

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

## READER'S GUIDE: COLLEGE-AGE/ADULT

Created by

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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 workshop facilitators of *The Education of Kevin Powell: A Boy's Journey into Manhood*. This guide includes several activities that anyone can facilitate in the college classroom, adult education center, reading group, 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.

### CREATING A SAFE SPACE

**Kevin Powell touches on many topics that will touch various people, no matter their background, in different ways. Please take the time before diving into this guide to establish guidelines for discussion and safe dialogue. Please consider writing those guidelines down as a group and putting them in a place for all to see.**

### CREATING A BLOGGING SPACE

1. Go to: <https://www.blogger.com/about/#create>
2. Connect to a Gmail account
3. Go to settings and click private and add readers from class/session
4. Encourage participants to comment on each other's blogs
5. Set a guideline for sharing and reading blogs

## CONTENTS

### SECTION 1: A REFLECTION

Get to know who young Kevin Powell is and the environment that shaped him. Through a series of reflections, readers are encouraged to examine the setting and context of Kevin's childhood as well as their own.

### SECTION 2: GET WRITE

In this section participants, will create their own blogging space to reflect regularly on the readings, the discussion questions, and current events, as they relate to the reading material

### SECTION 3: BE THE CHANGE

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

### SECTION 4: STANDING FOR JUSTICE

This final section focuses on activism, leadership, gender, mental health, and violence. In this section, participants 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 participants produce with Kevin. He would love to talk with you and the participants: [kevin@kevinpowell.net](mailto:kevin@kevinpowell.net)

## SECTION 1: WHO IS KEVIN POWELL?

### A. Childhood in Pictures

*"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.

## **Group Discussion Questions**

- Did you (or your kids) ever take a photo like this?
- If not, why not?
- How were you dressed? Did you
- How did you (or your kids) feel when the photo was taken?
- Did you want to have your photo taken? Why or why not?
- What role, if any, did pictures like the one that Kevin took play in your childhood?
- What other details can you tell us about this moment?

### **B. Picture Day**

Participants should bring in pictures of them or their kids when they were much younger. Ask participants to submit their first blog reflecting on a picture from their childhood or their kids' childhood.

## **Reflection Questions**

- When/Where was the photo was taken?
- Who else was there?
- Where is the picture now?
- What role did pictures play in how you grew up? *Consider the role pictures play today with smartphones and social media.*
- Looking back, would you have posed, preserved, or taken the photo differently?

### **C. 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 participants 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, with a partner discuss where the neighborhood you are from:

### **Group Discussion**

- What neighborhood are you from?
- If you could describe your neighborhood in one word, what would it be?
- Do you still live in that neighborhood? Why or why not?
- How has that neighborhood changed since you live there?
- Would you go back to live? Why or why not?

Next, write a blog about a description of your neighborhood growing up. Try to create imagery just that is clear and creative as you write about your neighborhood.

### **Reflection Questions:**

- What does your neighborhood look like?
- What does your neighborhood represent for you?
- Who lived there when you lived there?
- Who lives there now?
- What role did politics play in the evolution of your neighborhood?

## **D. Poverty**

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

As a group discuss the following:

### **Group Discussion**

- What does the word poverty mean to you?
- Do you identify at all with Kevin or his mother in how poverty affected them mentally, physically, both?
- Is poverty a form of trauma? Why or why not?
- What does the eradication of poverty mean to you?
- What do you think it will take to overcome poverty?
- Look at the first website that comes to mind when you think of current events? Is poverty mentioned on the front page?

Next, write a blog titled: ***Poverty Has Many Faces***. Please use the questions below to help:

### **Reflection Questions:**

- If poverty could look like a person, what would they look like?
- Male? Female? Gender non-conforming?
- How would they vote? Who would they vote for?

- How has poverty revealed itself in your life or the lives of people you know?
- Who is to blame for poverty?
- Where is the hope for those in poverty?
- What would/do you do to combat poverty in your community and country?

## 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 participants to consider the important life lessons that Kevin learned from his mother and aunts.

#### Group Discussion

- How do you define womanhood?
- The Powell Sisters left South Carolina to seek a better life for themselves. Reflect on what geolocation means in terms of safety for marginalized peoples.
- How did Kevin depict the life of single mothers? How does that compare to other depictions of single mothers, either in your life or in the media?
- 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.” Did you ever have a family member or friend that inspired you or changed the course of your life? Who were they?
- In what ways do you identify with the Powell women?

Write a short blog (400-500) words about how women in your life have influenced you as the Powell Sisters influenced Kevin to become who he is today.

### B. 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*.

### **Group Discussion**

- What role does poetry play in your life, if any?
- What activity or art form makes you feel as free as Kevin did when performing?
- How or how do you not identify with needing to have your voice heard?
- What spaces do you feel comfortable expressing yourself freely?
- If you do not have that space, why or why not?

Pick a section or phrase from *The Education of Kevin Powell* and write a poem in response to or exploring further that image, idea, or character. Please define poetry in structure and sound for yourself.

### **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>

### **Group Discussion**

- What are your thoughts, reactions to the conversation?
- How did you identify with Kevin's journey in deconstructing and discovering his own manhood?
- Is there any part of the video you disagreed with?
- In what ways is your definition of manhood different or the same from the manhood discussed in the video?

## B. What is Manhood?

### Group Discussion

- 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?

Write a blog describing how Manhood has affected your life?

### Reflection Questions

- What does manhood mean to you?
- How has manhood affected your life?
- Are you aware of manhood on a day-to-day basis?
- How does mass media depictions of manhood affect you, if at all?
- If you could create a new definition of manhood how would you define it?

## C. Identity Politics

*"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.

### Group Discussion

- Have you ever been in a similar situation as Kevin? What happened?
- Share a time that your identity was deemed problematic or politicized because of the space you were in?
- How did you handle it?
- Would you have handled it differently looking back?

Write a blog about how you navigate your identities on the day-today

### **Reflection Questions**

- How often are you made aware of your identity (race, gender, class, sexual identity)?
- How does it affect you?
- Do you navigate your identity depending on where you are?
- If not, why not?
- If so, how?

### **D. Kevin's Journey and Key Moments in America**

Kevin Powell writes about the experiences that shaped him as well as guiding us through a brief history of America and how it affected him. In this activity, participants will reflect on their own journeys and how the history of their country of origin shaped their growth.

#### **Group Discussion**

- Where were you born?
- When did you feel a sense of nationalism or loyalty to the country you were born in?
- In what ways did the history of country affect you growing up?
- What is the first presidency you can remember?
- What do you remember about it?

What do you remember of the following historic moments in Kevin's life?

1. The Los Angeles Riots
2. The death of Tupac Shakur
3. 9/11
4. Hurricane Katrina
5. The election of Barack Obama
6. The LA Riots

Choose a historic moment in your life and describe how it affected you growing up. Use the below reflection questions to help guide your blog:

### **Reflection Questions**

- What is your first historical memory?
- How old were you?
- How did that historical event affect you growing up?
- How does that historical event affect how you view the world now?

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

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

#### **Group Discussion**

- 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?

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?

### **Gender Identity Collage**

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

- Using stationary and 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.

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.

### **Group Discussion**

- How do you define misogyny? How does the dictionary define misogyny?
- How do you define gender? How does the dictionary define gender?
- How you define domestic violence? How does the law define domestic violence?

- How do you define gender violence? Who is affected by gender violence?
- 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>
<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</p>	<p><b>Message:</b></p>

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	
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### **Group Discussion:**

- 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?

Write a blog titled Racism Equals Race Plus Power. Explore how racism has or has not affected you and how recent events (Black Lives Matter, Police Brutality, Flint Michigan, etc.) has changed or altered how you see 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.’”*

### **Group Discussion**

- 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?
- Was Tupac Shakur a leader, why or why not?

### **C. 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.

#### **Group Discussion**

- Generate a list of the leaders, writers, and thinkers that influenced Kevin Powell.
- Who do you think had the greatest influence on Kevin? 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?

Write a blog reflecting on the activism during the civil rights era and the movements of today. Use the reflection questions below to guide your blog.

#### **Reflection Questions**

- What defines a movement?
- What strengths and weaknesses did The Civil Rights Movement have?
- What strengths and weakness do the movements of today have?
- What can each era learn from one another?
- If you were to start a movement what elements would you change or borrow from each movement? Why?

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

Write your own autobiography, three (8-10) pages double-spaced, 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>

[http://www.huffingtonpost.com/kevin-powell/what-is-manhood-without-a-father\\_b\\_8252068.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/kevin-powell/what-is-manhood-without-a-father_b_8252068.html)

"Will Racism Ever End, Will I Ever Stop Being a \_\_\_\_\_?" by @kevin\_powell, via

@UtneReader: <http://tinyurl.com/z64cool><http://www.complex.com/music/2015/10/kevin-powell-memoir-excerpt>

### 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/hljmcrv>

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)