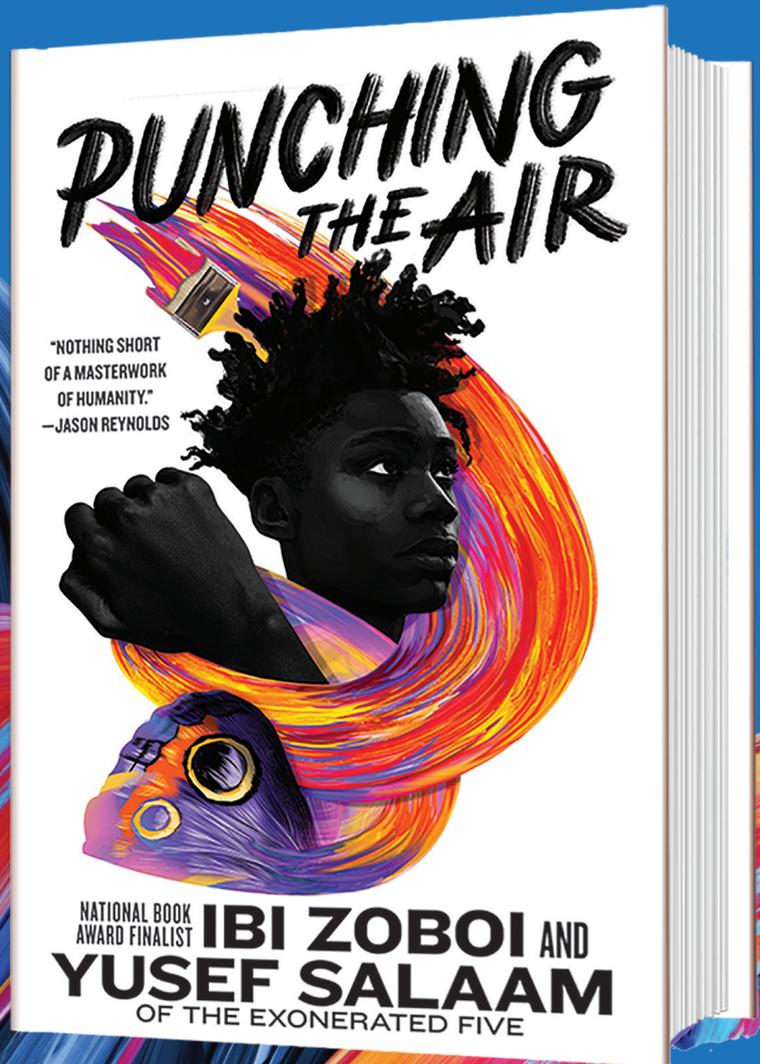


EDUCATORS' GUIDE  
FOR

# PUNCHING THE AIR

BY **IBI ZOBOI**  
AND **YUSEF  
SALAAM**



INCLUDES DISCUSSION QUESTIONS, EXTENSION ACTIVITIES, AND BEHIND-THE-BOOK FEATURES FOR **PUNCHING THE AIR**

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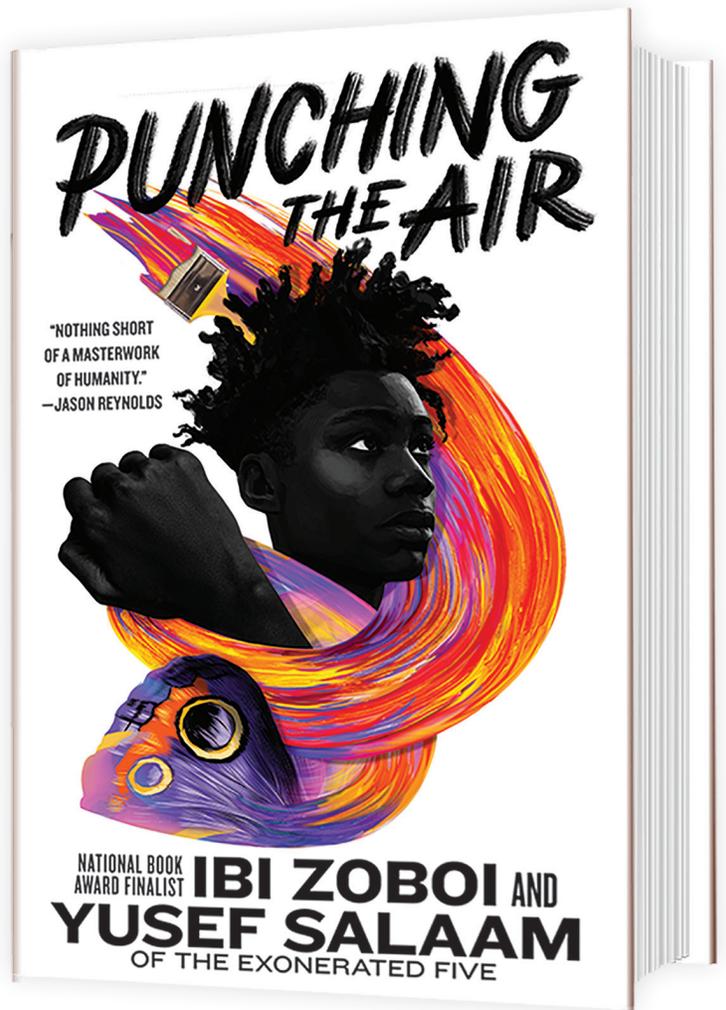
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# PUNCHING THE AIR

## ABOUT THE BOOK

When a racially charged fight involving youth from both sides of a gentrifying neighborhood goes too far, Amal, a sixteen-year-old poet and artist who was preparing his portfolio for college, is suddenly arrested, wrongfully convicted, and sent to juvenile detention. Society has failed him; can his art save him? Told in lyrical free verse, Amal's powerful story of holding on to his humanity in inhumane conditions addresses urgent issues facing American culture and society, offering a way for communities to begin essential conversations toward healing and reform.



## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Amal observes that authorities at school, in the justice system, and the public at large, do not see him, but rather construct a self they assign to him, “shaping me into / the monster / they want me to be” (p. 16). Where does that monster image come from, and why is it so easy to assign it to Amal?
2. Amal expresses a feeling of inevitability about his fate in the system (p. 8), and the shaping of his life by outside forces, like the prosecutor writing the “script” and directing the “scene” (p. 22), and in the poem “Blind Justice” (p. 44). To what extent do you think he and the other inmates, and the privileged boys, created their own life outcomes, and to what extent are their outcomes results of societal forces?
3. When he is sentenced, Amal compares his life before this moment to Africa and says, “maybe jail / is America” (p. 61). In “DNA,” he connects the shackles he wears leaving the court to the shackles his ancestors wore (pp. 80–81). Discuss the connections between his experience as a black youth in contemporary America and the experiences of early Africans arriving in the Americas. What has changed, and where do we see echoes of the past?
4. Throughout his time in juvenile detention, Amal is told in various ways that he and the other boys have “already become everything we’re supposed to be” (p. 346). Ms. Buford says “I know your type,” and encourages him to just “do what you need to do” (pp. 327–328). Stanford responds to his concern about Kadon by saying, “There’s nothing you can do, Shahid” (p. 324). But Imani works for prison abolition. What do you think Amal’s perspective toward his situation should be? Should he stay angry? Give in? Protest? Have hope? What are his options, and what would be the outcome of any of his choices?
5. On page 133, Amal says of Ms. Rinaldi, “She failed me.” On the surface, he is referring to his grade in her art class, but how can this line be interpreted as a double entendre? In what other ways did Ms. Rinaldi fail Amal? What should she have done differently? Was her treatment of him entirely her fault, or was she also at the mercy of a system? Why did she see his art as separate from him? Why did she think she could “save” him (p. 192)?
6. Amal’s description of gentrification goes beyond a simple residential pattern, to an attitude of ownership. Reread the passage from “The Persistence of Memory,” starting from “They were from where the big houses are” (p. 196) to “we were like *get the fuck out!*” (p. 197). How does gentrification create antagonism between races and socioeconomic classes? How do you see other societal forces pushing groups of people to fight one another?
7. Compare the description of the black boys to the description of the white boys on page 202. Have you noticed these terms being used in the news and elsewhere? How do you think these ideas and images—whether conscious or subconscious—affect our culture? What about the criminal justice system? If these ideas are present in the minds of individuals at every level—from schools to the public to the police force to the courts and prisons—what will it take to transform the way black youth are viewed and treated?
8. Uncle Rashon says that “school teaches you *what* to think / not *how* to think” (p. 206)? In what ways does this ring true in your experience? Amal says that the detention center looks something like school (p. 105), and he calls his middle school “Prison Prep” (p. 127). What do you see as the role school plays in preparing youth for society? Do you think schools should change? In what ways do different kinds of schools serve different purposes? How does this disadvantage some youth more than others?
9. In the poem “Brotherhood,” Kadon’s friends claim Amal, telling him, “You one of us now. / You one of us” (p. 213). What do they mean? Why is it important to them that he identify as one of them? Why does he come to accept it? What are the benefits and drawbacks of joining a group in this environment? Compare the social dynamics and the violence inside the detention center to what Amal experienced on the outside.
10. Why does Amal refuse to comply with Imani’s poetry exercise about Mistakes and Misgivings (p. 221)? How would you react to it in his situation? How does it end up affecting him when he returns to it later?

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS CONTINUED

11. In the poem “Harmony” (p. 274), the inmates tell the stories of how they landed in prison. How are their stories similar, and how do they differ? How important are the details of innocence and guilt? How do their stories deepen Amal’s story about all of the forces that usher black youth into the criminal justice system? At the end of “Family Portrait III” (p. 249), Amal and his umi quote a song by Nas and Lauryn Hill. How do the boys’ stories bring new meaning to the song lyric, “If I ruled the world / I’d free all my sons”?
12. Discuss the role of reading and books in Amal’s life. What does he mean when he writes, “The bookshelves here / are not walls / They’re closed windows / and all I have to do / is pull out one book / to make these windows / wide open” (p. 244). Why do Clyde and others assume he doesn’t read much? Why do his mother and uncle lay out so many books for him to read? How does reading help him? Have you read works by any of the authors he mentions on page 372? How do they shed light on his struggle?
13. On page 225, Amal describes a conversation with “the guys on the block” about butterfly wings and change. The butterfly image is carried and transformed throughout the rest of the story. Discuss the original metaphor and the ways in which Amal’s thoughts about butterflies and wings inform his views on individual actions and causation in the world.
14. Amal repeatedly refers to “a stone in my throat” and “a brick on my chest” (p. 142), which sometimes become a “mountain” and a “building” (p. 143). How do his physical sensations shed light on the relationship between racism, stress, and physical health? Police killings of unarmed black people have led to early deaths of victims’ family members due to health issues. How are the social, psychological, and physical intertwined?
15. Discuss Stanford’s character. How does his treatment of Amal change from their first encounter to the end of the story? Why do you think he treats Amal the way he does, and why and how does he judge the inmates in general? What did he try to teach Amal? If you were Amal, would you listen to him? Would you trust him?
16. The poetry class is reserved for inmates who show “good behavior.” What is the rationale for this restriction? How might those who are behaving “badly” benefit from opportunities for self-expression, art therapy, and getting in touch with their truths?



## EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

**THUGS VERSUS BOYS.** Look for news articles about crime, and compare the descriptions of the suspects or perpetrators, noting their race. What patterns do you notice? See how many of the terms on page 202 you can find in the news reports, and identify the race and the alleged crime of the suspects so labeled. Are the representations fair and unbiased? Make a collage or Powerpoint presentation to present your findings, and use the evidence you've found to address the following questions: How does the media shape our perception? Do you think our perception begins with the media or that the media is shaped by the culture? Or is it a cycle that feeds both ways?

**A NEW VISION OF CRIME AND PUNISHMENT.** Do some research on the prison abolition movement. What kind of society do activists imagine in the absence of prisons? Imagine and articulate a different way of viewing criminality, and a new solution to the problem of crime and rehabilitation. You may use the solutions you find among activists, or generate your own ideas. Feel free to use the systems of other countries, where the prison population is a much smaller percentage of the overall population than in the United States, as inspiration. Prepare a talk, in the style of TED Talks, to convince an audience to support your vision.

**ANOTHER KIND OF ART STUDY.** Design a syllabus for a course on art history featuring black artists. Include Basquiat in the lineup of artists. Write up a proposal to a school board, demanding the inclusion of this course in the school's offerings.

**THE EMOTIONAL WORK OF SOCIAL JUSTICE.** Make a playlist of songs and/or spoken word pieces that speak to the issues addressed in this book, including but not limited to systemic racism, economic inequality, school culture, the prison-industrial complex, the role of the media, the criminalization of blackness, and/or perceptions of the value of different cultural traditions. Characterize the emotions expressed in the pieces. What roles do feelings (anger, sadness, grief, pain, hope, joy, etc.) play in artistic expression? Would you characterize works about these issues as dominated by particular emotions? How can emotions and art spur social change? Write an introduction to your playlist that discusses these questions.

**GENTRIFICATION: COMING SOON TO A CITY NEAR YOU.** Do some research about gentrification in an area close to you. Try to find facts and figures as well as personal testimony about the rate, causes, process, and the effects of gentrification on communities. If possible, interview people affected by the changes. Curate an exhibit on gentrification in that particular location, featuring any combination of images, writing, audio, and video. If you find enough data, you can create an interactive map or a time lapse map showing changes in population characteristics and property value over time in an entire neighborhood, or even one block.

## FURTHER RESOURCES FOR STUDENTS

*"13th,"* a documentary by Ava Duvernay available on Netflix. Explores the loophole in the 13th amendment that allows slavery as punishment for a crime, and the criminalization of African Americans since slavery.

*Stamped: Racism, Antiracism, and You,* by Jason Reynolds and Ibram X Kendi, 2020. Explores the history of racist ideas in America.

*Just Mercy (Adapted for Young Adults): A True Story of the Fight for Justice,* by Bryan Stevenson, 2018. Details case studies and personal experiences from a lawyer's fight for human rights and equal justice.

*How to Be an Antiracist,* by Ibram X Kendi, 2019. Practical advice on doing the work, from the author's own experience and extensive research.

*When They See Us,* a miniseries by Ava Duvernay available on Netflix. Based on the "Central Park jogger" case and explores the lives of the Exonerated Five.

## FURTHER RESOURCES FOR TEACHERS

These texts, among others, may be helpful to inform educators on the themes present in *Punching the Air*. Excerpts can also be used with students for critical discussion.

*The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness,* by Michelle Alexander, 2010.

*Pedagogy of the Oppressed,* by Paulo Freire, 1970.

*Stamped from the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America,* by Ibram X Kendi, 2017.

## A NOTE FROM IBI ZOBOI

I was in the sixth grade when our teacher left a newspaper on his desk. The front page story had images of five teenage boys and the word *Wilding* was written across the top in bold, black letters. This news story caught my attention because the boys, who were accused of doing something terrible, looked just like the boys in my class, with their high-top fades and windbreakers. They seemed to be the same boys who would beatbox to the latest hip-hop songs and show off their dance moves in class, the same boys I was starting to develop crushes on.

Growing up in New York City, I watched a lot of news about crime and violence, and the faces of Black and Latinx boys were all over the TV screens and newspapers as both the victims and perpetrators. This had a huge impact on me as a teen. As the daughter of an immigrant, my social life centered around whatever my mother's fears were, and since she unfortunately believed the messages in the media—that Black and Latinx boys were menacing and prone to criminal behavior—dating was forbidden. But I and so many others my age, knew the truth: that these boys were so much more than how they were being portrayed in the media, that there is a long history of oppression in this country that disproportionately affects these boys' life choices and the environments they are raised in. Those same circumstances and environments affected me and other Black and Latinx girls as well. It was all part of being a teenager in New York City.

All throughout my high school and college years, there were more violent acts committed against Black men and boys, including Yusef Hawkins, who at sixteen was fatally shot in a predominantly white neighborhood in Brooklyn, and the unarmed West African immigrant Amadou Diallo, who was shot forty-one times by cops just as he was entering his Harlem apartment. All these stories were why I wanted to become a journalist.

So when I met Yusef Salaam, I wanted to be one of the few college reporters to investigate the truth about the “Central Park jogger” case because so many of us believed those five teens were innocent. By sharing this story, I had hoped to expose the ongoing disparities in the criminal justice system and how the media continually portrays an imbalanced view of Black children.

Many years later, as a published author, not much has changed, including my need to tell these stories. After meeting Yusef in 1999, we were reunited while I was touring for my debut novel, *American Street*. Yusef expressed his interest in speaking to more teens because his tragedy happened to him as a teen boy. He'd been mostly addressing law students and social justice and community organizations. A few days later, I approached him with the idea of telling his story in the form of a young adult book. We knew that young people needed to hear this story.

While Yusef and I are not telling his story as a member of the Exonerated Five, we are pulling from his experiences for *Punching the Air* to feature Amal, a sixteen-year-old artist and poet whose life is completely upended after one fateful night. At the center of Amal's story is the cycle of racial violence that continues to plague this country.

But this is not just a story about a crime or race. *Punching the Air* is about the power of art, faith, and transcendence in the most debilitating circumstances. It's our hope that all readers will relate to the journey of a boy who, in a heated moment, makes one wrong move that threatens his whole future, and how he uses art to express his truth—the truth.

—Ibi Zoboi



## A NOTE FROM YUSEF SALAAM

When I initially started writing, it was because, like many young brothers, I wanted to be a hip-hop artist. I had been writing rhymes since I was eleven or twelve years old. The “Central Park Five jogger” case happened in 1989, during an era in music when message-driven hip-hop songs were hot. *Self Destruction*, KRS-One’s *Love’s Gonna Get’cha*, and Public Enemy were some of the artists and songs that were shaping my style as a writer and were essentially the soundtrack of my life. I especially gravitated toward Public Enemy, who came out with a flow that sounded less like rap and more like a speech.

When I was convicted, it was the start of me realizing that I needed to say something. I wondered how I was going to speak my truth. For the first time, I realized that this art form I had been honing since childhood, hip-hop, was going to allow me to get my message across at this most critical point in my life.

On the day I was convicted, I remember being in and out of the courtroom. I had my shades on, head up, trying to feel and look confident, trying to be strong in the face of a very serious situation. At the same time, and still after everything we had already been through, I’d held out hope that the system would not fail us, that justice would prevail. If you look back on the footage from that day, what you will see is a young man who was sure he was going home that day. When the verdict came down and we were convicted, I was completely devastated. Never in a million years could you have convinced me that the system was going to do us like this, and then, the system did us like that.

Now, there I was in the courthouse, waiting for my sentence and being told that I should throw myself at the mercy of the court; that I should plead for the least amount of time possible. But I had been reading about Malcolm X and others who were in the struggle. I had been inspired by hip-hop acts who were using their art to spread powerful messages about our experiences, and I started writing instead. The words literally flowed through me like I was a vessel. And when our sentences were handed down, and I was given the stage to speak my truth, I read a poem entitled “I Stand Accused.”

I wrote it in that moment and it summed up everything I felt and knew I needed to say to the court and to the world. As time passed, not only was art something that allowed me to escape the harsh realities of imprisonment, but being able to write about these experiences really saved my life. Being able to share my thoughts on paper gave me an out. It was a way to keep my mind free, even though I was physically locked up. It provided a relief that I couldn’t find in any other way.

My mother used to always say to me that everybody—everybody—has gifts, and these gifts are the way to freedom. I didn’t always understand what she meant by that, but I knew she was trying to encourage me and make me see things in a positive light. I have since learned to see, embrace, and even build on those gifts—drawing and writing poetry and rhymes.

*Punching the Air* builds on some of the poetry I wrote while I was incarcerated. When Ibi and I started to discuss what kind of story we wanted to tell, we started with a name—Amal, which means “hope” in Arabic. It was important that whatever this teen boy was going through, he should always have hope, and we should write a story that instills hope in readers. It was also important that we make Amal’s mother a prominent figure in his life, in the same way that mine was. While *Punching the Air* is not my story, Amal’s character is inspired by me as an artist and as an incarcerated teen who had the support of his family, read lots of books, and made art to keep his mind free. Amal has to grow up really fast in a juvenile detention center, just like I did. But in his heart, his faith is strong. Ibi and I wanted people to know that when you find yourself in so-called dark places, there’s always a light somewhere in the darkness, even if that light is inside of you. You can illuminate your own darkness by shedding that light onto the world.

—Yusef Salaam

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## ABOUT IBI ZOBOI

Photo by Joseph Zobo



**IBI ZOBOI** holds an MFA from Vermont College of Fine Arts. Her novel *American Street* was a National Book Award finalist and a *New York Times* Notable Book. She is also the author of *Pride and My Life as an Ice*

*Cream Sandwich*, a *New York Times* bestseller. She is the editor of the anthology *Black Enough*. Born in Haiti and raised in New York City, she now lives in New Jersey with her husband and their three children. You can find her online at [www.ibizoboi.net](http://www.ibizoboi.net).

## ABOUT YUSEF SALAAM

Photo by Staci Nurse (Staci Marie Studio)



**DR. YUSEF SALAAM** was just fifteen years old when his life was upended after being wrongly convicted with four other boys in the “Central Park jogger” case. In 2002, after the young men spent between

seven and thirteen years of their lives behind bars, their sentences were overturned. They are now known as the Exonerated Five. Their story has been documented in the award-winning film *The Central Park Five* by Ken Burns, Sarah Burns, and David McMahon and in Ava DuVernay’s highly acclaimed series *When They See Us*, one of Netflix’s most-watched original series of all time. Yusef is now a poet, activist, and inspirational speaker. He is the recipient of a Lifetime Achievement Award from President Barack Obama, among other honors. You can find him online at [www.yusefspeaks.com](http://www.yusefspeaks.com).



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