

# THE EDUCATION OF KEVIN POWELL: A BOY'S JOURNEY INTO MANHOOD

## READER'S GUIDE: MIDDLE SCHOOL (Grades 6-8)

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### Message from the Author:

Peace everyone! Thank you for taking the time to read my book, and this Reader's Guide we created especially for you. My autobiography is the most important thing I have ever written in my life. I wrote it because I think it is mad important that we all tell our stories in some form, especially if we have survived and overcome much. For me writing, art, being creative, is not only about telling my truths, but also about healing and being self-empowered. In fact, writing is as important to me as breathing, and reading and writing have helped and saved my life so many times. It is my sincere hope my book will do the same for you in some way.

### HOW TO USE THIS READER'S GUIDE

This Reader's Guide is a resource for educators and youth workers who want to engage students in grades 6-8 in an exploration of *The Education of Kevin Powell: A Boy's Journey into Manhood*. This guide includes several activities that anyone can facilitate in their classroom, library, after-school program, or home. The activities aim to encourage critical thinking and generate interactive conversations on the themes of identity, race, gender, personal development, activism, and leadership.

### CONTENTS

#### SECTION 1: WHO IS KEVIN POWELL?

Get to know who young Kevin Powell is and the environment that shaped him. Through a series of activities, readers are encouraged to examine character development and setting in a personal narrative.

## **SECTION 2: GET WRITE**

Writing activities for students to demonstrate their understanding of the text by using examples from Kevin Powell's life story to support their ideas.

## **SECTION 3: BE THE CHANGE**

The activities in this section focus on identity, manhood, and change. Students will identify important moments of personal growth in Kevin's life and in their own, and investigate the process of personal change.

## **SECTION 4: STANDING FOR JUSTICE**

This final section focuses on activism, leadership, gender, and violence. In this section, students will explore some of the key historical moments that Kevin participated in, decode messages about race, gender roles, violence against women and girls, and explore civil and human rights leadership, then and now.

We hope that you will find the activities in this guide beneficial and inspirational to your youth. Please feel free to share feedback and the work your students produce with Kevin. He would love to talk with you and your students/young people: [kevin@kevinpowell.net](mailto:kevin@kevinpowell.net)

All content in the Reader's Guide for *The Education of Kevin Powell: A Boy's Journey into Manhood* was produced by Piper Anderson, Create Forward LLC. [www.create-forward.com](http://www.create-forward.com)

### **Outro, from Kevin Powell**

Kevin's final words about his book, and his hope for readers, educators, parents, guardians, mentors.

## **SECTION 1: WHO IS KEVIN POWELL?**

### **A. Photo Day**

*"One day my mother told me we were going to get my picture taken...."*

In the first chapter, Kevin Powell describes the day he took his first portrait as a kid, which became the book cover. Ask students what they think of the cover picture.

- What do you notice about the boy in the picture?
- What do you notice about how he is sitting in the photo?

- What does his facial expression tell you?
- Do you think he wants to be there? Why or why not?
- Where do you think this photo was taken?
- Do you think he knew the person taking the photo?

Next, read the first chapter of the book where he describes the photo day.

### **Discussion Questions**

- Returning to the photo, what other words would you use to describe the child in the picture?
- Why do you think he had so much trouble moving his arm from behind his back?
- What is one thing you would have said to little Kevin to help him feel less afraid in that moment?

### **B. Describe Your Own Picture Day**

Request that students bring in a personal or professional photo of themselves taken when they were much younger. Ask students to free-write on their own photo.

- Begin by describing the day the photo was taken: Where were you? What kind of day was it? Who took the photo?
- How did you feel when the photo was taken?
- Did you want to have your photo taken? Why or why not?
- Who else was there?
- What did you say or do before the photo was taken?
- Were you told how to pose or did you decide?
- What other details can you tell us about this moment?

### **C. Like My Neighborhood**

*“...that Jersey City, where I was born and where I would spend the first eighteen years of my life, began to disrobe itself, fascinating me, annoying me, and tempting me simultaneously.”*

Kevin describes the sights and sounds of the Jersey City where he spent the first 18 years of his life.

*“Like the rapture of playing on the black-and-gray gravel of Audubon Park: climbing the monkey bars, coasting hands-free down the sliding board, or kicking my feet toward the clouds as my mother pushed me on the swings.”*

Ask students to make a list of the places, sights, sounds, smells, people, and colors that make up their own neighborhood. What are the memories that you want to hold on to?

Next, write a description of your neighborhood including the details that you listed. Notice the kind of detailed imagery that Kevin includes in his description. Try to create imagery just as clear as you write about your neighborhood.

#### **D. Inner World of Kevin Powell**

Once the class has read the first half of *The Education of Kevin Powell* use this activity to chart his inside and outside world. This activity can be done individually but leads to more discussion when done as a group.

- Draw a circle on a big piece of paper. Beginning with the outside of the circle, list all the things happening in his environment that are affecting him.
- Next inside of the circle, make a list of all the things that Kevin has been feeling about himself, his family, his environment.

For instance, the inside of his circle might include anger, confusion, self-esteem, a desire to be loved while the outside of his circle might include poverty, police brutality, moving a lot, changing schools, etc.

#### **Discussion Questions**

- How is Kevin's environment impacting his state of being?
- Why is he so angry and getting into trouble at school?
- What would need to change in his environment for his behavior to change?
- Can you relate to some of what Kevin is experiencing?
- Have you ever had anger issues yourself?

- Is there a way to express anger without hurting yourself, or others?

## **E. Poverty**

Poverty is a repeated theme in Kevin's autobiography. It in fact dominates much of his life.

- What does the word poverty mean to you?
- How did being poor affect Kevin and his mother, mentally, physically, both?
- How else do you think poverty affects those who are poor?
  
- Why do you think people use words like "ghetto" to describe people, including people not from the ghetto?
- How was Kevin's life similar to other poor people in his community, and how was it different?
- What did Kevin do to overcome his poverty?
- How did Kevin's experiences being poor prepare him for life, or did it?

## **SECTION 2: GET WRITE**

### **A. The Three Powell Sisters**

In Chapters 12 and 13, Kevin writes about his mother, Shirley, and her sisters, Birdie and Cathy. The Powell sisters lived through an impoverished childhood in rural South Carolina, and together they moved north to escape being "the help" and the grueling life of picking cotton for White landowners. The women in Kevin's family had a major impact on him.

After reading these chapters, invite students to consider the important life lessons that Kevin learned from his mother and aunts.

### **Discussion Questions**

- The Powell Sisters left South Carolina to seek a better life for themselves. What challenges did they face in accomplishing this goal?
  
- The Powell sisters lived together when they first moved to Jersey City and then they seem to take different paths. In chapter 13, Kevin compares the differences between his mom and Aunt

Cathy to his Aunt Birdie. Why do you think they made such different choices? Do you think his mother and Aunt Cathy having children before Aunt Birdie made a difference? Why or why not?

- What did Kevin learn about the importance of work from his mother and aunts?
- Kevin writes about his Aunt Birdie, “But, whenever she was around, I stared at her and when she caught me looking, she’d smile and wink slyly, as if she knew that her grand escapades excited me.” How do you think Aunt Birdie influenced Kevin to become who he is today?
- The Powell women came of age during a time when there were less opportunities for work and education for women, especially Black women. What kinds of jobs did they have to take on to survive? What kinds of challenges did Cathy and Shirley face as single mothers? How did Birdie overcome some of these challenges?

### **Three Life Lessons from the Powell Sisters**

Write a short essay of 400-500 words about how the Powell Sisters influenced Kevin to become who he is today. Provide an example of one lesson that each woman taught Kevin Powell. What makes each woman unique and powerful?

### **B. Writing A Moment of Change**

*“I was twenty-five-years-old and knew I had to make a change. But I had no clue what to do other than to write.”*

Students will write an essay about an important moment in Kevin’s life that helped to shape who he is today. The essay should include at least one piece of evidence from the text that demonstrates how that moment changed his life. The essay should be at least 300-500 words.

PLEASE NOTE: It’s helpful to do the “Inner World of Kevin Powell” (Section 1-D) activity prior to writing this essay.

### **C. Poetry/Spoken Word**

*“My desire to write poetry indefinitely replaced my teenage dream of being a novelist. Poetry represented the kind of short bursts of ideas and energy that I carried with me every single day, demanding to be released.”*

Kevin’s own poetry begins each chapter of his memoir, *The Education of Kevin Powell: Boy’s Journey to Manhood*.

- Why do you think Kevin chose poetry as a way to express himself? Do you think poetry is an effective way to communicate, “Short bursts of ideas and energy”? as Kevin says?

- Next, each student selects a section of Kevin’s poetry then writes or types it on to a large index card. Each student will then share the piece that they selected and explain why they like that particular poem.
- Finally, invite students to organize their selected poems into one poem, arranging the text in a way that is consistent with Kevin’s journey from boyhood to manhood.

#### **D. Letter to the Author**

*“For me it said something about one’s humanity if you recognized the existence of another human being with a greeting.”*

Write an email letter to Kevin and describe how you felt about his book, *The Education of Kevin Powell: A Boy’s Journey into Manhood*: kevin@kevinpowell.net

Describe a moment that was especially important to you and explain why. Also include any questions you still have about his story.

### **SECTION 3: BE THE CHANGE**

#### **A. Video: Kevin Powell Speaks with bell hooks**

Watch the video: “bell hooks and Kevin Powell: Black Masculinity, Threat or Threatened”  
*Conversation begins at 13:13*

<https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=FoXNzyK70Bk>

- How did Kevin’s relationship with his mother affect him?
- What were Kevin’s issues around manhood growing up?
- How did violence affect and shape him?

#### **B. What is Manhood?**

##### **Group Discussion & Brainstorm (for ALL students)**

- What does manhood mean to you?
- Who created your definition of manhood?
- How does pop culture, music, and social media shape your definition of manhood?
- What examples do you see in pop culture, music and music videos, tv, movies, video games, and social media that spread definitions of manhood that are negative, violent, or disrespectful to girls and women?
- What does bullying mean, have you ever done it, or experienced it, or both?

- How did Kevin throughout his life display a typical definition of manhood? How did he challenge it later in his life? Why?
- If you could create a new definition of manhood how would you define it?

### C. Advice for Young Kevin

*“I now had a dilemma. If I took the promotion, the other boys, including my cousin Anthony, would regard me as being given special favors and treated better than them by these White people. But if I turned down the opportunity, these White people might view me as a problem, like I had a chip on my shoulder, as one mean White male teacher had said to me a lot at P.S 38.”*

In chapter 16, Kevin gets a summer job cleaning a vacant lot with other boys his own age. Shortly after starting this job he is offered a promotion to work in the office.

- How does he feel about this promotion?
- Why does he decide to leave?
- Have you ever felt pressure to fit in?
- What did you do about it?
- What advice would you give Kevin in that moment?

Write a short message to young Kevin on an index card or post-it note offering some advice on how to handle this situation. Invite everyone to post their messages on a wall to serve as inspiration throughout the day. How do these messages apply to your own experiences with peer pressure?

### D. Timeline of Kevin’s Journey

*“In those ratchet flashes of high school—when I was clocked by that cop, kicked out of Academic, and became a petty criminal while maintaining outstanding grades—the days, weeks, the months of my teenage years accelerated between life and whatever, yo. I sprouted from five feet to five foot ten in a matter of months, my high-pitched voice miraculously deepened, and my sandy-brown hair flowed into a reddish afro. “*

Kevin Powell writes about the experiences that shaped him. In this activity, students will identify those key moments in Kevin’s story that were critical to his journey into manhood and organize them into a timeline of Kevin’s life. Which moments are key to his arc of transformation?

- Begin by making sure that students understand the idea of a character arc. A character arc is the inner journey that the main character experiences over the course of the story.
- **Identify 7 key moments in his story that were important to his journey into manhood.**



- Working as a group or individually, organize these key moments into a timeline, writing brief titles for each. If available, they could also use markers or colored pencils to illustrate important moments in Kevin's journey. Depending on the group's skill level you might also invite them to design the timeline as a comic strip.
- Invite students to present and display their visual timelines of Kevin's journey and talk about why they chose those particular moments. How did these particular moments change him?

### **E. Mapping Your Own Journey**

After creating a timeline of Kevin's journey, invite students to reflect on their own lives.

- What have been the most important experiences to date that have shaped them into the people that they are today?

Identify 4-5 important moments and illustrate a timeline of their journey. Important moments might be going to school for the first time, the birth of a sibling, moving to a new neighborhood, a family vacation, etc.

## **SECTION 4: STANDING FOR JUSTICE**

### **A. Where Do We Learn Gender?**

Begin this lesson by finding assumptions that students might already hold about gender.

- What does it mean to be a man?
- What does it mean to be a woman?
- What does it mean to be gender non-conforming?
- Who makes these definitions?
- What kinds of toys are girls suppose to play with? What kinds of toys are boys supposed to play with?
- What kinds of toys did you play with when you were younger?
- Were you ever told that you couldn't do something because you were a girl or a boy? How did that make you feel?
- Describe the first time that you realized there was a difference between girls and boys? What happened?
- What do we learn about how to be a girl? A boy? (This could be done as a writing exercise)

Together make a list of all of the messages that girls and boys receive about their gender from the media, social media, family, friends, school, sports, religion, etc. Compare the two lists.

- What do you notice about the differences between these two lists?
- Where and how do we receive these messages?
- How can these messages be harmful?

- What about the messages that seem positive? Can they be harmful too? Why?
- What messages does Kevin Powell receive about what it means to be a boy/man?
- Where did he receive those messages?
- What were the consequences of those messages for Kevin's relationships with girls/women?
- As a young adult what did Kevin as a straight male learn from gay/queer males?

### **Split Image Collage**

We're all affected by harmful messages about gender. We're surrounded by these messages every day.

- Using two pieces of construction paper of different colors, that are the same rectangular size.
- Print out an 8 x 10 photo image of yourself.
- Paste the photo on to the larger piece of construction paper.
- Using magazines, cut and paste all the negative messages that you receive about what it means to be your gender on the left side of your photo. Keep in mind that the messages you receive might also relate to how your race, gender, sexual orientation, body size, ability/disability, and religion/spirituality all connect. Identify the messages that most relate to your experience.
- On the other side of your photo write/illustrate all the messages that you believe reflect who you are and how you express your gender identity.

### **B. Gender Violence**

Read Chapter 23, "My girlfriend and the bathroom door" and discuss dating/relationship violence.

Some statistics about dating abuse amongst teens:

[http://www.loveisrespect.org/pdf/Dating\\_Abuse\\_Statistics.pdf](http://www.loveisrespect.org/pdf/Dating_Abuse_Statistics.pdf)

- 1 in 3 adolescents will be the victim of teen dating abuse.
- Teen dating violence affects at least 1.5 million youth in the U.S. each year.
- Violent behavior in relationships can begin as young as 12-years-old.
- 81% of parents believe that teen dating violence is not an issue.
- A majority of parents would not be able to recognize the warning signs.

Visit [www.loveisrespect.org](http://www.loveisrespect.org) for more information and resources on teen dating violence.

Throughout his memoir, Kevin Powell describes his own abusive behaviors in relationships with women in detail. His relationship with Adera illustrates many of the signs of abuse that often go unnoticed.

Can you identify signs of abuse in the relationship between Adera and Kevin? You might use the "Power and Control" wheel on

<http://www.loveisrespect.org/is-this-abuse/power-and-control-wheel/>

to support this conversation.

- Can you identify signs of anger, isolation, threats, and possessiveness in their relationship?
- How do you think Kevin’s behavior affects Adera?
- What happens to finally convince Kevin that he needs to change?
- Is he able to immediately change his behavior? Why do you think he struggles to deal with his anger toward women?
- Why is it important for him to learn about the experiences of women as part of his healing process?
- Who are some of the people who help him change his beliefs about women?
- Kevin now identifies as an ally to women and girls, and works to end violence against women and girls. Why is it important for men/boys to speak up about violence against women and girls?
- What can you do right now to help end violence against women and girls?

### **C. An Education on Race**

Throughout his memoir Kevin talks about his experiences with race and racism. We’re going to look at three moments from Kevin’s journey where he learned about race and racism and decode the messages within those moments. There is a message behind every experience that teaches us something about the world and ourselves. What are the messages behind these three moments in Kevin’s journey?

#### **DECODING MESSAGES ABOUT RACE & RACISM**

<p>“Kevin, if a White person says you cute, then it must be true. They don’t just be saying that to anyone.” Ch 2.</p>	<p><b>Message:</b></p>
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<p>Whites seemed to own and control everything; Blacks seemed to have nothing and were dependent on Whites, or the government, or both to merely survive. And in most stories I heard about Black experiences with White people, Whites were extremely cruel. In the safety of our own company: “Them crackers ain’t nothin’, man. Always tellin’ a nigga what to do.” Ch 15.</p>	<p><b>Message:</b></p>
<p>Soon, two White police officers climbed onto the bus through the now-open back door, wrenched Richie and me apart, and removed us from the bus. For some reason my arms were pressed behind my back and I was placed in handcuffs, but Richie, a light-complexioned Puerto Rican, was not. Richie and I were walked to a police car. One officer gently put Richie into the front seat while the other—a red-headed man with a shaggy red moustache—rammed me into the backseat. Ch.16</p>	<p><b>Message:</b></p>

### **Discussion Questions**

- How does Kevin’s understanding of race change over the course of his life?
- Do you think his earlier experiences with White people impacted the way he defines racism later in life?
- When Kevin is on the reality show, MTV’s *The Real World*, he has several conversations with his cast mates about race. Writing about that experience he says, “*Somewhere in all the beefs with my White cast mates, I proclaimed that ‘Black people cannot be racist’ because ‘racism equals race plus power.’*” Ch 24.
- What does he mean by “racism equals race plus power”?
- Who has the power in each of Kevin’s lessons on race?

### **B. Today’s Hip-Hop Activism**

*“That kind of fearlessness and boldness reinforced for us hip-hop heads that our voices and lives matters...we were creating what became known as ‘hip-hop activism.’”*

In chapter 22 Kevin uses the term “hip-hop activism”? How does he define hip-hop activism? What kinds of things was he doing in his activism?

### **Group Discussion & Brainstorm**

- What is hip-hop? Who created it, and why?
- What are the five basic elements of hip-hop?
- How important are things like fashion and language to hip-hop, and what else is hip-hop, to you?
- What is the history of women in hip-hop?
- How have women been depicted in hip-hop, both in the past and in the present?
- Are today’s hip-hop artists activists, too? Why or why not? What are the things that hip-hop artists do to express their activism?

**The final project will be the students presenting to the class. It will be on their chosen hip-hop artist and their activism using quotes, song lyrics, and written background on the artist.**

- Which hip-hop artists, from any time period in hip-hop history, can also be said to be an activist or leader, and why? Research that hip-hop artist and their activism, and answer these questions.
- What does their activism look like?
- Provide examples of their activism.
- What social justice issues were or are they concerned with?
- Look for any articles that have been written about their activism?
- Find at least one direct quote or YouTube clip where they talk about activism.
- Who has been affected by their activist work?
- How have they been affected?
- Why do you think this work is valuable or important?

### **C. Making History: A Group Research Project**

*“There was a movement afoot, and I was in the middle of it. I was young, Black, and an artist in the early 1990s New York City, which was a great thing to be.”*

Kevin writes about some of the important historical moments from the 1980s-1990s that he participated in. As a group generate a list of all the historical moments that Kevin describes.

Select one of these moments, research the moment and prepare a presentation to the class.

- What happened?
- Why is it important?
- How did it impact Kevin's life?
- What was his perspective on these moments?

#### **A few of the historical moments described in the book**

- The Los Angeles Riots
- The death of Tupac Shakur
- 9/11
- Hurricane Katrina
- The election of Barack Obama

#### **D. Civil and Human Rights Leadership: Then and Now**

Throughout his memoir, Kevin describes some of the leaders, writers, and thinkers who have influenced him to become an activist.

- Generate a list of the leaders, writers, and thinkers that influenced Kevin Powell.
- Who do you think had the greatest influence on Kevin? Why?
- Did Kevin eventually change his opinion of some of these leaders? Why?
- Do you think there is a difference between leaders during the Civil Rights movement like Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X and those leaders who came after the Civil Rights era like Jesse Jackson and Louis Farrakhan? What do you think the difference is? How does Kevin Powell explain the difference?
- Was Tupac Shakur a leader, why or why not?

#### **E. FINAL PROJECT: *The Education of Me***

Write your own autobiography, three (3) pages, about your life. Do not worry about spelling or grammar for your first draft, just write, get your story out, then go back and make corrections. Please title your short autobiography *The Education of Me*.

#### **Outro, from Kevin Powell**

Thank you, again, very much for reading my autobiography. My final question for all of you: What did you get or learn from my book, how did it affect you, please? Please have that

conversation with each other, and please feel free to send a personal note to me, too:  
[kevin@kevinpowell.net](mailto:kevin@kevinpowell.net)

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

### READ

"Letter to a Young Man," @UtneReader blog by @kevin\_powell:  
<http://tinyurl.com/j23vdhe>

"Will Racism Ever End, Will I Ever Stop Being a \_\_\_\_\_?" by @kevin\_powell, via @UtneReader:  
<http://tinyurl.com/z64cool>

### WATCH

"bell hooks and Kevin Powell: Black Masculinity, Threat or Threatened"  
<https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=FoXNzyK70Bk>

"Tupac Shakur Interview from Rikers Island in 1995" via Complex  
<http://www.complex.com/music/2015/10/kevin-powell-memoir-excerpt>

### LISTEN

The Education of Kevin Powell: A Boy's Journey into Manhood—The Mix CD  
Volume 1  
<http://tinyurl.com/hljmerv>

The Education of Kevin Powell: A Boy's Journey into Manhood—The Mix CD  
Volume 2  
<http://tinyurl.com/zlemrc3>

The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr- Kevin Powell Mix CD  
<http://tinyurl.com/hoya2eh>

## **Books by Kevin Powell**

*The Education of Kevin Powell: A Boy's Journey into Manhood* (2015)

*Barack Obama, Ronald Reagan, and The Ghost of Dr. King* (2012)

*Open Letters to America* (2009)

*The Black Male Handbook: A Blueprint for Life* (2008)

*No Sleep Till Brooklyn: New and Selected Poems* (2008)

*Someday We'll All Be Free* (2006)

*Who's Gonna Take the Weight: Manhood, Race, and Power in America* (2003)

*Who Shot Ya? Three Decades of Hip-hop Photography* (2002)

*Step into a World: A Global Anthology of the New Black Literature* (2000)

*Keepin' It Real: Post-MTV Reflections On Race, Sex, and Politics* (1997)

*Recognize* (1995)

*In The Tradition: An Anthology of Young Black Writers* (1993)