

READING GROUP GUIDE

SHACKLED: A TALE OF WRONGED KIDS, ROGUE JUDGES, AND A TOWN THAT LOOKED AWAY

Written by Candy J. Cooper

\$19.99 US / \$25.99 CAN
ISBN 9781662620133 HC
ISBN 9781662620140 eBook

Grades: 8-12
Ages: 13-17



ABOUT THE BOOK

Between 2001 and 2008, judges from Luzerne County Courthouse in Wilkes-Barre, PA weaponized the zero-tolerance punishment philosophy for profit. Two judges, Mark Ciavarella and Michael Conahan, handed down unfitting convictions for first-time and low-level juvenile offenders, receiving kickbacks from real estate developer Robert Mericle, who built the prisons through the company PA Child Care, and the Planning Commission Lawyer Robert Powell, who secured the contracts. Taking off from a discussion of the generations of working-class victims— first, of coal mining, then of corrupt government practices— author Candy J. Cooper’s **SHACKLED** traces the entrenchment of corrupt political power all the way to its end, when those involved were brought to justice, and a long, heartrending investigation into the victim's experiences takes shape.

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PRAISE FOR SHACKLED

"From cover to cover, **SHACKLED** is a stellar read and an absolute must-have for all those serving tweens and teens." —*Richie Partington, Richie's Picks*

"Well researched and concisely reported, this heart-wrenching story is presented in an easy-to-follow and appealing manner. Supporting images of various figures, places, and pieces of evidence provide thought-provoking breaks in the text that emphasize just how real this miscarriage of justice was. An informative and accessible exploration of a major prison crisis with direct relevance to youth." —*Kirkus Reviews*

"This story about peer victims will appeal to true-crime enthusiasts and socially conscious readers." —*Booklist*

"The account is compelling in its horrific details....this book has enough history and crime to be intriguing for class assignments." —*The Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books*

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. In an interview with Teachingbooks.net (https://school.teachingbooks.net/book_reading.cgi?a=1&id=20745), author Candy J. Cooper explained her motivation for writing about the Flint Water Crisis in *Poisoned Water* (2020): "I've been guided by two main questions in my writing: What is fair? And what is true? I get upset when something seems unfair or untrue." Cooper clearly returns to this motivation by writing **SHACKLED**. How do you feel when you learn about something that's unfair? What personal strategies do you possess to deal with these situations? Are there structural strategies for you to deal with this?
2. In **SHACKLED**, Cooper focuses on the architecture of the Luzerne County Courthouse. Students can take a look at the picture on page 64 or use the internet to look at photos. What is Cooper's objective weaving this into the story? How do buildings play into the idea of power?
3. Besides the immediate architecture, Cooper also discusses the ways geographies of power developed in the mining region of Pennsylvania. In this area, those who had control over the mines passed power to governmental organizations as the mining industry closed down. What ways has landscape or industrial change created a legacy in your home region?

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4. Do for-profit prisons do what they set out to do? What controls are there on the ways the prison system can be susceptible to financial scandals? Who makes money on private prisons?
5. Consider the amount of press the Cash for Kids story received. Does it remain an important story in our cultural consciousness or imaginations? Why or why not? How did **SHACKLED** surprise you?
6. Why does Cooper want to draw a connection between the "more sober and austere settings" of children sleeping in tents or on cafeteria floors with the lavish trappings of Robert Powell's boat, a "56-foot fishing yacht" called Reel Justice with a "\$6,820 teak fishing chair"?
7. Can fairness ever be sacrificed for something? Such as safety? Should truth be sacrificed for any reason? What freedoms or rights do we sacrifice for our safety? What sorts of ways has this been interpreted in the past? How do you feel it is interpreted in your own life? What would you change about these views?
8. Judges Mark Ciavarella and Michael Conahan relied on a relationship with Planning Commission Lawyer Robert Powell and a real estate developer Robert Mericle. In what ways were these relationships maintained?

ESSAY QUESTIONS

- Consider the discussion of Social Worker Mary Pat Melvin's situation on page 87 of **SHACKLED**. Melvin went to the Wilkes-Barre *Times Leader* to support 63-year-old Judge Chester Muroski, a "fair-minded and caring judge" who was released from his post of 23 years by Judge Conahan for questioning the dubious flow of money. Melvin is afraid of losing her job, afraid of retribution:

"Everybody can play ostrich and stick their heads in the sand, but I couldn't rest with myself if I didn't say something, because this is a very, very wrong move."

In anecdotes like these, we finally hear from those giving voice to the voiceless—but for the voiceless, speaking out can be difficult. Has there ever been a time when you felt voiceless? Or when speaking out did not feel comfortable? How did you react? What were the consequences? What factors cause these behaviors in groups or organizations?

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- The Newark Youth Court (<https://www.innovatingjustice.org/programs/youth-court>), launched in 2008, promotes a procedural justice process where offenders, when "treated with dignity and respect, they tend to follow the law, even when a judge rules against them," (Cooper, 152). Cooper cites the Crossroads in Juvenile Justice study, published in 2020, too: (<https://faculty.lsu.edu/pfricklab/pdfs/juvenilejustice-pdfs/dpcauffmanetalmaincrossroadsweb.pdf>).

Compare these programs with the policies of Zero-Tolerance used during the Kids for Cash scandal. Other comparisons could be drawn to Restorative Justice, which has been around for over 100 years, but could be traced to academic formalization in the 1970s. Also consider diversity, equity, and inclusion, a way of reconceptualizing affirmative action that began during the John F. Kennedy administration, or social-emotional learning programs, which could also be traced back to the 1960s. What have we learned in the intervening years? What is working about these programs and what challenges do they face?

- Cooper describes in her author's note a process of planning her book as a way of creating an "osmosis of material." She is a former newspaper reporter, and she cites the many publications she used for a regional and local record of events. She also cites the film documentary *Kids for Cash* and a podcast. In what ways does telling a story differ in these mediums? Which is most effective for you, the reader, listener, or viewer? How does telling a story at different times and places shape our understanding of it?

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