

Southfield Public Library

The Cotillion: or one good bull is half the herd by John Oliver Killens

Discussion questions used at SPL February 2014

1. This book was written in 1972 . . .does it seem dated to you? What parts of it? This book was nominated for a Pulitzer prize. . .do you think it was worthy of the nomination?
2. Was the language hard to read? How would you describe it? Would you consider Ben Ali's speech a type of poetry or rap, much like the hip-hop songs of today?
3. What do you think his aim was in writing this satire?
4. The beginning chapters introduced each of the main characters . . .what did you think of them? Did they change over the book?
5. What do you think of the author's view of "high society"? Of African American society in general?
6. P. 46. . . Yoruba wanted to be a black woman not a lady. . . what do you think the difference is, in her mind?
7. Author often has two characters who are opposites of each other. . .one example is Mrs. Patterson and Mrs. Brap-Brap. . .why do you think he does that?
8. Why was Mrs. Brap Brap even involved in the Cotillion since she obviously thought it foolish?
9. Yoruba's parents are another pair. . .Matt has his feet firmly planted in the life they really lead and Daphne is yearning to be something other than she is. . . what does that tell us about society?
10. What did you think of Ben Ali? Did you understand Yoruba's attraction to him? Was there a little bit of nostalgia in their love?
11. We as readers learned along with Yoruba, seeing the hypocrisy of the Femme Fatales, learning about her parents' relationship, learning about the world from Ben Ali. . .what was most surprising for you to learn?
12. Did you have sympathy for Yoruba's mother, Daphne? What do you think she was striving for in having her daughter be part of the Cotillion? How did you react to her idolization of her white father? And then, what did you think once she admitted the real relationship she had with him?
13. The Brassworks - why did the author include these characters? What was he trying to tell us when he described their actions and lifestyle? P. 166+ What do you think Yoruba learned watching the cream of black society?
14. What did you think when Daphne thought it would be a good idea to go work at the white Cotillion? And why did Ben Ali decide to go along with it? And what do you think Yoruba learned watching the cream of white society?
15. "Sophisticated" parties vs Heights parties. . . How were they alike? Different? P. 172
16. Yoruba's parents were very interesting to me. . . they seemed so different and I wondered why they stayed together. . . what were your thoughts on them? P. 202 – Daphne finally admits to trouble in her childhood and why she married Matt. . . What did you think of that story?
17. Matt – Yoruba's father – was an uneducated man – proud of his degree from the School of Hard Knocks, but do you think he was a wise man? Did you feel he was grounded in who he was and where he was going? Was he satisfied with his life?

18. Hair was a big part of the ending - Why do you think it was so shocking that Yoruba cut her hair off? Why did it bother both her mother and the society women so much? Has much changed in our views on what is good hair and what is bad hair? What did that natural style represent for the author?
19. What do you think the author would think of African American society today? How much has it changed since the 60's?
20. There was so much that was just preposterously over the top in this novel. . .the rumor of the race riot all due to Ben Ali's clothing, the themes of the Cotillion, especially the current one. . . Ye Olde Plantation. . . why did the author choose to create those situations? What do you think he was trying to tell the reader?
21. How important is it for cultures to keep their traditions – whether they be African American, the Arab community in the U.S, or the Polish community in Hamtramck – our Latino community with their quinceaneros, . . .is that a good thing or bad thing?
22. Did you feel the author had strict standards that he thought every African American should hold to? Did he give people leeway to have their own beliefs?
23. Would you recommend this book to someone?

Southfield Public Library

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?

Southfield Public Library

The Cotillion by John Oliver Killens

Biographical and Critical Information on the author

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Oliver_Killens

<http://www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/articles/arts-culture/john-oliver-killens-1916-1987>

<http://jokww.tripod.com/page2.html>

<http://www.unz.org/Pub/SaturdayRev-1971mar06-00036>