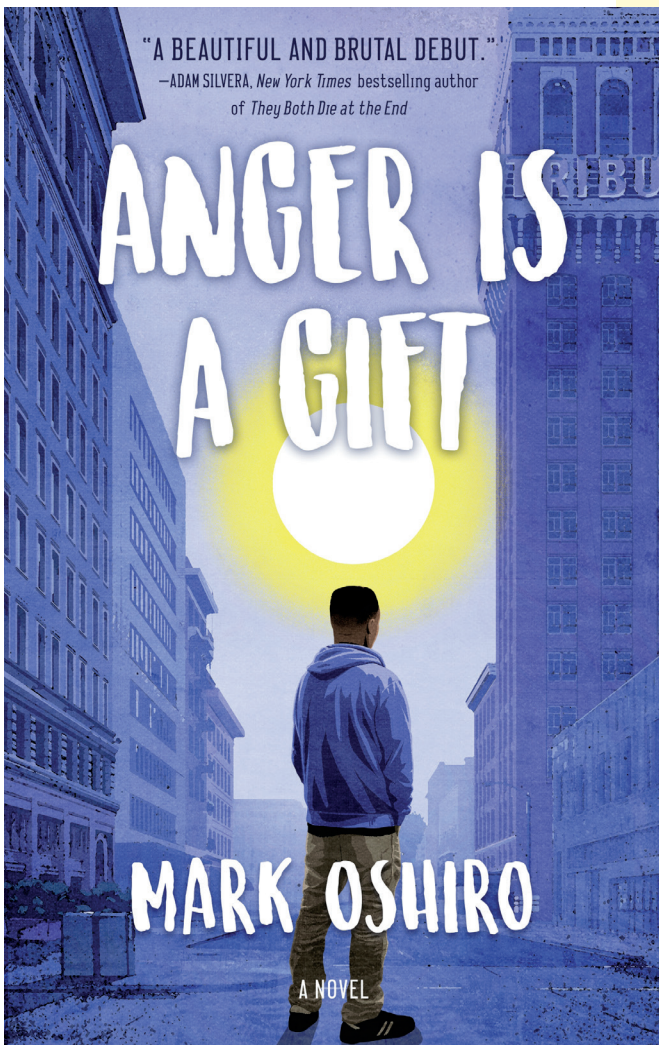


# READING GROUP GUIDE



## ABOUT THE BOOK

Moss Jeffries is many things—a considerate student, devoted son, loyal friend, affectionate boyfriend, enthusiastic nerd.

But sometimes Moss still wishes he could be someone else—someone without panic attacks, someone whose father is still alive, someone who hasn't become a rallying point for a community because of one horrible night.

And most of all, he wishes he didn't feel so stuck.

Moss can't even escape at school—he and his friends endure the crumbling infrastructure at underfunded West Oakland High, as well as constant intimidation by the resource officer stationed in their halls. That was even before the new regulations—it seems sometimes that the students are treated more like criminals.

Something will have to change—but who will listen to a group of teens?

When tensions hit a fever pitch and tragedy strikes again, Moss must face a difficult choice: give in to fear and hate or realize that anger can actually be a gift.



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**MARK OSHIRO** is the Hugo-nominated writer of the online Mark Does Stuff universe (Mark Reads and Mark Watches), where he analyzes book and TV series. He was the nonfiction editor of *Queers Destroy Science Fiction!* and the co-editor of *Speculative Fiction 2015*, and is the President of the Con or Bust Board of Directors. When not writing/recording reviews or editing, Oshiro engages in social activism online and offline. *Anger is a Gift* is his acclaimed debut YA contemporary fiction novel.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What emotions did you experience as you read *Anger Is a Gift*? When a scene made you angry, were you able to imagine how those feelings could become a gift? Which moments in the book made you feel hopeful?
2. Moss lives with panic attacks and other effects from the trauma of his father's violent death. How does he cope with his fears and flashbacks? How does his story help us understand the experience of being a survivor?
3. Esperanza's parents, Rebecca and Jeff Miller, are wealthy and white; their life in Piedmont is very different from that of Wanda and Moss Jeffries. The author writes, "Piedmont was full of people who liked to tell outsiders that they lived in Oakland. A certain amount of street cred came with that" (p. 143). How do these differences drive a wedge between Esperanza and Moss? How does the idea of "street cred" play into widening that gap?

4. The author describes the Millers as clueless but well-intentioned. Even Rebecca's conversation with Principal Elliot ultimately has deadly consequences. Think about the meeting that they host in their home. How do you think the intentions of the Millers compare to the actual results of their involvement? What is the best way to be an ally, especially when confronting your own privilege? ("Privileged" doesn't necessarily mean wealthy; it can simply mean having an advantage, such as freedom from harassment or the consequences of visible prejudice.)
5. On page 133, Rawiya tells the story of the day Principal Elliot ordered her to remove her hijab during the Pledge of Allegiance at a school assembly because it's considered disrespectful in America to wear anything on one's head while reciting the Pledge. Rawiya responded by sitting down, and others followed her lead. What do you make of Rawiya's response? Do you think she was brave to sit down? Do most Americans have blind loyalty to the Pledge of Allegiance, and how do schools condition students to follow, instead of question, these traditions? How can schools and institutions improve their practices to make a more inclusive environment for all students, no matter their religious beliefs?
6. What makes Javier and Moss a good couple? How do they help each other overcome their insecurities about being attractive enough and worthy of love?
7. The novel presents many types of families. Which of the book's households and parenting styles were especially appealing to you, and why? How do Moss's friends, along with others in the community, form a type of family as well?
8. Moss's therapist recommended the Rolodex exercise, helping Moss build a supply of mental images of his dad to comfort him. What are the most comforting images in your own mental Rolodex? How have these memories sustained you?
9. Shawna and Reg have medical conditions but were injured by West Oakland High's supposed attempts to keep them safe. How is Officer Hull's presence at the school more harmful than helpful? If you were Principal Elliot, how would you have ensured the safety of Shawna and Reg?
10. From Principal Elliot to Assistant Principal Jacobs to Police Chief Tom Berendht, Moss's community is suffering at the hands of men who are supposed to be public servants. Why are they so misguided? How did such ignorant people rise to positions of power?
11. Even though he's not a student at West Oakland High, Javier decides to help Moss. Besides love, what motivates his decision to take this risk? What would motivate you to take such a risk?
12. For Mrs. Torrance, teaching is much more than just a job. What gives her the courage to be so protective of her students and speak truth to power? In your opinion, what are the traits of an excellent teacher? Can you see yourself in a future career that transforms lives—and if so, what is it?
13. Re-read the novel's epigraphs (the quotations at the beginning of the book) and then read a few short online biographies of James Baldwin and Dolores Huerta. How has the meaning of those quotations changed since Baldwin's lifetime and the days when Huerta was at the peak of her civil rights activism?
14. Moss's father, Morris Jeffries, is an important character in the novel even though we only meet him through other people's memories of him. What legacies did he leave behind for his family and his community?
15. Social media is a powerful platform for exposing injustice, giving Moss a big audience that he might not have had otherwise. On the other hand, the students at West Oakland High were relying on their cell phones during the walkout; without technology, they were vulnerable. Did the novel make you wary of technology, or do you think technology will help turn the tide of injustice?
16. Moss and his friends represent a spectrum of ways to experience attraction, love, and independence. Quiet Kaisha writes an enlightening blog that helps readers understand asexuality (and helped Reg find the word—biromantic—for his feelings). Bits is trans. Shawna is bisexual. What was it like to read a storyline in which heterosexuals were in the minority in the cast of characters? Which characters did you most closely identify with?
17. How did you react to the novel's closing scene? What will it take for Moss's wish to come true in real life?



## EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

1. If *Anger Is a Gift* had a soundtrack, which songs would you want to include? Pick your five favorite scenes and choose a song to match each scene.
2. Though West Oakland High School is fictional, the novel's three settings are very real. Research the history of the Fruitvale neighborhood, West Oakland, and Piedmont. Make a timeline that lists the historical highlights of all three, and then compare the timelines. How have historical events shaped current life in this corner of America?
3. On page 226, Javier tells Moss that he and his mother came to the United States from Guatemala when he was around eight years old, "right after my father disappeared. . . . I'm not actually a citizen. We never managed to get citizenship for either of us." Imagine that you are elected to Congress, with the power to introduce new immigration laws for the United States. What changes would you propose? Who would qualify for citizenship, and who would qualify to live in the States as a long-term guest? Research how a federal bill becomes a law, and then discuss what it would take for your plan (or parts of it) to become enacted.
4. Principal Elliot says he is trying to keep students safe, but his actions actually make school more dangerous. How safe do you feel at your school and in your community? What would it take for you to feel safer? Research the names of your local elected officials including your mayor, city council representative, and school board representatives. Brainstorm for ways to make your ideas known to decision makers. Would it be more effective to send a letter, meet in person, post on social media, or use another communication method? Which candidates and propositions would you like to promote, even if you're not yet old enough to vote?
5. The Texas Legislature recently enacted the Community Safety Education Act, written by Royce West, an African American state senator. This new law will require public high schools to implement a police-interaction curriculum that includes a video in which police officers demonstrate what a driver should do and say if stopped by the police. The law also requires such training as part of driver's ed courses as well as "civilian-interaction training for peace officers." Explore the rationale behind the new law and discuss whether you think this type of legislation is a good idea. Would Moss support it? Has similar legislation been introduced where you live?
6. In his author's note, Mark Oshiro provides an extensive list of nonfiction books that taught him that "anger is indeed a gift, and that to wield that gift is an awesome experience." He also includes a list of novels that inspired him. Along with the other members of your reading group or class, choose one of the books from the author's note (you could also include the novel Mrs. Torrance assigned, Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*) and check it out from a local library. After you have had time to read the selections, come together as a group to report on the books you chose. Read paragraphs aloud to the group, or perform scenes from the novels, to help each other hear the book's message. Share the most surprising, enraging, or profound information you learned from the authors.
7. Moss's school is seriously underfunded, although money is available to administer tests and install military-grade security equipment. Research how public schools, including charter schools, are funded in your state. Make charts to compare how the funding varies by district and how your state's funding compares to that of the rest of the country.
8. *Anger Is a Gift* is a work of fiction, but it reflects the reality of numerous similar tragedies, as well as the reality of countless heroes who persist in the face of adversity. Read online articles about Oscar Grant, a young man who was killed by a BART police officer at Fruitvale Station. Then read online articles about Dr. LuPaulette Taylor, who has taught at McClymonds High School in West Oakland for more than forty years. What parallels and differences did you notice between their lives and the world depicted in *Anger Is a Gift*? How can novels, fictional films, and online games enhance the way we see the real world? In your reading group, work together to create a fictional character inspired by multiple people from your community. Write a short story, brief screenplay, or video game narrative that features the character you created, giving your imagination ample freedom.

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