FROM THE DESK OF ZOE WASHINGTON

by Janae Marks

Booktalk

Zoe Washington has a lot going on in her life this summer. She is an enthusiastic baker who wants to compete on the Food Network show *Kids Bake Challenge!* She's not speaking to Trevor, her best friend and next-door neighbor. She receives a letter from her father, who she's never met, from prison. This summer Zoe has to manage all of that and somehow fix it all. Will she be able to apply for the television show? Will she and Trevor repair their friendship? Will she be able to prove her father's innocence and get him out of prison? Zoe Washington has a summer packed with delicious sweet treats and detective work!

Questions for Group Discussion

Secrets. When is it appropriate to keep secrets? Who do secrets help or hurt? A secret is uncovered when Zoe receives a letter from Marcus Johnson, her biological father. Why does Zoe hide her only picture of Marcus? As Zoe reads Marcus's letter, what does she discover? What is the secret that her mother has been keeping from Zoe? Why does Zoe (and eventually her grandma) keep her correspondence with Marcus a secret? Is it appropriate to keep this secret from Zoe's mom? Reflect on Zoe's thoughts: "All of the lying was wrong. I knew that. But maybe it was okay to do something wrong if you were doing it for the right reason" (p. 180).

Music. Zoe and Marcus exchange letters. In them, Marcus shares song titles that remind him of her and other songs that tell her more about him. What can someone's music choices tell us about that person? If you were making a playlist for one of your family members, what songs would you choose? How would those song choices differ if you were making a playlist for a friend? What songs would you choose for a playlist that reminds you of key moments in your own life? Why did you select those songs?

Goals. Consider Zoe's statement: "I never saw many Black pastry chefs on the shows I watched, or in the cookbook section of the library, but I was still determined to be one when I grew up" (pg. 35). How does seeing people who look like you in media and books affect the kind of goals you set for yourself? What does this say about the importance of representation?

Friendship. Zoe was mad at Trevor for a long time. What finally makes Zoe decide to tell him why? What does their conversation reveal about the ways different people can interpret the same events? What does communication have to do with friendship? Have you had an experience when a friend was angry with you, and you didn't know why? How did you patch up the friendship?

Advocacy. What does Zoe begin to discover as she reads *The Wrongfully Convicted* at the library? How does this change her perspective on justice and the prison system? What do many of the innocent people in prison have in common? Why do you think this happens? What is the Innocence Project?

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