



# ON THE COME UP

by Angie Thomas

## Booktalk

Sixteen-year-old Bri is a talented rapper and knowledgeable hip hop fan, who is best known to some as the daughter of the underground hip hop legend Lawless, who was murdered by local gang members. Her mother insists that she focus on preparing for college, but Bri finally has a shot to make it big with her music. Her first recorded song goes viral for all the wrong reasons; the verses, fueled by her anger over being profiled by security guards at school, earn her a reputation she didn't want. Playing into the stereotype to make money could be her ticket out of poverty, but Bri must decide who she really is and how to represent herself and her skills.

## Questions for Group Discussion

**Stereotypes.** After Bri blows up at DJ Hype, she fears that she has become the “ratchet hood rat” people unfairly made her out to be (p. 354). Do you think she became the stereotype? Is there a difference between the radio interview, her Instagram video, and the song that Supreme wants her to record for James? Why does she feel so differently about each situation? Do you think her friends and family are justified in their opinions about the way she presents herself?

**Loyalty.** Bri doesn't want to “fire” Aunt Pooh as her manager because she doesn't want to hurt her and risk leaving her behind. Jay has an easier time deciding not to bail her sister out of jail if she isn't ready to change. Do you agree with their decisions? What does it mean to be loyal to family and friends who are making bad choices? How do you know when you're helping or hurting someone you love? How do you decide what sacrifices are worth making for them?

**Youth culture.** After the riot at the school, some parents blame Bri's song for the violence that occurred. Bri thinks that's wrong, but she also hates to hear little kids echoing her lyrics and taking them literally. Do you think music influences people's choices and behavior? What about videos and books? Is there an age when young people should be trusted to understand the difference between art and real life? Who should

decide where to draw the line between free speech and harmful speech when young people are involved?

**Poverty.** Trey wants to sell their father's chain to pay their bills, Bri sees it as a financial safety net they can pawn if they need to, and Jay insists on keeping it. What does the chain represent to Trey? Do you think he is right? Do you agree with Jay's decision to accept welfare before selling the chain? What other decisions do characters make that are complicated by poverty? Do you think poor people are unfairly judged for their situations and choices?

**Double standards.** Bri is enraged when an online petition calls to “protect our children.” Bri thinks, “I'm definitely not included in that ... God forbid [another child] *hear* about what people like me have to deal with on the daily” (p. 265). Why do you think the author of the petition thinks that children like hers need protection from children like Bri? How do other characters in the book show double standards? How do they affect Bri's daily life, and the other young people of color around her? Do you see double standards around you?

Guide created by Autumn Allen, EdM, MA-MFA, educator and critic.