

Reading Group Guide: *Stakes Is High* by Mychal Denzel Smith

1. Before reading this book, what assumptions did you have about the American Dream? Did *Stakes Is High* make you rethink those assumptions?
2. Mychal Denzel Smith writes about policing, justice, violence, and misogyny. Did you ever find yourself relating a recent news story to the points being made in the book?
3. If you were to describe one lesson from the book to a friend or family member, what would you tell them?
4. Based on your experiences, what do you think makes America what it is? Do they clash at all with what the author says in the book?
5. Smith argues that American delusions are entrenched in all aspects of American life: our politics, ideas of freedom, and belief in exceptionalism. Was there a moment where you realized that you subscribed to the delusions he outlines? If so, how did you react?
6. As a solution to eradicating the American myth, the author makes an impassioned case for disengaging with all symbols that feed into the myth itself, using the notable example of Martin Luther King Jr. To what extent do you agree with the author?
7. Reflect on the neighborhoods around you. Which ones do you perceive to be “good and safe” versus “bad and violent”? Why do you think that is?
8. Has this book changed your understanding of the police? If so, how?
9. Smith asserts, “Justice is a proactive commitment to providing each person with the material and social conditions in which they can both survive and thrive as a healthy and self-actualized human being” (93). What does justice look like to you?
10. Smith uses the cultural phenomenon that was *The Cosby Show* to show the effect of media on our collective consciousness. Think of a recent movie or TV show that you enjoyed that featured Black characters and Black life. How would you describe the representation of blackness in that movie, TV show, or in the entertainment industry as a whole? What has changed (or not) since *The Cosby Show*?
11. Smith is unflinchingly upfront about the worsening state of rape, sexual assault, and violence against women. He writes, “[The perpetrators] will never know what it is to be held accountable... They will be reassured that they have done nothing wrong, that they are guilty only of being men and there has never been anything wrong with being a man” (110-111). In your opinion, what will it take to build a better future?

12. Smith calls out the prison system as “an evasion” of both justice and accountability (115). To what extent do you agree with him? Why?
13. There is a striking moment in which Smith turns the reader’s attention to him--specifically, his own complicity and “cowardice” when he did nothing whilst a young man physically and verbally harassed a young woman on a train (123). What was your reaction to the story and the author’s vulnerability in admitting he should have done better? Have there been times where you’ve felt the same way?
14. Smith repeatedly urges the reader “toward the strength of movements, to recognize the need for *collective action* to defeat entrenched power” (155). Can you think of the last time you felt the power of community action? What can you do to incite that in your own communities?
15. Myths can be destructive but also important. How does Smith suggest we engage with them? What kind of America do you dream about?