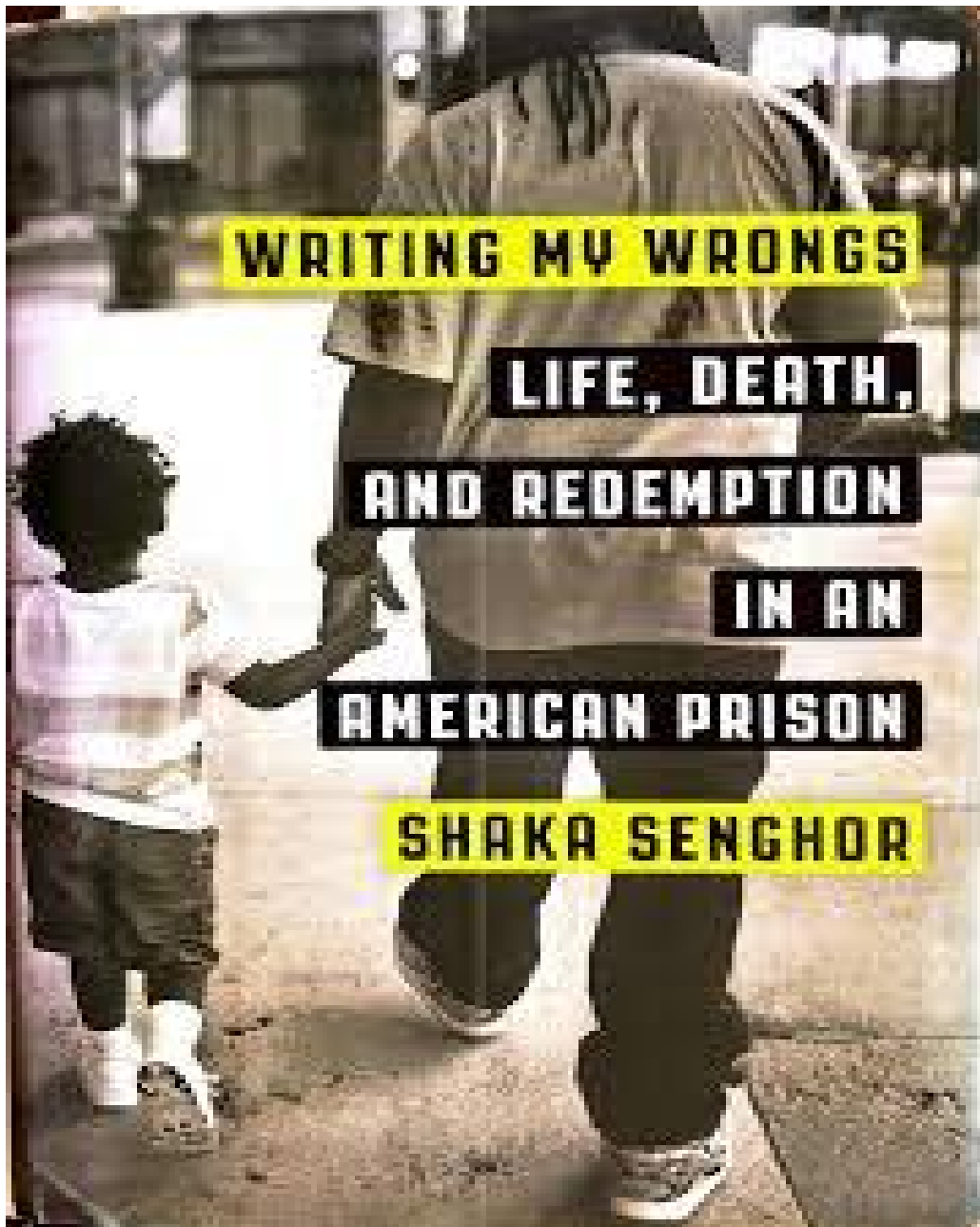


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ENGL 112B
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Writing my Wrongs: Life, Death, and Redemption in an American Prison (2013)

By Shaka Senghor



About the Author:



Images sourced from the Author's website: <https://www.shakasenghor.com/>

Shaka Senghor was born and raised in Detroit, Michigan amidst the crack epidemic of the 1980's. After suffering physical and verbal abuse following his parent's divorce Senghor became a runaway at 14. As a result, Senghor would turn to a life of crime and violence. While in prison, Senghor reflected on his life and choices, and following his release in 2010 he wrote *Writing My Wrongs*. Since then Senghor has become a motivational speaker and life coach emphasizing the power of transformation and not letting your worst mistakes define you.

Summary:

The book is a memoir divided into three distinct parts. The first part outlines Senghor's youth and his first steps in the criminal justice system. The chapters in this part alternate between these subject matters. Senghor took on drug dealing at 14 to care for himself and during these times he learned the finer points of street life. Engaging in illicit activity, violent exchanges, and multiple near-death experiences shape the hardened exterior of a ticking time bomb of a young man. By the end of this section, Senghor is 19 and handed his sentence for a second-degree murder charge that had the potential of 40 years behind bars.

The second and third parts follow Senghor's evolution as he reflects on his life choices. In the early years of his sentence, Senghor falls in line with prison politics staying within his group and engaging in violence on their behalf when asked. Simultaneously Senghor is also learning about figures like Malcolm X and begins to craft a new identity after learning to accept responsibility for his actions and work towards building a new perspective on his life.

Quote 1:

“My heart fluttered like the broken wings of a bird. I was terrified... at fourteen I was about to die... On the streets, it was a well-known fact that dope fiends wouldn’t hesitate to kill in order to get their next fix... I wanted someone in that restaurant to stand up and rescue me... Deep down I was ashamed of my own fear” (21-23 this and all other quotations in this Book Talk are taken from *Writing My Wrongs* by Shaka Senghor).

This interaction sets the tone of Senghor’s life up to this point. He is deeply misguided and the gravity of his choices is only apparent at these near-death junctions. In this section, Senghor also details how street life affected him thus far. On the outside, he appeared to be an angry young man decked out in designer clothes. But on the inside, he is still very much a child desperate for that space to be just that. He wishes to be rescued, to be seen as the young boy he truly is. At this point, he is not ready to let go of the streets and the feelings are short-lived as asserts his shame for feeling how he does.

Quote 2:

“In my cell that night... A deep sadness gripped me... I started talking to God and asking why he had allowed this to happen to me... I got angry at my parents, teachers, and everyone else I felt had let me down. I felt unlovable... I would have given anything to be one of them, picking through garbage, but free to roam the world” (86).

Following his sentencing Senghor reflects on the culmination of his life. Potentially facing 40 years his frustration boils over. He questions his worthiness as a father and his depression sets in. This turns into anger as Senghor addresses his parents and other people he felt failed him and ultimately turns his rage to God. Senghor’s feelings end in self-loathing. Trapped and angry he can only ponder his life and the lost potential he once had.

Quote 3

“When we arrived at the hospital, I felt like I was being moved through an assembly line manned by robots... I felt victimized all over again, this time by an officer who didn’t give a damn about my misfortune... So I coped the only way I knew how. I became angry” (137).

Here Senghor once again is made keenly aware of the consequences of his choices. But the treatment at the hands of law enforcement and hospital staff ignites a new anger. Senghor reflects that no one counseled him or even consoled him. No one helped him through the trauma he had just suffered. Without guidance, he became galvanized in this mindset. Setting on a course for disaster.

Classroom Use

Because it is a memoir, Senghor is able to deliver an authentic and sobering retelling of his life. With this, I believe I can shed light on institutional racism, the prison industrial complex, and the power of overcoming past mistakes.

From a didactic perspective I believe Senghor's memoir can fill a similar role to pieces like *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*. Similar to Douglass's narrative, Senghor's narrative offers a perspective, not many teens are privy to. Because of this more robust discussions on mental health, racial inequalities, and lives in difficult circumstances may be had.

Why should this book be given to teens?

Teens in my community, are maybe one to two bad choices away from ending up like Senghor. I found myself in the book as an angry young man with no guidance. While I chose the military many of my friends opted for the life Senghor did. In fact, many of my friends are still incarcerated to this day. Teens need guidance, love, and understanding. Wise men learn from the mistakes of others. Senghor offers up his life as a cautionary tale to teens who find themselves in similar crosshairs. Aside from that, Senghor's novel also serves as a symbol of hope that we are never too far from redemption. We need only be brave enough to start the journey.

How it fits in *Adolescents in the Search For Meaning*

Chapter 4: Books About Real-Life Experiences.

- This is quite literally a real-life experience. Senghor reflects on the choices he made and his mental state throughout his teens and journey into adulthood from street life to prison and redemption thereafter.
- Senghor includes many real places throughout Detroit including the crack houses, prisons he stayed in, and the hospital that treated him after being shot.
- For teens authenticity is key. Senghor spares no detail. Every gunshot fired, drug sold, and horrible choice made is offered for readers to learn about.

Chapter 6: Books about Identity, Discrimination, and Struggles with Decisions

- The entire novel is a reflection on his life by Senghor.
- He talks several times about his failures as a young father.
- The decision to turn to drug dealing at 14 sets him in a cycle that he cannot break.
- He also questions his identity as a street hustler and what that has gotten him.
- It is this struggle with identity that Senghor truly begins to turn his perspective around.

Chapter 7: Books about Courage and Survival.

- Senghor details several times when he was unable to change his ways. This being deeply rooted in his fear that he could not survive any other way. He asserts you have to be brave enough to change.
- Senghor survives shootings, prison fights, and solitary confinement. He could have very easily slipped deeper into prison politics and let it consume what was left of his life. Instead, he chooses to confront himself and accept that he is responsible for how his life turned out and it is because of this he not only survives but can live.

Quantitative Analysis:

Word Count: about 60,000

Page Count: 266

Lexile: Age: 11-14, 860L

Dale-Chall: 7-8 grade level, Readability: ages 12-13

Qualitative Analysis:

While the novel is not difficult to read as far as capability. A 12-year-old should be able to read this without a problem. However, the content is far beyond what I would suggest to that age group. The novel is riddled with instances of violence, sexual assault, and explicit language. Senghor also presents conversations on the development of his mental health that I think is outside the scope of a 12 year olds understanding.

The novel is broken into three parts each detailing a different phase of Senghor's life. The first part describes his upbringing as a drug dealer and his early prison life before his sentencing. The second chronicles his time after sentencing. He tells of running with his crew, committing violent acts to maintain status, and eventually his growing dissatisfaction with his life choices and himself.

The final part details his final transition into acceptance of responsibility that his life is his fault. He begins to actively shape his future and overcome his past leading up to his life post-prison.

As far as knowledge requirements, I would say there are none. Senghor's word choice is relatively simple and clear. Any event or occurrence that may have some ambiguity is explained within the page it's introduced.

Considering all this, I would recommend this book to 16-19 year olds.

