

DISCUSSION GUIDE

PUSHING HOPE

Written by Raymond Santana

Illustrated by Keith Henry Brown

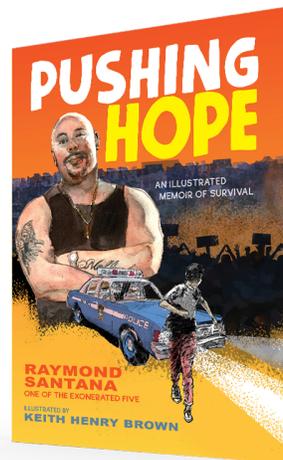
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Grades: 9 and up

Ages: 14 and up



ABOUT PUSHING HOPE

“This is what justice looks like. We are told we live in an age of few if any heroes, but Raymond Santana is a real genuine hero. His story is one of unbelievable courage in the face of rampant injustice and impressive resilience as he maintains his dignity and in the face of obstacles that would destroy many of us. Bravo!”—Ken Burns, filmmaker

When Raymond Santana was just 14, he was accused of a crime he didn’t commit. The 1989 rape of a jogger in Central Park was pinned on Santana and four other young teens, a tragedy that would change their lives forever.

In this powerful illustrated memoir, Raymond Santana takes readers on a journey from his move to Harlem, to his arrest and trial, and from his time in prison to his ongoing fight for justice. Exonerated in 2002, Santana has made it his mission to fight wrongful convictions and injustice. What has sustained him and given him the strength for that fight, is his creativity—art and fashion have always been a refuge and a source of hope.

Teaming up with celebrated artist Keith Henry Brown, Raymond Santana shows in vivid color how one can survive by pushing a message of hope.

PRAISE FOR PUSHING HOPE

★ “This touching, heartrending work will inspire young people to action. With so many curricular tie-ins and as a powerful choice for aspiring activists and artists, and striving readers, this is a must-purchase for all collections.”—*School Library Journal*, **starred review**

“A searing critique of the justice system with a narrative arc that turns despair into hope.”—*Kirkus Reviews*

ASTRA BOOKS FOR YOUNG READERS

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“Santana’s accessible and conversational text, accompanied by vivid, immediate-feeling mixed-media illustrations by Brown immerses readers in the figure’s emotional experiences.”—

Publishers Weekly

“This illustrated retelling of the true events that unfolded in New York City in 1989 allows Raymond Santana to finally provide his side of the story... This heartbreaking yet important story brings history to life and will leave readers inspired to fight injustice and wrongful incarceration.”—

Booklist

Themes & Major Discussion Points

Here are some themes and issues found in **PUSHING HOPE** that teachers, librarians, and parents can explore with readers.

- **Wrongful Conviction and Injustice**
Examine how institutional systems such as the justice system, policing, and media can unjustly affect young people, especially youth of color.
- **Race, Identity, and Family Background**
Raymond Santana is Afro-Latino. His memoir reflects how race, ethnicity, and cultural identity play roles in how others perceive him, and how he perceives himself.
- **Power of Art, Creativity, and Expression**
Art and fashion are not just hobbies in Santana’s life, but sources of refuge, meaning, resistance, survival, and eventually activism.
- **Resilience, Hope, and Healing**
Despite severe injustice, Santana’s narrative is one of holding onto hope and finding ways to heal. Santana avoids being consumed by bitterness and instead channels his experiences into positive action.
- **Interrogation, Coercion, Youth, and Vulnerability**
The methods used by law enforcement dealing with minors, including long interrogations, deprivation of food/sleep, pressure to confess, is explored in **PUSHING HOPE**. The book examines how vulnerable youth like Santana were treated in these circumstances.
- **The Role of Memory, Narrative, and Truth**
PUSHING HOPE asserts that telling one’s own story matters. The book fills in missing perspectives and explores the contrast between public narratives, media representations, and personal truth.
- **Activism and Social Change**
After his exoneration, Santana’s work with fashion and activism serves as a response to his past experiences. By reading the book, young readers will gain broader lessons about advocacy.

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Discussion Questions

Early in the Book

- What is the significance of Raymond Santana’s move to Harlem at age 14? How does Harlem shape his early identity, his opportunities, and the challenges he faces?
- What is Santana’s family background? How is his background relevant to his sense of self and how others treat him?
- Before his accusation and arrest, what parts of Santana’s life seem to offer him comfort, purpose, or hope?
- Reflect on the description of Santana’s initial police interrogation. What does it reveal about power dynamics and vulnerability?

Mid-Book

- Pause to consider Keith Henry Brown’s illustrations throughout **PUSHING HOPE**. What impact does his artwork have on your understanding of Santana’s experiences? Are there moments where the images say something the words do not? How does Brown utilize colors to convey the mood and the story throughout the book?
- How does Santana, despite all his adversity, maintain dignity and hope? Can you point to specific moments or strategies he uses?
- What role does public opinion and media play in the case against Santana and the other accused young men? How does this affect their self-worth, their defense, and the possibility of justice?
- How does the book portray the legal process? What seems effective and not effective in Santana’s fight?

Later in the Book/Post-Exoneration

- How does Santana’s life change after his exoneration? What new challenges does he face—emotionally, socially, or materially?
- In what ways has Santana transformed his pain and his past into activism? What do you think are the key moments or turning points in that transformation?
- Art, fashion, and creativity are important to Santana. In what way does they continue to function in Santana’s life?
- **PUSHING HOPE** as a memoir explores what “survival” means. How does the book do that beyond physical freedom?
- What does the title **PUSHING HOPE** mean in the context of his story? What does “hope” look like at different points in the book?

After Reading the Book

- How does Santana’s story connect to current issues around wrongful convictions, policing, racial bias, juvenile justice, and reform?
- What responsibilities do readers have when reading true stories of injustice like this? How does this book inspire or challenge you to act?

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- How does Santana’s memoir compare with other stories you’ve read of wrongful conviction, or of resilience after trauma?
- After reading the author’s note in the book’s backmatter, how is Santana’s memoir different from other memoirs?
- Which parts of the story were hardest to read, and why? Which parts were most inspiring?
- If you were to share Santana’s story with someone skeptical of systemic injustice, what parts would you highlight? What arguments or examples could be compelling?

Activities Beyond the Book

- **Art Response:** Have students create artwork, such as drawings, collage, digital, or fashion sketches, inspired by scenes from the memoir. Encourage them to create something that reflects hope, survival, or transformation.
- **Role-Play or Debate:** Split students into groups and ask them to role-play perspectives: police/interrogator; defense attorney; media reporter; community member. Debate how different assumptions, biases, and choices affect outcomes.
- **Compare Media:** Examine media coverage of the Central Park Five/Exonerated Five over time. How were the boys portrayed originally vs. after exoneration? How does public narrative shape justice? How are they portrayed today?
- **Juvenile Justice Research:** Investigate current laws around juvenile interrogation, false confessions, and wrongful convictions in your region. What reforms have been implemented recently? What more could be done?
- **Personal Reflection or Journal:** Encourage students to write about a time when they felt unjustly judged or had to hold onto hope despite hardship. How did they cope? What role did creativity or community play?
- **Community Action:** Consider organizing or supporting an event, cause, or campaign connected to criminal justice reform, youth rights, or wrongful convictions in your town or city.
- **Find out more about Raymond Santana:** What is Raymond Santana doing now? How about the other members of the Exonerated Five? Discuss what they’ve done and accomplished throughout their lives.