathan Kozol

“Here is the role model, the griot, the nurturer, the brother who never left the ‘hood because he keeps looking into the faces of the children and seeing himself there.” —Patricia Smith, *Boston Globe*

“Geoffrey Canada is a front-line soldier in the fight against violent street crime.” —*USA Today*

“Canada’s experiences make *Fist Stick Knife Gun* not a theoretical treatise, but a glimpse through the eye of an expert. . . . [A] unique blend of storytelling, investigative political history, and strategies for individual and government participation.” —*San Francisco Chronicle*

Geoffrey Canada is the president and CEO of Harlem Children’s Zone, a nonprofit, community-based organization serving more than 17,000 children and adults, which has been featured on *The Colbert Report*, *Good Morning America*, *The Today Show*, and *60 Minutes* and in the *New York Times Magazine*. He is also the author of:

Reaching Up for Manhood

Transforming the Lives of Boys in America

“With vivid stories from his own childhood and from the boys he works with now, [Canada] provides a powerful account of what life is like for men and boys in urban America today.” —Robin Browley, *Creative Classroom*

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Patricia Rigley has taught sixth-, seventh-, and eighth-grade English in Boston, Brookline, and now Newton.



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