



FIGHTING FOR DONTAE

MIKE CASTAN

**GRADES
6 UP**

About the Book

Javier's life is going nowhere fast. He hates seventh grade, his pop is locked up, and his mom can't even afford to buy him shoes. At least she's sober . . . for now. He and his friends are in a gang, but he doesn't really know why he joined the Playaz in the first place, since hanging with them is like asking for trouble from the cops.

When he is assigned to work with the special education class, Javier thinks that the one thing he had going for him in middle school—his social life—is over. Little by little, though, Javier realizes that he actually enjoys reading to Dontae, a severely disabled boy his age. When everything else around him is falling apart, working with Dontae becomes the one thing worth fighting for.

978-0-8234-2348-4 / Young Adult

DISCUSSION GUIDE

Belonging/Friendship

- ❖ Why do you think Javier and his friends felt it was necessary to join a gang? In your own school, do gang members seem to get more respect? Why is peer pressure so important to young teens?
- ❖ Why do you think things such as “the right shoes” or “not looking/sounding stupid” are so important to kids? Do the kids in your school have similar standards? Do you think there's anything students can do in their schools to change this phenomenon?
- ❖ Javier was unusual among his friends because he enjoyed reading. How do you think reading saved him from making even bigger mistakes with his life? Why do some middle school kids think reading or being a good student isn't “cool”? Is this true in your school also?
- ❖ How did Javier and Jesse help each other? What was your reaction to Javier's friendship with Jessica? And his ultimate relationship with her father? How do you think they helped each other?

Family

- ❖ Do you agree that it was okay for Javier to lie about where his dad really was? Why or why not? What would you have done under similar circumstances? How did you feel about all of the other lies Javier told—to his mom, teachers, friends, etc. Why do you think kids lie?
- ❖ Javier listed some of the things that were good and bad in his life. Make a similar list related to your own life.
- ❖ What is your opinion of the fact that for some kids being in a gang seems to take the place of being in a family? Compare what Javier “got” from his mom and dad vs. what he “got” from his friends and the gang, as well as what he had to “give” to each.

Bad Behavior

- ❖ How do you feel about the fact that Javier planned to steal the sneakers from the swap meet? There were other illegal activities in the story. Do you think breaking the law is ever justified? Why or why not? Do you think stealing and smoking dope are normal behaviors in low-income communities? Why or why not?
- ❖ What was your reaction to some of the language in the story—i.e., curse words? Is this just the way kids talk today, or do you think the author included these words for some other reason? How do people in your family/community react to seeing these words in books for middle school kids?

Respect for People Who Are Different

- ❖ How do you think Mrs. Aronson just *knew* that Javier would be a great aide for her special ed classroom and the perfect person to work with Dontae? Describe any experiences you've had with teachers who just somehow *knew* the right thing to say or do to help you through a difficulty.
- ❖ Javier began to enjoy working in the special ed class on the very first day, and he began to look forward to it daily. Why do you think that was? What did he learn from Nena and Dontae? What did you learn about special ed kids from reading this story? How are special ed kids treated by your friends at school?

Prepared by Sandy Schuckett, school library consultant

About the Author

Mike Castan is an author and former middle school teacher. His first book, *The Price of Loyalty*, was compared by *The Bulletin* to Walter Dean Myers's "venerable *Scorpions*," noting that "middle-schoolers who consider *Scorpions*' 1988 copyright date to be old school . . . can be directed to Castan's debut novel." Mike Castan lives in the Los Angeles area.