

SAVING Kenny

DISCUSSION GUIDE



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About the Book

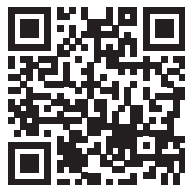
Twelve-year-old Kenny Reed is a scholarship student at a private school across the river from his apartment in the Roxbury neighborhood of Boston, which he shares with an older brother and sister and their abusive mother. He has always lived in the shadow of his siblings' success, but when he watches a performance of the opera *Aida*, Kenny discovers the magic of costumes and decides to become a costume designer.

In the midst of tumultuous family dynamics and domestic violence, the three siblings find a path to achieve their dreams and break the cycle of violence in this coming-of-age story.

About the Author



Corinne Gaile started out as a dancer, became an artist, and is now a writer of middle-grade and young-adult novels. Along the way, she taught sculpture at a university, curated art exhibitions, and lectured on art and culture in the African Diaspora. She spends her free time traveling internationally and kayaking locally.



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Discussion Guide

Use these questions to kick off classroom discussion, guide pre-thinking and post-reading responses, or inspire a writing assignment!

- Read the sensitive content warning and the author’s note together. Why did the author point to specific resources for domestic violence survivors? Why do you think the author chose to write a story about a character experiencing abuse at home? Have you encountered other stories about this experience? What do you know, or think you know, about domestic violence? After reading this book, did your understanding of domestic violence change?
- *Saving Kenny* is set in 1968. What was happening in Boston, the US, and the world at that time?
- A white singer in blackface plays the titular character of *Aida* in the performance Kenny sees with his sister Gwen. How do Kenny and Gwen feel about this character? Why is it important that Black characters are played by Black actors, dancers, and opera singers?
- Kenny calls becoming an opera singer Gwen’s “Number One Mission.” Do you have a Number One Mission? What motivates you to accomplish that mission? What obstacles would you overcome, or have you overcome, to accomplish it? What are the missions of the other characters in this book?
- What does Kenny find challenging about being at private school? Have you ever had the experience of being the “only” in a group of people? How did that feel?
- How do Kenny’s friends and family feel about his dream to become a costume designer? What encouraging or discouraging things do they say to him? Where do negative attitudes about men working with costumes and clothing come from? What examples do some characters point out that contradict gender stereotypes? Have you ever done something that defies gender stereotypes?
- How do Gwen and Vaughn try to protect Kenny from their mother? What are some of the signs they look for to navigate their mother’s moods and violent actions?
- How does the Vietnam War influence the events of this book? Do you know a veteran, draft resister, or protestor of the Vietnam War? What do you know about the history of the conflict?
- What is the Heritage Bookstore like? Does your city have a Black-owned bookstore? Why do you think Vaughn specifically takes Kenny to Heritage Bookstore, the barbershop, and Shabazz before going to the rally?
- At the rally, Kenny hears about the Ten-Point Program of the Black Panther Party. What points stand out to you from the program? Why do you think the Panthers chose to present their mission in this way? Look up the full text and discuss how it is connected to political traditions like Marxism, documents like the Declaration of Independence, and to the social concerns of the Black community in the 1960s.
- Have you ever been to a rally, march, or other public political action? Is the Black Panther rally in Chapter 7 similar to or different from that experience? What would you say the purpose of this rally was?

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- Why does Kenny draw a political cartoon? Does it seem similar to political cartoons that you see in newspapers and magazines today? What do you think of Thomas's reaction when he finds the cartoon in Kenny's sketchbook? Do you agree more with Gwen's advice or Vaughn's when Thomas withdraws from Kenny?
- What is Kenny's plan for his summer classes at the AAAA? Why didn't Kenny just refuse to take drumming? Have you ever agreed to someone else's plan while intending to do something different?
- Why does Kenny struggle with drumming? Have you ever been stuck in a class that you struggled with? What do you think of the conversation Kenny has with Baba in Chapter 16?
- What do you think of Vaughn's apology in Chapter 19? What parts of this apology make it meaningful? Have you ever apologized after hurting someone's feelings, or been apologized to after someone hurt your feelings? How was that apology like or unlike Vaughn's apology?
- Why do you think Kenny decides to tell Walter about his mother's abusive actions while they're alone in the studio, and not another place or time? How does Walter react? Do you think Walter's response is a good example to follow if a friend tells you that they don't feel safe at home? Why or why not?
- Gwen admires the Black opera soprano Leontyne Price. What do you know about this singer? Where can you find more information about her? After learning more about Price's life, why do you think Gwen looks up to her?
- Why is Vaughn's family so frightened when he is arrested? What does Vaughn decide to do when his draft notice arrives? Why do the Panthers help draft resisters? How does Vaughn's choice affect Gwen and Vaughn's plan to get themselves and Kenny out of their mother's home?
- How does Kenny feel when his mother is hospitalized? Why do you think his feelings about his mother are so complicated?
- How does Betty's care contrast with their mother's care when she comes to visit? Why don't Kenny and Gwen tell their cousin Betty that they don't feel safe with their mother?
- What do you think of the Black Student Union's letter to the Olympic Committee? What are some other examples of political protest in sports that you can think of? Do you think you would have the courage to protest at an event if you were an athlete?
- Why do you think writing a letter works to restore Kenny's friendship with Thomas? Have you ever written a physical letter to send to someone?
- Why do you think the story ends with Kenny going to Westsmith? How has his relationship with his mother changed since he and Gwen moved into Miss Temple's apartment?