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If Beale Street Could Talk by James Baldwin

Discussion questions used at SPL February 9 & 10, 2016

1. Baldwin chooses to tell the story in first person through the eyes of Tish, a 19 year old girl, what do you think of the style/format of the book? Would the story have been different if told from another perspective?
2. Are the characters convincing? Do you find them authentic and real? One reviewer stated that Tish doesn't resemble "any pregnant and unmarried young Black woman I[she] can conceivably imagine, let alone accept as real." Could this be because of the expectations of the times for women and women of color?
3. Baldwin wrote this story about a period in the 1970's, have things changed 46 years later? What things have changed? What things have stayed the same?
4. Do you think Baldwin understates the struggles of his characters? Does he use this technique of underplaying the situation to humanize them? How sensitive is he to the female victims/characters?
5. Would you feel powerless if you were in the same situation? How likely are those events and occurrences depicted in the book likely to happen today?
6. Themes: Love-male/female & family love; family, friend, or community relationships; powerlessness; racism-cultural & legal system; social injustice; religion; connections-family, community, church, political, identity formation, etc. Which theme is strongest? Central?
7. What do you think about Tish's description of New York City? Could the same be said about Detroit or any big urban city in the USA? "The ugliest buildings and the nastiest people...got to have worst cops." P.9
8. On page 39, Baldwin makes this statement about vocational schools, "They say the kids are dumb and so they're teaching them to work with their hands...the people who run these schools want to make sure that they[the kids] don't get smart: they really teaching the kids to be slaves." Do you think this is true? Has vocational schooling changed since the 70's? How or how not?
9. What are your thoughts about Daniel's story/interaction with the legal/justice system? He pleads guilty to a crime he did not commit because he is scared and coerced by the police and the court appointed lawyer. We hear stories like this all the time, what can we do to change this sort of systemic problem? Would things have been different for Daniel had he had family and friends to rely on during his crisis?
10. Page 104 Baldwin utilizes lyrics from a song to convey the emotions of what Fonny, Tish, and Daniel are feeling, what emotions are they feeling? Are you familiar with the song? It is a Billie Holiday's song titled *My Man*.
11. After reading this book, what have you learned about family and the power of family? Love, protection, trust, fight, etc... Family can be defined in many ways, Fonny is Tish's family and her family takes on the responsibility of that. What does that mean to them?

12. P. 173—Tish describes looking into Bell’s (police officer harassing Fonny) eyes, have you ever had that feeling or experience as she describes it? Can you relate to what she says?
13. Baldwin writes the book in two parts: *Troubled about my soul*-Part One and *Zion*-Part Two. Why do you think he used this structure? “Lord, I’m troubled about my soul” by Lilli Knox is a 1937 gospel. (Play recording if possible.) How does it relate to all the information we learn about the characters, the community, the justice/injustice system, or the social classes in America then and now? Part two is very short yet somehow relays a sense of hope for the future. What do you think? Why choose Zion, what is the significance of Baldwin’s choice of words-Zion vs something else?
14. This book is filled with a lot of emotions, is there one part that you found too emotional? Examples: Sharon’s talk with Victoria in Puerto Rico; Frank’s response to his daughters after he hears about the postponement; or Tish’s incident with the neighborhood kid & rescue of Fonny from Bell (prejudice cop) to name a few examples.
15. Page 192...the righteous must be able to locate the damned...Baldwin uses this statement after he states “these captive men are the hidden price for a hidden lie...” What is the lie? What do you think he means by this? Who are the “damned”? If you believe he is referring to black people, are they still damned today? Look at our current incarceration/prison statistics before you answer.
16. What meaning/significance does Frank’s suicide have on the story? Why does Frank kill himself?
17. The ending of the book is fluid, continuous. Nothing is finalized for Tish and Fonny. Is the ending paragraph a dream sequence or reality? Does Fonny get out on bail or what? Does the ending leave you with a sense of hope? Or, are you frustrated by it?
18. Baldwin uses song lyrics and musical connotations to stress a point or show emotions throughout the book. Does the music move the story forward or hold it back?
19. In the news currently, we have several cases of police misconduct, excessive force, death by police, police brutality committed on people of color/African Americans and the disproportion of incarcerated African Americans. What does this say about our justice system today? “Will this country and its system of police ever make Black citizens feel any less terrified?” asked Stacia L. Brown in her article *What James Baldwin’s writing tells us about today* (2015).

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General discussion questions

- For the person who chose the book – What made you want to read it? What made you pick it for the book club? Did it live up to your expectations?
- How is the book structured? First person? Third person? Flashbacks? Narrative devices? Do you think the author did a good job with it?
- How would you describe the author’s writing style? Concise? Flowery? How is language used in this book? Read aloud a passage that really struck you. How does that passage relate to the book as a whole?
- How effective is the author’s use of plot twists? Were you able to predict certain things before they happened? Did the author keep you guessing until the end?
- Did the book hold your interest?
- How important is the setting to the story? Did you feel like you were somewhere else? Did the time setting make a difference in the story? Did the author provide enough background information for you to understand the setting and time placement?
- Which is stronger in the book – the characters or the plots?
- Would you recommend this book to someone else? Why? And to whom?

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Title: *If Beale Street could talk* by James Baldwin

website address: http://onebook.hplct.org/uploads/2/6/4/7/26475139/readers_guide.pdf

Other sources for discussion:

Stacia L. Brown, Review April 2015

“What James Baldwin’s Writing Tells Us About Today”

<http://review.gawker.com/what-james-baldwins-if-beale-street-could-talk-tells-us-1696489449>

New York Times Review

Joyce Carol Oates, May 1974

<https://www.nytimes.com/books/98/03/29/specials/baldwin-beale.html>

“*If Beale Street Could Talk* is a moving, painful story. It is so vividly human and so obviously based upon reality, that it strikes us as timeless—an art that has not the slightest need of esthetic tricks, and even less need of fashionable *apocalyptic* excesses.”

Title meaning:

https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Beale_Street_Blues

Billie Holiday song from page 104:

http://www.lyricsfreak.com/b/billie+holiday/my+man_20017796.html

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IQlehVpcAes>

Lilli Knox, “Lord I’m troubled about my soul”

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yC6DI3Jzw_s