

Reading Group Guide: *Bird Uncaged* by Marlon Peterson

1. Before reading *Bird Uncaged*, what was your perception of the criminal justice system in America? Did your views change after reading Peterson's memoir?
2. At the beginning of *Bird Uncaged*, Peterson writes, "I don't believe in cages of any kind. Let me tell you why" (ix). What different kinds of cages trap Peterson throughout his story? Are there any "cages" that you have become aware of in your own life?
3. How does toxic masculinity distort Peterson's sense of himself and the world around him? Can you relate to his experience?
4. Peterson writes, "Survival of the oppressed isn't always logical to the oppressor when observing the oppressed. None of our people are monsters—none. The moment we describe people as monsters we shift human behavior into the realm of the unexplainable" (18). Do you believe that all acts of violence are explainable? What is the danger in labeling behavior "unexplainable"? Have you seen this struggle at play within your own community?
5. What role does faith play in Peterson's life? How does this role change over the course of *Bird Uncaged*?
6. "Prisons and jails don't help people. People help themselves despite prison" (161). How was Peterson able to maintain his humanity despite the brutal inhumanity of incarceration? What ways do you find refuge when faced with adversity?
7. People in prison for violent crimes are often left out of discussions about criminal justice reform. Why do you think this is? Do you think something could be gained from their inclusion?
8. Towards the end of his story, Peterson calls himself an "unproud-unAmerican-American" (199). What does he mean by this? How does this memoir engage with the myth of America?
9. Do you believe abolition is possible? Why or why not?
10. What does healing ultimately look like for Peterson? What does it look like for you?
11. Throughout *Bird Uncaged*, Peterson writes various letters: to himself as a young boy, to "Dash," to his father, to students in the Young Scholars Program, and, eventually, to Freedom itself. What effect did these letters have on you as a reader? If you could write a letter to your younger self, what would you say?
12. What aspect of *Bird Uncaged* impacted you the most? Is there a particular passage that stands out to you?