



# DISCUSSION GUIDE

## KNEEL BY CANDACE BUFORD

For guys like Russell Boudreaux, football is the only way out of their small town. As the team's varsity tight end, Rus has a singular goal: to get a scholarship and play on the national stage. But when his best friend is unfairly arrested and kicked off the team, Rus faces an impossible choice: speak up or live in fear. Desperate for change, Rus kneels during the national anthem. In one instant, he falls from local stardom and becomes a target for hatred. But he's not alone. With the help of his best friend and an unlikely ally, Rus will fight for his dreams, and for justice.



“Buford takes the criminal justice system sharply to task, demonstrating how easily it bows for people trying to uphold white supremacy at the expense of the livelihoods (and sometimes lives) of Black people... Perfectly pitched to justice-oriented sports fans.”

—*Booklist*, starred review



“Debut author Buford delivers a novel that bridges the mighty dreams of *Last Chance U* with the trenchant social critique of *The Hate U Give*. Sports’ biggest social movement moment of the decade gets a special homage.”

—*Kirkus*, starred review

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Candace Buford has been an avid reader since childhood—always looking for stories with strong and complex POCs. She graduated from Duke University with a degree in German literature, which exposed her to the delightfully creepy side of storytelling by writers like Kafka and Brecht. Raised in Houston, she now lives in the PNW. She shares her life with a rocket scientist and a Plott hound, who both ensure there is never a dull day. *Kneel* is her debut.



## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. From the first chapter, it is clear that Monroe and Westmond are neighborhoods segregated by race and class. How does residential and school segregation affect the lives of the characters and the interactions between the residents? Do you see segregation in your neighborhoods and schools? How does it affect the lives of those around you, in both material and ideological ways?
2. In class, the poem “i sing of Olaf” makes Russell think of Colin Kaepernick’s peaceful protest and the consequences he suffered for it (44). His father called the protest “foolish” because Kaepernick lost his job and was villainized. Why do you think his father says this? How many different ways can you think of to view Kaepernick’s decision? What elements of a person’s own background might lead them to hold a particular one of those views?
3. At several points throughout the book, Russell weighs the pros and cons of protesting against injustice. At one point, he thinks he would “do anything to make a better life for myself” (208). What are the pros and cons of his protests? How do his decisions affect his parents, his teammates and his own future?
4. When Russell’s father’s truck is vandalized and someone calls over the police, Russell’s “heart rate quickened” and he felt “on edge” and “guilty” even though he had done nothing wrong (61). What makes him feel this way? How does this feeling reflect the relationship between the police force and Russell’s community?
5. Some of the posters about Dante say “Silence is Violence.” Discuss what this saying means for individuals, communities, systems and a nation.
6. Throughout the book, Russell and Marion struggle with a sense of powerlessness against a system that is designed to fail them. What situations are within their control and what situations are outside of their control? Where do you see hope in the struggle for change?
7. When Gabby screams at the crowd, Russell tells her, “They can’t hear you anyway,” and she responds, “That doesn’t mean I shouldn’t speak up” (113). What is the benefit in speaking up when you may not be heard?
8. After the rally, Russell thinks, “What if we *all* used our voices? We could shake the very foundations of this country” (223). What do you imagine that could look like? Does this idea affect their situation in the timeline of the book?
9. Why does Russell’s father have a change of heart toward the end of the book (284)? Do you agree with his and Russell’s final assessment of the act of protest?
10. When Russell begins writing for his project, he says “I was suffocating from the confines of racism, trapped. I couldn’t focus on anything else” (287). What does that look like for him? What does it look like for people in your community or nearby? How might the world be different if all people were free to “live an unencumbered life” (294)?
11. Discuss the section from Russell’s essay on page 295. What role does personal responsibility play in this story? What role does it play in society?

## AFTER READING ACTIVITY

Research the following questions, individually or spreading the questions among a group:

- How did Colin Kaepernick decide what form his protest would take? What was his message? What has he been doing since his protests ended his football career?
- What issues were Tommie Smith and John Carlos protesting at the 1968 Olympic medal ceremony? How did silver medalist Peter Norman support them? How did all three of their lives change after the protest?

Then, make a chart or slideshow comparing the motivations behind, support for, opposition to and consequences of these two famous acts of protest in sports. In what ways have race relations changed since 1968? In what ways have they remained the same?

---

## MORE PRAISE FOR *KNEEL*

“Absolutely timely and gripping. Couldn’t put it down. Speaks to the current social climate, and is a must read. 10/10.”

–Broderick Hunter, actor, model, and activist

“A powerful and timely debut novel, *Kneel* is a gripping story about what it looks like when we demand equity, justice, and recognition of our own humanity. It examines the mental and emotional costs of activism but also gives us a reason to stay in the fight.”

–Kalynn Bayron, author of *Cinderella Is Dead*

“An utterly unforgettable book—one that makes you think, makes you angry, and most of all, makes you eager to demand change. With an honest, unflinching voice and imbued with moments of true tenderness, *Kneel* is realistic YA at its best.”

–Rachel Lynn Solomon, author of *Today Tonight Tomorrow*

“This is “Friday Night Lights” for the Black Lives Matter era: an intense and unflinching look at how racism curdles lives in a small Louisiana town. You’ll blaze through it with your heart in your mouth and your fist in the air.”

–Martha Brockenbrough, author of *The Game of Love and Death*

“Unflinching and compelling, Candace Buford turns a bright spotlight on the unjust world we live in. With *Kneel*, she is claiming space as a powerful new voice, loudly reminding us that *silence is violence*. Readers will be galvanized by this beautiful book’s message.”

–Annette Christie, author of *The Rehearsals and Love Lessons*

---

## ABOUT THE GUIDE’S AUTHOR

Autumn Allen is an educator, a writer and an editor specializing in children’s literature. Find her online at [www.autumnallenbooks.com](http://www.autumnallenbooks.com).

 @InkyardPress  @InkyardPress

 @InkyardPress  @InkyardPress  @InkyardPress

