

Southfield Public Library

Jazz by Toni Morrison

Discussion questions used at SPL -- December 2010

1. This was a difficult book to read. Was it worth the journey?
2. Who do you think was narrating the book? Was it a specific person? A spiritual voice? Toni Morrison? Was it a reliable narrator?
3. What did you think of the two main characters, Joe and Violet? Were they sympathetic characters? Was there anything you liked about them? What did you dislike?
4. Did you come to understand their actions? Were you able to accept what they did?
5. Why did Joe shoot Dorcas? Why did Violet try to mutilate her?
6. Were Joe and Dorcas able to accept what they did? Did you feel as though they had come through at the end? Would they be happy again with each other? What were some of the signs that they might have?
7. What was it about Dorcas that made Joe go after her? Why did Dorcas accept his attention?
8. What kind of young woman was Dorcas?
9. Why did Dorcas choose to die? Who was she protecting? Or was it for another reason?
10. What did you think of the community that Joe and Violet lived in? Did you like how it was described by that unnamed character that saw everything?
11. Was it a neighborhood that supported each other?
12. What did you think of Violet going over to Dorcas' aunt's house? Would you have let her in the door? What did each of those women gain from those meetings? Did it help them heal?
13. Why did Morrison tell us the story of Golden Grey? How did his life relate to Joe and Violet's story?
14. What did you think of the story of Wild, Joe's mother? What influence did she have on Joe's life?
15. What about the story of Violet's mother, Rose Dear. . . Was she driven to suicide by circumstances or do you think that she might have had the same mental health issues that Violet exhibited even before Joe's affair?
16. What role did music play in this book? Smarter people than me feel as though the book was written in a jazz style – call and response from different characters, allowing them to explore the same theme with a different point of view. Could you see that?
17. Would you consider this a historical novel? Which important parts of African American history did it cover? The great migration? So-called Race Riots?
18. What were some of the themes that ran through this book? How did they affect the story?
19. What were the relationships between women like in the book? Supportive?
20. What did birds mean in this book? Why did Violet set her caged birds free at the beginning of the novel? Why wouldn't she rescue her poor parrot who wouldn't leave her windowsill?

21. In the story of Wild, what did the red-winged blackbirds mean?
22. What do you think those very last lines in the book mean? Is that Morrison talking to you, the reader, since your hands are holding her book?

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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?