

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS for *The Pact* - Pick five and answer in complete sentences. Be prepared to turn in your assignment on the first day of class.

1. "How can a mother's pleas compete with the thrill of having wads of cash handed to you when your pockets are empty and the pantry is bare?" Sam writes (p.53) "Sure, you see cats your age dying all the time, but you figure that's the price you pay for being born poor. And you accept your fate, unless someone or something convinces you that you have the power to change the script." Discuss the narrators' success in the context of this statement. Who or what provided that "someone or something" for these three boys?
2. The narrators cite role models as huge influences on their lives. Discuss how Mr. Jackson, Miss Johnson, Reggie, and Carla affected George, Sam, and Rameck. Do you think individuals are encouraged to take on leadership roles in troubled communities? Why or why not?
3. How did family relationships influence these boys' lives? What stands out about each of their childhood experiences at home?
4. Each of the narrators describes a turning point at which specific decisions or choices—to turn away from certain friends, to never return to jail, to study harder—changed the course of their lives. Are such moments recognizable only in hindsight? Do you think that shaping the events of your life into a story would influence the importance you placed on specific events? Discuss.
5. Peer pressure plays an enormous role in the lives of young people in every circumstance. How did it play into Sam, George, and Rameck's lives? What drew them together and what kept their "pact" alive?
6. Rameck's grandmother tries to teach him a tough lesson when she takes back the money she's lent him for portfolio pictures because she found out that his mother used it to pay the utility bill. "You can't help nobody till you help yourself," she tells him. Do you agree with her philosophy? What do you think Rameck took away from that experience?
7. Education is at the center of this success story. But teachers like Miss Johnson, who nurtured and inspired George, were less prevalent than those who "...just didn't know how to reach us and didn't seem to care. They expected and accepted mediocrity or less, and unfortunately, we usually gave no more." Why do you think George felt this way? To what degree are teachers—and students—to blame for this situation? Does the book suggest any ways to improve the system?

8. If the EOP program that gave these three young men a chance at college—and the hundreds of other programs like it—didn't exist, do you think they would have succeeded anyway? Why or why not?

9. George ends the book sitting at his desk watching teenagers outside, wondering: "Where are their parents? Where are the cops?"—though he adheres to the unwritten code of the streets, of course, and doesn't call them—and finally, "Where are our young leaders to show the kids something different from what they see around here?" Has this book changed the way in which you'd answer those questions?

10. After reading this book, what do you conclude is required to enable other young people in rough environments to achieve? Who is ultimately responsible for providing those opportunities? The individual? The family? The state?

11. "We hope our story will also demonstrate that anyone with enough compassion has the power to transform and redirect someone else's troubled life," the doctors write in their introduction. Have they succeeded? Can you identify ways to take up that challenge in your own community?