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## READING GROUP GUIDE • MNHSPRESS.ORG

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### *Diesel Heart: An Autobiography* by Melvin Whitfield Carter Jr.

A Reader's Guide  
Composed by Dane Verret

1. In the first chapter, Melvin writes about his grandmother Clara May Smith, who was born before chattel slavery of African Americans ended. He says that she has lived an experience he will never know, and he will experience a life she has been denied. What are some of these experiences, for each of them? What does that statement mean to you? What are some of the dreams that your family hopes you will make real for them?
2. What reasons does Melvin give in describing how the Rondo neighborhood became a community for African Americans? Why do you think his parents decided to relocate there to start their family? Does your family share anything in common with the Carters' experience?
3. While Melvin was a child in the 1950s, the city of St. Paul was preparing to destroy the Rondo community to make way for Interstate 94. While Melvin was roaming the neighborhood, playing with his friends, what do you think this time was like for Melvin's parents and the other adults in the neighborhood?
4. Melvin describes what he learns about boxing from Mr. Nins as the foundation for his identity. How does he show that in later chapters? What are two other important lessons that Melvin gains throughout his childhood? What are some of the most important lessons you learned in childhood, and how are you using that knowledge now?
5. "Thee Boyz" is a group that Melvin and his friends form for friendship and protection. Why does Melvin decide to distance himself from Thee Boyz? What challenges does Melvin face in making the decision?
6. What are some examples of how Melvin has to fight racism, physically and mentally, the entire time he is in the military? How do other African American sailors and marines handle these issues? What motivates him to stand up for himself and his ideals, rather than back down and give in to racism? When did you begin to stand up for your own values and beliefs? What have been some of the biggest challenges you faced?

7. After being honorably discharged from the military, Melvin describes himself as feeling “lost.” What are some of the most important events that occur in his life during this time? Have you ever felt lost? What new people or mentors did you meet—and did you lose any important people, or ideas about yourself, along the way? After you found yourself, did you feel like you were very different from who you used to be?
8. Melvin joins the St. Paul Police Department because members of the Rondo community ask him to. What do they see in Melvin that gives them confidence in him? When have you been called, by community or by circumstance, to go above and beyond your current level of performance and talent in order to find your new “better best”? What commitments and sacrifices did you have to make to achieve that?
9. As a Black officer, Melvin endures a very racist, extremely hostile working environment in the St. Paul Police Department, as well as distrust and hostility from the African American and white communities he serves. Despite the challenges, he treats both the community and himself with respect. How do you think he was able to stay true to his value system? Was there a time in your life when you felt torn between staying true to yourself and fitting into a hostile place? What did you do?
10. After almost 10 years as a police officer, including surviving race riots during the Rice Street Parade, routine workplace bullying, and a short time on the St. Paul SWAT Team, Melvin says he “fell into the trap of bitterness” and decided to quit his job. What are some of the reasons that he became bitter? What are some of the struggles you have had to endure in our society? How do you decide when to struggle with changing the world around you, and when to surrender?
11. Soon after Melvin rejoins the force, he’s assigned to the Juvenile Division as a detective. Why does he say this moment of “banishment from prestige turned out to be among my life’s biggest blessings”? What are some of the most urgent, important challenges facing your community right now? What responsibilities and actions are you taking to find a solution to the challenges your community is facing?
12. What are some of the broad historical events that Melvin, his family, and his community experienced directly, over three generations? When you look at your parents, grandparents, and the community who helped raise you, what struggles of the past will your success release them from? What kind of future would you like to guide the young people you care about towards?
13. If you had to tell our own life story, as Melvin does in this book, how would you tell it? How would you arrange the different time periods of your life into parts and chapters? What are the three most important lessons you would want someone to learn from your life story?
14. If someone were to listen to your heartbeat, what would they hear?

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