

Project X

by Jim Shepard

Alfred A. Knopf

A Reading and Discussion Guide

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SUMMARY:

Project X is the story of two fourteen-year old boys, outcasts in their eighth grade class, who become caught in a downward spiral of alienation, anger, and violence. The narrator, Edwin Hanratty is a loner. He doesn't belong to any group, listen to music, watch television, or participate in extra-curricular activities. Try as they may, his parents do not know how to help him. His only friend is Flake, a similarly foul-mouthed kid who pushes hard against the boundaries of his world. Together, they bemoan and berate everything about their lives: parents, teachers, the clicks at school, and society in general. In time, however, their ranting turns to a plan for revenge, which, once formed, seems to take on a life of its own – culminating in a tragedy that leaves no life untouched.

There have been a number of novels to address the issue of teen violence since the Columbine school shootings in 1999, most notably *Give a Boy a Gun* by Todd Strasser (Simon & Schuster, 2000) and *Shooter* by Walter Dean Myers (HarperTempest, 2004). But Shepard's talent for capturing the voice and heart of his characters sets him apart. In *Project X* he presents a poignant, sometimes-humorous look at two teens who might, in truth, attend any junior high school in America. In the end, it is our sympathy for these two young teens that haunts us long after we have turned the final page.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. *Project X* is narrated by Edwin and relayed in the language and patterns of a teen. Was this effective? Why or why not?
2. Did you find Edwin to be a trustworthy narrator? How might the novel have been different if told from the point of view Michelle, Edwin's mother, Ms. Arnold?
3. Describe the character of Flake. How is he different from and similar to Edwin? How does he change over the course of the story?
4. What is *Project X*? Why is it important to the novel? What images or ideas does it evoke?

5. Edwin's parents know that their son is unhappy. How does each parent respond to this emotional distress? What dynamics in the family might be contributing to Edwin's unhappiness? What dynamics strike you as healthy and positive? What role, if any, did the parents play in the ultimate tragedy?
6. As witnesses to Edwin's inner thoughts, we are painfully aware of missed opportunities at school to help – or save - this troubled teen. Describe three key exchanges with teachers or administration. Why wasn't there a different outcome? Were the adults somehow negligent?
7. Edwin has been compared to Holden Caulfield in Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye*. How did you find him similar to or different from Holden? Is this an apt comparison?
8. How do Edwin and Flake's experiences relate to your own in Middle School? Could you sympathize with these characters?
9. As human members of society, we have a natural tendency to "explain" unexplainable events by placing blame on one person or group. Does Shepard seem to blame someone for this tragedy? Do you?
10. Many argue that there is relationship between violence on television and music and violence among teens. Neither Edwin nor Flake listen to music or watch TV. What other factors are involved in their story?
11. Edwin survives the school shooting and lives to tell the story, although we never find out what happens to him or anything about the aftermath of the event. Was this ending effective? Why or why not?
12. After reading *Project X*, what, do you think, might lead a teen from *thinking* about revenge to actually *committing* a violent act?

BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

Excerpted from an author interview with Robert Birnbaum:

<http://www.identitytheory.com/interviews/birnbaum146.php>

Jim Shepard is the author of six novels: *Flight*, *Paper Doll*, *Lights out in the Reptile House*, *Kiss of the Wolf*, *Nosferatu*, and *Project X*. He has also published two short story collections and edited three anthologies (with Ron Hansen and Amy Hempel).

Jim Shepard has been teaching at Williams College since 1984. He was born in Stratford, Connecticut and attended Trinity College and Brown University. He currently resides with his family in Williamstown, Massachusetts.

HELPFUL LINKS:

Village Voice review of *Project X* :

<http://www.villagevoice.com/books/0405,atkinson,50704,10.html>

Random House site for High School Teachers:

<http://www.randomhouse.com/highschool/catalog/display.pperl?isbn=9781400033485>

Center for the Prevention of School Violence:

<http://www.ncdjdp.org/cpsv/>

SUGGESTED READING:

FICTION

1. Strasser, Todd. *Give a Boy a Gun*. Simon & Schuster. 2002. ISBN: 0689848935.
2. Myers, Walter Dean. *Shooter*. HarperTempest. 2004. ISBN: 0060295198.

NONFICTION

1. Kalergis, Mary Motley. *Seen and Heard: Teenagers Talk about Their Lives*. ISBN: 1556708343.
2. Newman, Katherine S. *Rampage: the Social Roots of School Shootings*. Basic Books. 2004. ISBN: 0465051030.



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