

# Educator Discussion Guide

**AGING OUT**  
By Alton Carter

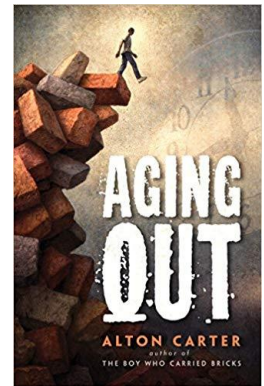
**Louisiana Teen Readers' Choice Award Nominee 2018-2019**  
**Grade 9-12**

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## **ABOUT THE BOOK**

Alton Carter does not live an easy life. He has never met his father, and has a troubled relationship with his uncle. After a particularly violent episode with his uncle, authorities remove Alton from his home and place him into the tumultuous cycle of the foster care system. Alton is labeled with the big “F”, as he calls it: Foster Kid. For the next nine years Alton lives with multiple families until he ages out of the foster care system at the age of eighteen.

Most teenagers look forward to their eighteenth birthday as it brings freedom, legality, and adulthood. However, Alton is petrified of his eighteenth birthday because once he ages out of the foster care system, the pressure to be a successful adult is on. With his grandfather as the only stable relative he can turn to for advice, Alton acknowledges his desire to outgrow his background. With that desire and his willingness to accept help, Alton learns how to become a stable and successful adult.



## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Alton Carter has a Bachelor's Degree in Sociology. He works at the First United Methodist Church in Stillwater, Oklahoma. There he is the director of the youth ministries. This is Alton's second book. He lives with his wife and children in Oklahoma.

Biographical information taken from author's book

*Aging Out*

Accessed on 24 September 2017.

## **BOOK AWARDS**

2017 In the Margins Award, Nonfiction

2019 Louisiana Teen Reading Choice Award Master List

## **OTHER TITLES BY AUTHOR**

*The Boy Who Carried Bricks*, Alton Carter, The Road Runner Press, 2015. 196 p. Winner of the 2016 Oklahoma Book Award

## **RELATED TITLES**

*Foster Care, A Memoir*, Georgette Todd, Alala Books, 2013. 304 p.

*On Their Own: What Happens to Kids Who Age Out of the Foster Care System*, Martha Shirk, Basic Books, 2006. 336 p.

## **PREREADING ACTIVITIES**

### **Foster Care**

Have your students think of a time that they were furious with their family. Have them think about problems that their family deals with. All families have problems and scuffles, but imagine that your family's problems were so severe that you were taken away from them. In America there is an average of 428,000 children in foster care on any given day. The average child is in foster care for two years, but about 27,000 remain in the system for a minimum of six years. (Taken from [childrensrights.org](http://childrensrights.org) accessed on 20 October 2017.) Have your students break up into groups and create a list of the pros and cons of foster care. When all groups are finished, consider creating a class list or having each group share out part of their thinking.

### **Becoming an Adult**

Have students create a list of as many adult responsibilities as they can think of. Then pose these questions:

Which adult responsibilities are the simplest?

Which adult responsibilities are the most difficult?

Which ones need an adult role model to show you how to handle these responsibilities successfully?

What is needed to fulfill these responsibilities?

Now ask students: How would you feel if you were given all these responsibilities on your 18<sup>th</sup> birthday with little to no guidance or help? Have students read the article titled "Youth Aging Out of Foster Care Struggle in the 'Real World,'" <https://www.usnews.com/news/best-states/louisiana/articles/2017-03-19/youth-aging-out-of-foster-care-struggle-in-real-world>.

Have a class discussion about the article.

## **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

### **Chapter 1**

1. How do typical teenage problems compare to those of Alton?
2. What is the Catch-22 of being a foster child that Alton struggled with?
3. How do you feel when your parents yell at or lecture you? How does your reaction compare to Alton's the first and only time he was lectured?

### **Chapter 2**

4. On page 16, Alton says that "turning eighteen would trigger changes in [his] life" that he wouldn't be able to control. What changes is Alton talking about and how are those changes different than what his peers are facing?
5. How does Alton feel about his first ACT score? How do you know? Cite evidence from the text.

### **Chapter 3**

6. There were many times throughout Alton's life that people tried to support him, but he didn't see it. Describe one of those times and how Alton reacted.

### **Chapter 4**

7. Alton shared an eye-opening experience when he worked with Tim and Jeff the summer after he graduated high school. Describe that moment and the mind shift that came with it.

**Chapter 7**

8. How does Alton's demeanor change from before he left for Stillwater to after he returns to Cushing? What is the reason/s for the change?

**Chapter 10**

9. Why was living at college for four years such a foreign concept to Alton? Be specific and cite examples.

**Chapter 14**

10. In chapter 14, Grandpa shows Alton "tough love." What does he do and how does Alton react to it? How does Alton's initial reaction compare to his feelings when he looks back on the incident as an adult?

**Chapter 15**

11. Describe Alton's run-in with the law. How did that one event affect his life?

12. How does Alton's experience with the law compare to what he was taught by his family?

**Chapter 22**

13. Reread pg. 84-85. Pick a character trait that Alton exhibits and provide an example of that trait in use.

14. What are two character traits you could use to describe Kristin? Provide at least one example of a time when Kristin exhibited each trait.

**Post Reading**

15. Who do you think played the most pivotal role in Alton's life? Why do you think that? Be sure to cite evidence from the text.

16. There's no question that Alton looked up to his Grandpa. In your opinion, what was the single most important lesson that Grandpa taught Alton? Why do you think that? Provide examples from the text.

17. Throughout the book, Alton acknowledges several times that he was likely dealing with depression. When in his life did depression present itself to Alton? Do you notice a pattern?

18. Throughout his life Alton has battled low self-esteem. Identify and compare two specific such times.

19. How does Alton change over the course of the book? Provide examples to support your thoughts.

20. Alton is very trusting and tolerant when it comes to his family, but time after time they slight him. Give an example of one such time they disappointed Alton and explain what his family should have done.

21. Alton's intentions are always good, but frequently the way he acts on them does not produce the results he wants. Explain a time when Alton had good intentions, but his actions missed the mark.

22. After reading the book, take another look at the cover. How does the cover hint at what is to come? What is the significance of the pile of bricks, the boy stepping out into an abyss and the faint time/clock in the background?

23. Imagine that Alton was adopted by Phil and Marcy. How might his life be different?

24. What are some ways that Alton's past still affects him even now years later? Provide two examples.

25. Describe Alton's relationship with his mother, his siblings and his sibling's children. Would you consider these healthy relationships? Why or why not?

26. Is Alton able to forgive his mother and family for everything he went through: the abuse, neglect, hunger, events that led to his being put in foster care, etc.? Use examples from the book to support your answer.

## **CLASSROOM CONNECTIONS**

### **Art:**

There were many times when Alton was forced to make a choice between two options. Have students create two different dioramas showcasing each choice and what Alton's life could have been like had he made each choice.

### **Mathematics:**

Alton ages out of foster care and is immediately responsible for all the traditional bills without ever having been taught financial responsibility. First have students think about expenses that most adults are responsible for monthly. Have students research costs of living in their hometown and/or state and prepare a budget for someone who has recently aged out of foster care. What is the minimum amount of income needed to survive? Is it possible to work a minimum wage job like Alton did and cover the bills each month?

### **English Language Arts:**

- The end of the book is open-ended in a way because Alton's life is not over. Based on their reading of Alton's life so far, have students imagine what Alton's life will be like the next 5-10 and write a continuation of his life story. Does he continue with his job at the church? Do he and Kristin have any more children? Are they still living paycheck to paycheck? Does he continue to look at the refrigerator occasionally just to make sure there is actually food in it?
- Have students write a letter to Alton expression their thoughts after reading the book. Have them mention 2-3 events from the book in their letters. After revising and editing their letters, both with their peers and during a writer's conference with the teacher, students will submit their letters for a grade. At that point students can choose whether they would like their letter mailed to Alton or not. Mail designated letters to:  
Alton Carter  
P.O. Box 2564  
Oklahoma City, OK 73101
- Alton drops out of college the first time because of self-doubt. Write an alternate ending to the book had Alton continued with college and graduated. Would he have ever met Kristin? Would he still be in Oklahoma? Would he still have found a way to work with children daily?

### **Social Studies/English Language Arts:**

- The entire premise of this memoir revolves around the foster care system, which most students are unfamiliar with. Have students research the history of the foster care system in America. A few questions to consider:
  - When was the foster care system created?
  - Is it funded by the local, state or national government?
  - How many children are in the foster care system?
  - What is the average length a child is in foster care?
  - Is there a similar system in other countries?
  - How can an adult become a foster parent? What is required?
- After reading the book, have students come up with a list of questions they have about the foster care system. Have students research a few of the questions and write a short essay.

**Social Studies:**

If your state is one of the 25 that doesn't participate in The Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008, have students research the act and then write a letter to their state representatives on behalf of the act.

**Vocabulary:**

Anomaly	Litany	Stigma
Conspicuous	Miffed	Therapeutic
Delusion	Ostracized	Unbeknownst
Dodo bird	Psyche	Vitae
Erratic	Remedial	Wherewithal
Incest	Speculated	

**RELATED WEBSITES**

**Author Alton Carter**

<http://www.altoncarter.net>

Learn more about Alton, see interviews with him and read about the other books that he's written.

**National Foster Youth Institute**

<https://www.nfyi.org/51-useful-aging-out-of-foster-care-statistics-social-race-media/>

Learn 51 facts about the foster care system and what it means to "age out."

**National Conference of State Legislators**

<http://www.ncsl.org/research/human-services/extending-foster-care-to-18.aspx>

Learn about the 25 states that extend foster care beyond the age of 18.

**National Public Radio**

<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=125594259>

This article talks about the difficult transition of aging out of foster care and reports on a few different aging out stories across the nation.