SOFTWARE & TECH

If I Grow Up Todd Strasser

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Exploring "If I Grow Up" by Todd Strasser: A Gripping Tale of Urban Adolescence and Tough Choices

Todd Strasser's young adult novel, **"If I Grow Up"**, is a powerful and unflinching look at life in the inner city, where the future is uncertain and the pull of gang violence is a daily reality. Published in 2009, this book quickly became a staple in classrooms and libraries for its honest portrayal of a teenager caught between the desire for a better life and the pressures of his environment. In this comprehensive article, we delve into the plot, themes, characters, and lasting impact of Strasser's work, examining why it remains a crucial read for young adults and educators alike.

Understanding the Plot of "If I Grow Up"

The story centers on DeShawn Flanagan, a teenager growing up in the Frederick Douglass Projects, a housing project in an unnamed American city. DeShawn is a smart, observant young man with dreams of escaping the cycle of poverty and violence that surrounds him. However, his world is dominated by the Diablos, a powerful street gang that controls the neighborhood. His older brother, Junie, is a high-ranking member, and his friends are either in the gang or aspiring to join. DeShawn's grandmother, who raised him after his mother's death and his father's absence, does her best to keep him on the straight and narrow, but the temptation of the gang's money, protection, and status is ever-present.

The narrative follows DeShawn from middle school into high school, chronicling the escalating pressures that force him to make life-altering decisions. A turning point occurs when a friend is murdered, and DeShawn begins to question the value of staying out of the gang. As he navigates academic challenges, first loves, and the constant threat of violence, readers witness a young man's internal struggle between the path of education and the allure of the streets. The title, **"If I Grow Up"**, reflects DeShawn's uncertainty about even reaching adulthood—a poignant reminder of the stakes for many urban youth.

Key Themes in Todd Strasser's Novel

One of the most compelling themes in **"If I Grow Up"**is the limited nature of choice. DeShawn is not a one-dimensional character who simply makes bad decisions; rather, Strasser skillfully shows how systemic poverty, lack of opportunities, and peer pressure shrink the range of options available to him. The gang offers a sense of belonging, financial support for his family, and protection from rival gangs. For many young readers, this nuanced portrayal helps them understand that the decisions made by characters like DeShawn are not simply about right and wrong, but about survival. The novel encourages empathy and critical thinking about the societal forces that shape individual lives.

Strasser does not glamorize gang life. Instead, he presents it as a brutal, unforgiving reality. Through DeShawn's eyes, we see the emotional toll of losing friends to gunfire, the paranoia of retaliation, and the hollow promise of loyalty. The novel explores how violence begets more violence, trapping generation after

generation. DeShawn's internal monologue often reflects his awareness of this cycle, yet he struggles to break free. This theme resonates deeply with readers who may know similar stories from their own communities or from the news.

Throughout the book, DeShawn encounters teachers and mentors who try to guide him. A key figure is his history teacher, Mr. Willings, who encourages DeShawn to think about his future and challenges him academically. DeShawn also has a kind-hearted girlfriend named Shareese, who dreams of becoming a nurse and tries to keep him focused on school. These characters represent an alternative path, but Strasser is careful not to suggest that education alone is a magic solution. The obstacles are real and daunting, and the novel respects the difficulty of choosing the classroom over the street corner.

Character Analysis: DeShawn Flanagan

DeShawn is one of the most authentic and relatable protagonists in young adult literature. He is not a saint nor a fool; he is a bright, sensitive boy trying to make sense of a world that often seems stacked against him. His narrative voice is accessible and raw, filled with the slang and rhythms of urban speech. Strasser avoids condescension, allowing DeShawn to articulate his fears, anger, and hopes with clarity. Readers watch him grow from a somewhat naive middle schooler to a hardened teenager forced to confront the consequences of his choices. DeShawn's development is the emotional core of **"If I Grow Up"**, making it impossible to forget his story after the final page.

Supporting charactersare equally well-drawn. Junie, DeShawn's brother, is both a cautionary tale and a tragically complex figure—he is violent yet also protective of his little brother. The grandmother embodies resilience and faith, representing the family's moral compass. Friends like Marcus and Terrell show the varied responses to poverty: some embrace the gang, others try to resist, and some are consumed by it. Each character serves to deepen the novel's exploration of its central themes.

The Impact and Relevance of "If I Grow Up" Today

Although published over a decade ago, the novel's themes remain painfully relevant. Issues of youth violence, systemic racism, and socioeconomic inequality continue to dominate headlines. Schools use **"If I Grow Up"**in curriculum units on social justice, empathy, and decision-making. The book has been praised by librarians and educators for giving a voice to adolescents who are often marginalized in literature. It does not offer easy answers, but it does provide a starting point for conversations about the choices that shape young lives.

Todd Strasser, known for other impactful YA novels like *The Wave* and *Give a Boy a Gun*, brings his characteristic blend of journalistic research and compassionate storytelling to this work. He spent time in urban communities and consulted with young people to ensure authenticity. The result is a book that feels honest and respectful of its subject matter. For readers who wonder "*What would I do in that situation?*", "If I Grow Up" offers a challenging, immersive experience.

Discussion Questions and Educational Use

For teachers and book groups, the novel lends itself to rich discussion. Here are some key questions often raised:

- How does DeShawn's environment shape his identity and choices?
- What role does the grandmother play in attempting to break the cycle of violence?
- Is the title "If I Grow Up" hopeful or pessimistic? Why?
- How does the novel portray the relationship between gangs and the lack of economic opportunity?
- Compare and contrast the paths of DeShawn, Junie, and Marcus. What factors lead to their different outcomes?

These questions encourage critical thinking and personal reflection, making the book an effective tool for social-emotional learning.

Similar Books and Recommendations

Readers who enjoyed **"If I Grow Up"** often also appreciate the following titles:

1. "The Hate U Give" by Angie Thomas – A contemporary classic about police brutality and activism.
2. "Monster" by Walter Dean Myers – A novel about a young man on trial for murder, exploring identity and justice.
3. "Long Way Down" by Jason Reynolds – A verse novel about a boy's decision to seek revenge after his brother's murder.
4. "All American Boys" by Jason Reynolds and Brendan Kiely – Tackles racism and violence from multiple perspectives.
5. "The Outsiders" by S.E. Hinton – The classic story of gang rivalry and class conflict remains a perfect companion.

These books, like Strasser's, delve into the complexities of growing up in challenging circumstances and the power of choice.

Conclusion: Why "If I Grow Up" Matters

"If I Grow Up"by Todd Strasser is more than just a gripping YA novel—it is a mirror held up to society. It asks readers to consider the structural barriers that many young people face and challenges the simplistic narratives often heard about "bad choices." By walking in DeShawn's shoes, readers gain a deeper understanding of resilience, empathy, and the fragility of hope. Strasser's unvarnished depiction of urban adolescence ensures that this book remains a vital, thought-provoking read for anyone seeking to understand the realities many young people endure. Whether you are a student, an educator, or a concerned citizen, this novel offers a compelling look at the question that haunts its protagonist: what does it mean to grow up when growing up is not guaranteed?

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