

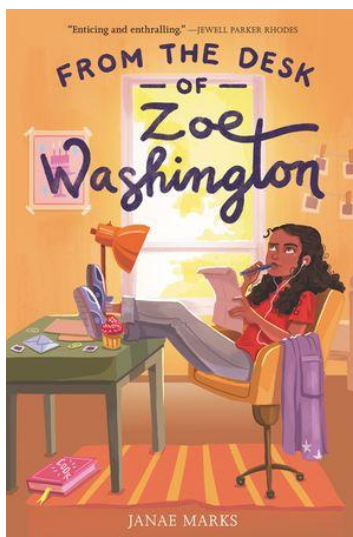
# Using FROM THE DESK OF ZOE WASHINGTON to Teach About Criminal Justice

by Pamela Brunskill

**From debut author Janae Marks comes a captivating mystery full of heart, as one courageous girl questions assumptions, searches for the truth, and does what she believes is right—even in the face of great opposition.**

Humans have always used stories to confront and navigate difficult truths. They offer distilled experiences useful for cracking open a topic for discussion that is often too convoluted and scary to start in real life. With her debut novel *From the Desk of Zoe Washington*, Janae Marks provides a forum for discussing incarceration (and more) with children. As twelve-year-old Zoe Washington learns, the criminal justice system is more complicated than most people realize.

Like Zoe, when I was growing up, my father was incarcerated for murder. At the time, I knew little about the criminal justice system, so my father's incarceration was overwhelming and raw. Books like *From the Desk of Zoe Washington* would have helped to combat the isolation I felt. Now, as a literacy coach, I get excited for the students I work with when books showcase characters grappling with criminal justice, especially when the protagonist has an incarcerated parent. Such books offer windows and mirrors into these children's lives.



Surprisingly, even though [one in 27 children experience parental incarceration](#), few books address this topic head-on or in regards to violent crime, making *From the Desk*

of Zoe Washington a welcome addition. Having an incarcerated parent is an [Adverse Childhood Experience \(ACE\)](#), which can lead to worse health and well-being outcomes later in life. To validate and support these children, I share the following ideas to incorporate Zoe into the classroom.

### **Authentic Details**

There are several ways Zoe mirrors my experience and those of other children with incarcerated parents. You might want to point them out.

First, Marks includes the prison communication system, which involves writing letters and accepting collect calls. The prompt to accept the call was reminiscent of accepting my father's calls. Even the visit to the prison echoed my experience. There is security, uniformed guards, visitors sitting across tables from inmates, and vending machines.

Second, Zoe grapples with her identity. She exhibits bias against those who commit crimes (more on this later). This bleeds into the shame many children in this situation feel. To protect myself from perceived judgment, I shielded that part of my identity when I was younger, fiercely ashamed that I was in any way associated with the guilty party. Like Zoe, I was very careful who I shared that information with.

Third, families have many different attitudes towards the relationship with the imprisoned individual. Zoe's mom didn't want her talking with Marcus. In my own life, the attitudes varied widely—some of us stayed in contact with my dad while others cut him out completely. Probably most important, Zoe wants a relationship with her father, and she wants to believe in his goodness. She point-blank asks him, "Are you sorry you did it?" (p. 82). I always wanted to find ways to appreciate and respect my father, even though he committed a heinous crime. While I can't speak for all children with incarcerated parents, I have worked with and spoken with enough to know that the bond is strong and should be supported when appropriate.

### **Discussion Questions**

Feel free to use these questions about crime and punishment.

- Marcus writes letters to Zoe. What surprises Zoe about the letters? Why?
- Zoe notices when people can be biased and judgmental. Can you find an example of this? How does this relate to her feelings towards Marcus?
- Why does Zoe want to pursue a relationship with Marcus if he's a convicted murderer? Is this reasonable? Why or why not?
- How does Marcus's incarceration affect Zoe and her family?
- How does Grandma help Zoe in her understanding about Marcus?
- Who deserves to be punished? Why? What makes a punishment fair?

- What conclusion does Zoe make about the legal system?

\*A special note and discussion question--

Zoe uses words to describe individuals who are incarcerated based on what she knows. Often, people who are new or outside the criminal justice system view it as good and bad, black and white. When they do, they can use dehumanizing language, which hurts those behind bars and those who love them. Zoe is guilty of this. She refers to Marcus as a “convict father” (p. 3), says “I hated that this person related to me was a monster. A murderer” (p. 24), and asks her grandma, “Even if he’s a criminal?” (p. 78). Zoe’s mom does the same, saying “Marcus is not a good man. He lies and manipulates people. And he’s a convicted murderer.” (p. 44). Using this type of language automatically turns people into good and bad caricatures; real human beings are infinitely more complicated. Of course individuals who are dangerous to society need to be incarcerated, but as an actual [daughter of someone who committed murder](#), I can say my father was more than his crime. A very important discussion revolves around language used to describe incarcerated individuals. How does a student feel when hearing a friend, teacher, and family (including themselves) refer to a parent as a criminal, inmate, and murderer? Ideally, students should resolve to use humanizing language (because [#wordsmatter](#)).



Image from the Osborne Association's #WordsMatter Campaign. Used with permission.

## Book Pairings

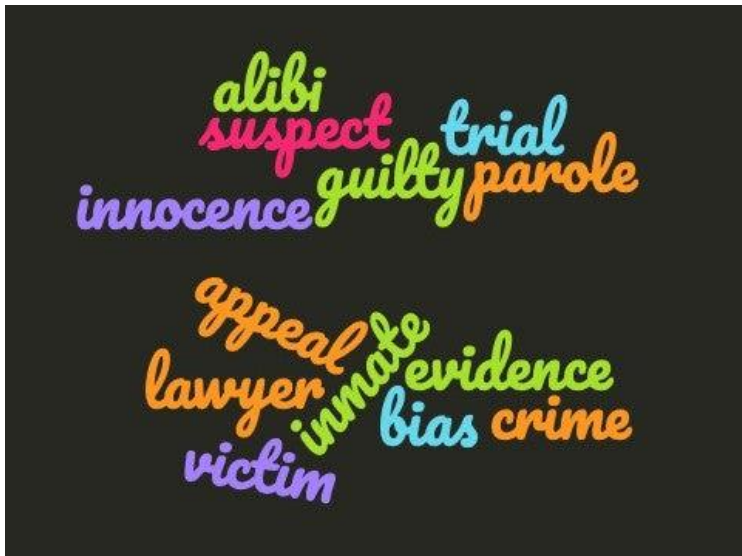


For classrooms wanting to complete a middle grade study on parental incarceration, some other great books that deal sensitively with the topic are:

- Ruby on the Outside by Nora Raleigh Baskin (Simon & Schuster Books for Young Readers)
- The Same Stuff as Stars by Katherine Paterson (Clarion Books)

## Domain-Specific Vocabulary

Some tier 3 words in *From the Desk of Zoe Washington* you can explore with your students include victim, innocence, trial, lawyer, alibi, crime, bias, parole, guilty, inmate, appeal, evidence, and suspect.



## Research projects

For classrooms interested in research projects related to Zoe, here are a couple ideas.

1. Zoe learns about the Innocence Project in this book. What is the Innocence Project, what has it accomplished, and how? You might also want students to research different cases and explain how they relate to Zoe's story.  
(<https://www.innocenceproject.org/>.)
2. What are some of the experiences of Children with Incarcerated Parents?
  - a. Visit the New York Initiative for Children of Incarcerated Parents (NYCIP) Toolkit at <https://www.susu-osborne.org/susu-resource-toolkit>.
  - b. Visit the National Resources Center on Children and Families of the Incarcerated at <https://nrccfi.camden.rutgers.edu/about-us/>.
  - c. Explore #WeGotUsNow, a national movement built by, led by, and about children and young adults impacted by incarceration.  
<https://www.wegotusnow.org/>.



When children see themselves reflected in the lives of the characters they read about, and when they read about others traversing different journeys, their worlds expand in profound ways. Janae Marks' *From the Desk of Zoe Washington* allows students the opportunity to discuss criminal justice at an age-appropriate level. Should your students want more, I hope you will consider expanding the book by using some of the suggestions here, or come up with your own.



Pamela Brunskill is a literacy coach, developer of educational resources, and writer. You can read more about her and her work at [PamelaBrunskill.com](http://PamelaBrunskill.com), or connect with her on Twitter at [@PamelaBrunskill](https://twitter.com/PamelaBrunskill).