PRE-READING QUESTIONS:

1. What impressions are conveyed by the cover of *The First Stone*? Do you think its design is effective? Why or why not?

2. Do you know (or have you read about) anyone who has been charged under the Youth Criminal Justice Act (or other comparable legislation)? What do you recall about the offence and its eventual punishment?

3. Do you think youths should ever stand trial as adults? Why or why not?

4. In *The First Stone*, a character states, “People have zero tolerance for youth crime.” What do you think is meant by this statement? Do you agree or disagree with it? Why?

5. Do you think people feel differently toward youths who commit criminal acts than toward adults who commit the same acts? Explain.

6. The use of profanity in young adult fiction is a contentious issue, especially in fiction that is read in classrooms. Do you think an author is justified in using profanity when writing for young adults? Why or why not?

READER’S GUIDE:

Chapter 1

1. The first chapter of a novel should catch the reader’s interest as well as introduce the main character and conflict. Does the first chapter of *The First Stone* succeed in doing all three? Give examples to illustrate your comments.

Chapter 2

2. Comment on Reef’s relationship with his friends, Bigger and Jink. How important are they to him? Explain.

3. The novel’s first and second chapters introduce Reef and Leeza separately while the third chapter includes both of them. What is the effect of seeing them presented in this manner?
Chapter 3 - 6

4. Why does Reef throw the rock off the Park Street overpass? Compare the act of throwing this rock with the act of throwing the pumpkins off the Everett Street overpass, which is described in the novel’s first page. In what way(s) are these acts similar/different?

Chapter 7

5. Discuss your response to the judge’s ruling in Chapter 7. How do you feel about Reef’s reaction to this ruling? Explain.

Chapter 9

6. Comment on the five rules, found in Chapter 9, which Frank Colville requires the residents of North Hills to follow. Compare these with the rules by which Reef has lived his life since the death of his grandmother.

Chapter 10 - 12

7. North Hills Group Home has been in operation long before Reef arrives. Why do you suppose Frank Colville assigns Reef—rather than another resident—the job of repairing the greenhouse?

8. What is the purpose of the family room sharing sessions? Why does Reef refuse to participate in them openly and honestly?

Chapter 13

9. Chapter 13 offers insight into Reef’s relationship with Scar. What would you say characterizes their relationship? Why?

Chapter 14 - 22

10. Explain the connection that forms between Reef and Leeza. Is it believable that they bond so quickly? Tell why or why not.

Chapter 23

11. What is the purpose of Chapter 23? Explain.

Chapter 24 - 26

12. One of the novel’s most colourful characters is Alex, whom Reef dislikes on sight. What common experience in their backgrounds enables them to become friends?
13. Explain your response to the scene in Chapter 25 during which Reef and Leeza discover each other’s identities. Is the scene effective? Why or why not?

Chapter 26

14. Comment on the questions asked by the students at Reef’s presentation in Chapter 26. What important information do Reef’s answers provide the reader? What other questions would you have asked if you had attended his presentation?

Chapter 27

15. What is the purpose of the scene, included in Chapter 27, during which Reef visits Leeza for the last time?

16. One reader commented that The First Stone could have ended with Chapter 27. Re-read this chapter and explain whether or not you agree with this statement.

Post Reading

17. What is the purpose of the novel’s final chapter?

18. Some readers have said they wanted the novel to end differently. Were you satisfied with the novel’s ending? Why or why not?

19. Most stories (whether novels or short fiction) include a change of some sort—something is different at the end of the story than at the beginning. This change might involve one or more of the following:
   ● a change in the main character
   ● a change in the main character’s situation
   ● a change in the way the reader feels about the main character
What changes in the novel The First Stone? What is the significance of this/these change(s)?

20. “It is often the dead who speak loudest to the living.” Comment on this statement in relation to the events of The First Stone.

21. Explain the significance of the novel’s title.

QUESTIONS ABOUT THE WRITER’S CRAFT:

1. Don Aker chose to tell his story alternately from Reef’s and then Leeza’s third-person points of view. What effect does this continual shift in point of view have on the reader’s perception of the events?
2. There is one scene during the novel when the author deviates from this point of view, choosing to present a scene from the viewpoint of other characters. In which scene does this occur? Why do you suppose the author chose to present this scene in this manner?

3. Why do you think the author divided his novel into three parts? Would it have been as effective without these divisions? Tell why or why not.

4. Writers use a variety of details to convey strong impressions of characters, including the following: (1) physical appearance, (2) setting, (3) action, (4) dialogue, (5) reaction (a character’s thoughts and feelings), and (6) observations made by other characters. Illustrate Don Aker’s use of these details in *The First Stone* by explaining how they convey an understanding of particular characters in the novel.

5. Every character in a novel—even the most minor—must serve a definite purpose, which can include one or more of the following:
   - to advance the plot
   - to give the reader information about other characters or about the conflict
   - to provide “comic relief”

Choose five minor characters in the novel and comment on their function. Give examples of scenes in the novel that illustrate your ideas.

6. Comment on the author’s choice of names for his characters. Is it significant that none of the novel’s major characters use their birth names? Comment on the importance of the following line in Chapter 28: “[Reef] traced his fingers over her signature, lingering over the second syllable she’d finally chosen to use.”

7. Many of the novel’s main events are shown after-the-fact in the form of flashbacks. Give examples of three important events that are related in flashbacks, and explain why you think the author chose not to sequence these events chronologically.

8. Read the novel’s first and final pages. What image is repeated in both? What purpose does it serve?

9. A critic once commented that a novelist is allowed only one coincidence. What role does coincidence play in *The First Stone*? Does Don Aker rely too heavily on coincidence in his novel? Explain.

10. Re-read the comment on the novel’s cover written by Tim Wynne-Jones. Would you agree with his assessment of the novel? Why or why not?

11. An epigraph is a statement, often a quotation, at the beginning of a literary work that identifies an important theme. Comment on Don Aker’s choice of epigraph for *The First Stone*. Is it appropriate? Why or why not?
12. Profanity is always a major concern among parents and educators when it appears in young adult fiction. Do you think its use in *The First Stone* is gratuitous? Tell why or why not.

**EXTENDING YOUR READING:**

1. Don Aker includes in his novel two passages from Robert Frost’s poem “The Death of the Hired Man,” one in the epigraph and the other in the final chapter. Locate a copy of the poem and read it twice. Does knowledge of this poem help further your understanding of the novel? Explain.

2. Readers often wonder whether Reef and Leeza ever see each other again. Using either Reef’s or Leeza’s third-person viewpoint, write a scene in which the two characters might plausibly meet again.

3. In the novel’s final chapters, readers learn what happened to Scar, and they have a hint about what lies in store for Reef. What do you suppose will happen to Jink and Bigger? Consider their lives ten years from now—what will they be doing and what will they be like? How do you know?

4. The experiences of the character Alex Praeger suggest some of the obstacles faced by gay youths. Explore how gay youths are presented in contemporary fiction, films, and/or television programming.

5. Canada’s Youth Criminal Justice Act replaced the Young Offenders’ Act in 2003. Locate each on the Internet and explain how the present Act differs from its predecessor.

6. Create and conduct a survey about public attitudes toward youth crime and its punishment, making sure to include responses from a variety of age groups. Are you able to draw any conclusions from your data?

**OTHER RESOURCES**

For more information on Don Aker and his publications, visit the following websites:

www.donaker.com
www.umanitoba.ca/outreach/cm/profiles/aker.html