

# Monster

by Walter Dean Myers · Language: EN

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## Overview

Monster by Walter Dean Myers is a groundbreaking young adult novel that blends prose, screenplay format, and journal entries to tell the story of Steve Harmon, a sixteen-year-old African American boy on trial for his alleged involvement in a fatal robbery. The narrative unfolds through Steve's handwritten journal and the screenplay he is writing about his own trial, a device that forces readers to question the nature of truth, identity, and justice. The central question of the book is whether Steve is a "monster"—as the prosecutor calls him—or a scared kid who made a terrible mistake by being in the wrong place at the wrong time. The story arc follows the trial from jury selection to verdict, interspersed with Steve's reflections on his life, his family, and his fears, ultimately leaving the verdict ambiguous and the reader to decide Steve's guilt or innocence.

The book matters because it challenges simplistic narratives about crime, race, and adolescence. Myers, drawing on his own experiences and observations of the criminal justice system, presents a protagonist who is both sympathetic and unreliable, forcing readers to confront their own biases. The innovative format—part novel, part screenplay—makes the story immediate and cinematic, while the moral ambiguity at its core invites deep discussion. Monster is not just a courtroom drama; it is a meditation on how we define ourselves and how others define us, especially when we are young, Black, and poor. It remains a staple in classrooms and a powerful tool for exploring themes of identity, justice, and the power of storytelling.

## Key Takeaways

- Your identity is not fixed; the way you see yourself can differ drastically from how others label you, and you have the power to shape your own narrative.
- The justice system is not always fair, and being in the wrong place at the wrong time can have devastating consequences, even if you did not commit the crime.
- Writing and art can be a way to process trauma and make sense of chaotic experiences, as Steve does through his screenplay.
- Family support is crucial, but even loving parents cannot fully protect you from the world's judgments and the legal system.
- The choices you make, even small ones, can have life-altering repercussions, and you must take responsibility for them.

- Racial stereotypes and economic inequality heavily influence how individuals are perceived and treated in the criminal justice system.
- The truth is often subjective; what is presented in court is a constructed narrative, not necessarily the whole truth.

## Chapter Summaries

### Part One: The Trial Begins

Steve Harmon is in jail, awaiting trial for felony murder. He is terrified, and he begins writing a screenplay about his experience to cope. The opening sections introduce the key characters: Steve, his defense attorney Kathy O'Brien, the prosecutor Sandra Petrocelli, and his co-defendant James King. The trial starts with opening statements, where Petrocelli calls Steve a "monster," a label that haunts him throughout the book. Steve's journal entries reveal his fear and his attempts to understand how he ended up in this situation.

### Part Two: Witnesses for the Prosecution

The prosecution presents its case. The first witnesses include a police officer who describes the crime scene and the convenience store owner who was killed. Then, a key witness, a man named Jose Delgado, testifies that he saw Steve and King at the scene. The most damaging testimony comes from Bobo Evans, a co-defendant who has made a deal with the prosecution. Bobo claims that Steve was the lookout during the robbery. Steve's journal entries show his growing despair and his feeling of being trapped by the testimony.

### Part Three: The Defense

The defense calls its witnesses, including Steve's mother and his younger brother. They testify to Steve's character and his love for filmmaking. Steve's father testifies, but his testimony is strained, revealing the distance that has grown between them. Kathy O'Brien tries to undermine the prosecution's witnesses, but the evidence is stacked against Steve. Steve's journal entries show his internal struggle, his memories of his life before the trial, and his fear that even his own lawyer does not fully believe in his innocence.

### Part Four: Verdict

The jury deliberates. Steve waits in a holding cell, writing in his journal and working on his screenplay. The tension is palpable. Finally, the jury returns with a verdict: Steve is found not guilty. He is released, but the experience has changed him forever. The book ends with Steve walking out of the courthouse, but he is not triumphant. He is haunted by the label "monster" and by the knowledge that he will never be the same. The final journal entry suggests that he is still trying to figure out who he is.

## Themes

- Identity and self-perception
- Justice and injustice
- Race and prejudice
- The power of storytelling
- Family and loyalty
- Fear and courage

## Notable Quotes

- "The best time to cry is at night, when the lights are out and someone is being beaten up and screaming for help." — Steve's journal entry early in the book, reflecting on the violence and fear in jail.
- "I am not a monster. I am a human being." — Steve's internal declaration, repeated throughout the book, in response to the prosecutor's label.
- "You are what you do. You are what you do." — A line from Steve's screenplay, spoken by the prosecutor, emphasizing the theme of identity and action.
- "I think that the truth is what you see, and what you see depends on where you are standing." — Steve's reflection on the nature of truth and perspective, near the end of the book.
- "They took my picture. They took my fingerprints. They took my name." — Steve's journal entry describing the dehumanizing process of being processed into the criminal justice system.

## Frequently Asked Questions

### What is *Monster* about?

*Monster* is about Steve Harmon, a 16-year-old Black teenager on trial for felony murder in a robbery that left a store owner dead. The story is told through his journal and a screenplay he writes about the trial. It explores his struggle to maintain his identity and humanity as the prosecution tries to label him a 'monster.' The novel raises questions about guilt, innocence, and how society perceives young Black men.

### Is *Monster* worth reading?

Yes. *Monster* is a powerful, thought-provoking novel that uses a unique format to explore serious themes like identity, justice, and racism. It is widely taught in schools and has won numerous awards, including the Coretta Scott King Award. Readers appreciate its emotional depth and the way it challenges assumptions. It is a quick read but leaves a lasting impact, making it a valuable book for teens and adults alike.

### **How does Monster end?**

Spoiler: Steve Harmon is found not guilty by the jury. He is released from jail and walks out of the courthouse, but the experience has deeply scarred him. He is not elated; instead, he is haunted by the label 'monster' and by the realization that he will never be the same. The ending is ambiguous about his actual involvement, leaving readers to decide whether he was truly innocent or just got away with a crime.

### **Who should read Monster?**

Monster is ideal for young adults, especially high school students, as it is often part of school curricula. It is also recommended for anyone interested in stories about the criminal justice system, racial inequality, and identity. Teachers, book clubs, and readers who appreciate experimental narrative formats will find it engaging. The book is suitable for ages 14 and up due to mature themes and language.

### **How long does it take to read Monster?**

Monster is about 280 pages long, with a mix of prose and screenplay format, making it a fast read. At an average reading speed of 250 words per minute, it takes roughly 4 to 5 hours. Most readers can finish it in a few sittings, making it a great choice for a weekend read or a school assignment.