

Play: *Fame* • Issue: September 21, 2009

Name: _____ Class: _____ Date: _____

Pennie for Your Thoughts!

Read about Collins Pennie, who plays Malik in the new movie *Fame*. Then answer the reading-comprehension questions at the end of the interview.

Q: *You spent much of your childhood in foster care. What kinds of challenges did you face?*

Collins: There are a lot of things you go through in foster care. You want to be at home with your family, so it's a struggle, because you're in another person's home. But I had a dream, and that kept me happy. It allowed me to focus on something else.

Q: *At what ages were you in foster care?*

Collins: From 11 to 15.

Q: *When did you know that performing would be a career for you?*

Collins: I knew I always wanted to perform. I knew I wanted to sing and dance. I sent out a demo to my first agency, and they asked me to read some lines. They said, "Read these lines and go to this audition." I almost got the job and that was when I was like, "Oh, I can do this too? I can be in movies, I can be in television?"

Q: *Now your family is solid, right?*

Collins: Yes, everyone is together. We worked everything out. My mom was a single parent, so it was rough on her raising me and my sister, but everything is good now.

Q: *What challenge, either personal or professional, are you the most proud of overcoming?*

Collins: My challenge personally would be performing arts. I didn't have much support being on my own at that early age, going after what I believed was right for me. It was very rough, but I never gave up on my dream. I'm very proud of that because look where I am today.

Q: *Do you have a personal motto that encapsulates who you are, what you are, and what you dream about?*

Collins: I don't have a motto, but I never give up. I believe in my work. I believe that it pays off. Stay focused and work hard.

Q: *Describe your character Malik. What is he like?*

Collins: Malik is a guy who comes from a background of struggle. He uses that struggle as motivation to push himself forward—to succeed. He basically wants a chance to get a better life, to show his mom a better life. He's a very determined guy, and he decides that he's going to audition for this performing-arts school. He faces a teacher named Dowd, played by Charles Dutton, who challenges him and makes him open up, because as artists, you have to be open. Malik

has a lot of walls up because of all the things he's been through. He doesn't want to be judged or hurt. Dowd challenges him, and Malik really opens up and finds his voice as an artist.

Q: *Did you have someone like Dowd—an adult mentor or teacher who helped you in your personal life?*

Collins: My mom. I saw how hard she worked. I saw how much she struggled, and she instilled in me the power of hard work.

Q: *Do you keep in touch with the members of the cast of *Fame*?*

Collins: Oh, of course. We're all close friends. We spent so much time together in rehearsals and filming the movie that we formed this close bond. A lot of times you do projects and you don't find the time to connect with your cast mates, but we've done that on this set and that really reflects on the movie.

Q: *Do you like to read?*

Collins: I have to read every day. I get so many scripts. I love to lose myself in a book.

Q: *What book do you recommend?*

Collins: *Everything Is Illuminated* by Jonathan Safran Foer.

Q: *Is there an artist or band that you would like to perform with?*

Collins: Kanye West. Maybe one day I can set that up!

Q: *What was your favorite subject in school?*

Collins: My favorite subject was history, because I got to dream and imagine what it was like back then, and now I'm an actor so it makes sense.

Q: *Is there a character you'd like to portray in a movie?*

Collins: I always said I wanted to be the first black James Bond. That's a good goal right? Maybe one day I can play Barack Obama.

Q: *Were you particularly involved in the election or excited about the election?*

Collins: It was one of the most exciting years of my life to see

something like that happen—and for my mom and people from my culture and family. It was such a huge historical moment. I was ecstatic and uplifted, and it showed me that anything is possible. That's my story too—against all odds and adversities, you can still come out on top.

Reading Comprehension

Directions: Answer the following questions about Collins Pennie.

- What struggle did Collins face as a teen?
 - living in foster care
 - trying to be a world-famous rock star
 - getting a part in *Fame*
- What is a central value in Collins's life?
 - loyalty
 - hard work
 - happiness
- Collins says that his dream helped him focus on something else when he was living in foster care. What was that dream?
 - succeeding in the performing arts
 - graduating from high school
 - seeing Barack Obama get elected
- Collins says that Malik has "a lot of walls up." What does he mean by "walls"?
 - the materials he used to build a set for the school play
 - the partitions in his apartment building
 - emotional barriers to keep other people from hurting him
- What does **ecstatic** mean?
 - lonely
 - overjoyed
 - glum
- How does Collins most relate to his character Malik?
 - They both faced major hardships in their personal lives but refused to let that keep them from their dreams.
 - They were both born in New York City and have little sisters.
 - They both want to be movie stars.

WRITE NOW!

A wall is a partition or barricade designed to keep things out. An emotional "wall" works the same way. On a separate piece of paper, think about what it means to have "walls" in your life. Why did Malik have walls? Do you have walls? If so, what kinds and why? How did Malik's walls get in the way of his talent? Can walls be useful? How do walls get in the way of meaningful relationships?