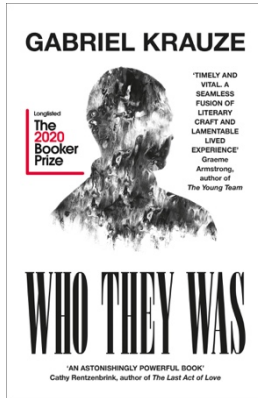


Who They Was By Gabriel Krauze



Gabriel Krauze grew up in London in a Polish family and was drawn to a life of crimes and gangs from an early age. *"This life is like being in an ocean. Some people keep swimming towards the bottom. Some people touch the bottom with one foot, or even both, and then push themselves off it to get back up to the top, where you can breathe. Others get to the bottom and decide they want to stay there. I don't want to get to the bottom because I'm already drowning."* This is a story about what it's like to exist in the moment, about boys too eager to become men, growing up in the hidden war zones of big cities-and the girls trying to make it their own way. This is the story of concrete towers and blank-eyed windows, of endless nights in police stations and prison cells, of brotherhood and betrayal. This is about what's left behind.

Discussion Questions

1. The book opens with a particularly violent act, where Krauze (Snoopz) and Gotti assault a woman on her doorstep, breaking her finger to steal a diamond ring. How did you feel reading about the violent acts throughout the book, knowing that they are based on reality?

2. Krauze jumps between slang and standard English. Does the language affect how you read the book and would it be a different experience if it had been written entirely in standard English or entirely in street slang?

3. The book is set primarily in North London, near the housing estate in south Kilburn where the author grew up and in East London, where he attended Queen Mary University. How does the author create a strong sense of place?

4. Why is education important to Krauze?

5. *"and this is the thing, there's no remorse, I don't feel any remorse...it's not because we're evil or any basic moral bullshit like that. The thing is I don't actually feel anything."*

Chapter: Don't Watch Face

Krauze does not make attempts to justify or give excuses for his actions, he is simply saying this is how it was. What effect does this have on the reader's perception of Krauze?

6. How does the book's title 'Who They Was' relate to its contents?

7. Do you think the thrill of violence that Krauze describes in the book, before they 'do a move' horrifies or entices the reader?

8. *"Perhaps home is not a place, but an irrevocable condition."* Chapter: The Mask

There is a strong bond between Krauze, Gotti and Uncle T. Do you think this sense of belonging was what attracted Krauze to this lifestyle as it was something he couldn't find at home?

9. Chapter: The Seekers After Smooth Things

"The professor talks about human suffering being a confirmation of our existence and I start rubbing my finger over the sharpness of the diamonds in one of my teeth, looking at the faces in the room, attentive, uninterested, thinking you don't know what I know about myself and then I raise my arm. The professor says Gabriel. I say one of the points that Nietzsche makes is that morality is just a rule of behaviour relative to the level of danger in which individuals live. If you're living in dangerous times, you can't afford to live according to moral structures the way someone who lives in safety and peace can."

To what extent do you agree with Nietzsche's point on morality? Would you say that Krauze's life was indicative of a 'dangerous time'?