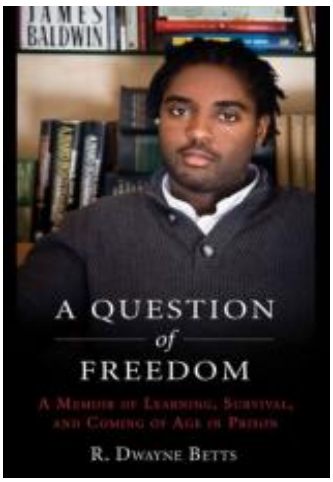
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A Question of Freedom: A Memoir of Learning, Survival, and Coming of Age in Prison

by R. Dwayne Betts



About the Book

?I didn?t hear who said it, but it bounced off the old head?s ears. ?Why you in here?? The old man kinda smiled his gap-toothed grin before he said, ?Nah blood, you ain?t gotta worry ?bout me. I?m ?bout done living. You gots to find out why you in here? (p. 58).

Just before Christmas in 1996, two teenage boys carjacked a man outside a Virginia mall. In addition to a brief joyride in the stolen Grand Prix, their crime earned them ten dollars, a cell phone, and a credit card that would get them both arrested when they took it out on a shopping spree the next day. R. Dwayne Betts knew he?d made a mistake, but --- even after he began his eight-year prison term --- the sixteen-year-old honors student had no idea how high a price he would ultimately pay. Yet, the time Dwayne served also opened his eyes and taught him a series of hard-won lessons that would eventually lead him to freedom.

Dwayne was familiar with fear and violence well before his trial. But, behind bars, everyone ?from lawyers to judges to the other kids around me thought their power rested in getting someone to fear you? (p. 7), and he began to wonder if he could endure prison?s constant threat of injury, rape, and even death without succumbing to the violence that originally landed him there. Fortunately for Dwayne, he reached beyond the black boys from his part of the world to make connections which --- however fleeting --- help him to preserve his humanity.

For the first time in his life, Dwayne lives in a racially mixed society. While the majority of prison inmates are black, some are Latino or white, and Dwayne realizes that his initial perceptions of them are based on stereotypes. Only when Droopy, an illegal Guatemalan gang member defends him from a black man, does Dwayne admit ?it was ironic, I treated them the way I thought white people treated me? (p. 38). As they become friends, Dwayne decides to learn Spanish ?to get rid of the expectation that they had to learn English and me, as an American, didn?t have to learn anything? (p. 42).

Prison also offers him the opportunity to forge relationships with older black men --- surprisingly, something the only son of a single mother had never done. Without offering it as an excuse for his crime, Dwayne writes, ?the men in my family had disappeared before I was old enough to know they were missing? (p.9). Through fellow inmates like 62-year-old Pop Jenkins, Dwayne learns respect for the weight of experience and that ?the truth is often in the space outside of the story? (p. 188).

However, throughout his incarceration, he finds the deepest solace with his most consistent companions: books. Certain volumes like *The Black Poets* anthology and Ernest Gaine?s **A Lesson Before Dying** resonate deeply with him, but he reads everything that comes his way. During difficult stretches, he burns through a book a day grappling to understand why he is in prison, how he will survive, and what he can possibly do afterwards if he did make it.

A Question of Freedom is at once a tour of the parallel universe occupied by black men in America, an exposé of the justice system?s grave shortcomings, and a morality tale. But, most of all, it is a beautifully, brutally honest memoir about one imprisoned boy?s harrowing journey towards freedom and manhood.

Discussion Guide

1. Which incident in the book shocked you the most and why?

2. What is the question that Dwayne is referring to in the book?s title?

3. Dwayne writes, ?I thought there was an imaginary line that would keep me safe. If I stood on corners but didn?t sell crack I?d be okay? (p. 10). What does he mean? Do you think many people incarcerated today believed they would wind up in prison?

4. ?It reminded me of what I thought a gun in my hand said about power. How something that weighed next to nothing in my palm added a ton to the tenor of my voice, made every word I said matter? (p. 21). Is that moment of power worth the risk one is ultimately taking? If not, why do so many take it?

5. ?No one said that we were all locked up because of what filled the lyrics of rap songs. I didn?t say it either. I thought about it sometimes, when the radio was on and I nodded to somebody rapping about who they were going to shoot and when? (p. 54). Is it rap music lyrics that inspire violence or is it the violence that inspires the lyrics?

6. Dwayne spends some time ?doing the knowledge? (p. 113) with a group of Black Muslim inmates but returns Rashid?s Quran after taking the Muslim name, ?Shahid. The witness? (p. 122). Why does he choose this name at the same time that he rejects their beliefs?

7. ?That?s how it was, get picked up for truancy or a fight and the next thing you knew half the people you?re tight with were locked up or had been locked up? (p. 149). Are violence and illegal behavior like viruses that infect those in contact with it?

8. Dwayne?s grief-stricken mother is a silent but constant presence. How does this relationship affect Dwayne while he is serving his time behind bars and once he was released?

9. Early on, Dwayne makes a decision to accept personal responsibility for his actions rather than blaming the violent, racist society in which he was raised. Is this the only path to redemption? What is society?s responsibility towards Dwayne and others like him?

10. Even before Dwayne goes to prison, he is a voracious reader but admits, ?I?d never talked about one book I?d read with my friends until a cell door closed behind me? (p. 153). Why would someone who so obviously loved books keep his reading a secret?

11. While writing a letter on behalf of a fellow inmate who was trying to dispute the bogus case against him, Dwayne realizes ?the thing was, most of us didn?t have the skills, the basic grammatical skills to put together a letter that would make someone want to help? (p. 166). Where does the blame for this deficiency lie: the educational system, parents, or the individual?

12. What did you think of the manner in which Dwayne and his fellow inmates were treatment in the aftermath of 9/11? Do you think that the descendents of slaves?especially if they are also incarcerated?should be expected to feel patriotism?

13. Were you surprised by the fact that Howard University refused to honor the scholarship that Dwayne earned because he was a convicted felon? Or by Mr. Wescott?s decision to accept Dwayne as an intern at The Atlantic even though he?d once been the victim of a carjacking himself?

14. Dwayne explains that he wrote this book ?and hope[s] in the small moments someone will remember what you say and put the gun down? (p. 96). Do you think he succeeded?

Author Bio

R. Dwayne Betts founded YoungMenRead, a book club for at-risk young men, shortly after he was released from prison. A published poet who teaches poetry at several public schools in the D. C. metro area, he is also a graduate student at Warren Wilson College, where he has been awarded the Holden Fellowship.

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