

A CONVERSATION WITH MARLON JAMES

What inspired you to write your award-winning book?

I'm still not sure how it happened. I've been obsessed with *Sula* and *Song of Solomon* for years, so that might have had something to do with it. (I used to carry around a copy of *Song of Solomon* all the time, just in case I met Toni Morrison). I also had lunch with an African poet two years ago, when I was between drafts, and we spoke about how matriarchal West African society was: how women decided when and where to plant crops—agricultural scientists, in every sense of the word—women who made the decision between abundance and starvation, and how the line of succession was always through the oldest daughter. This left me wondering, what if a group of women formed this kind of sisterhood, this power center on a sugar plantation, and what if nobody knew about it?

What research did you undertake in writing *The Book of Night Women*?

I was already familiar with quite a bit about slavery, having studied it from high school days. It's the defining event in Caribbean history, so you can't escape it even if you want to. Whether you're in history, cultural studies,

music or economics, slavery is the Diaspora's Genesis chapter. So, much of the history of slavery I already knew, but I still did a ton of research. History can be good at the what, when, where and even how, but not so much with the why. So I read slave narratives, master narratives, ship logs, tax records, pretty much everything—histories of fashion, costume archives, even weather patterns in the eighteenth century.

What do you like most about the novel?

Miss Isobel. She was the most interesting character to write, largely because all the contradictions of living in such a brutally formed colony are embodied in her.

What interesting challenges did you encounter in writing *The Book of Night Women*?

It's hard staring in the face of atrocity. More so for the writer, who has a duty to all his characters, even the ones he doesn't like personally. Writing about any cruel event costs you. You can write about slavery, or the holocaust or the Armenian genocide, but it will cost you. You can get lost in all that death and live a sort of death yourself. Or you can get so caught up in history that you forget

that the world you just wrote about is behind you.

How long did it take to write the book?

18 Months. I had to or I wouldn't have graduated.

What do you enjoy doing in your free time?

Cycling. Thank god I live in the greatest cycling city in America. In fact I live in two of them.



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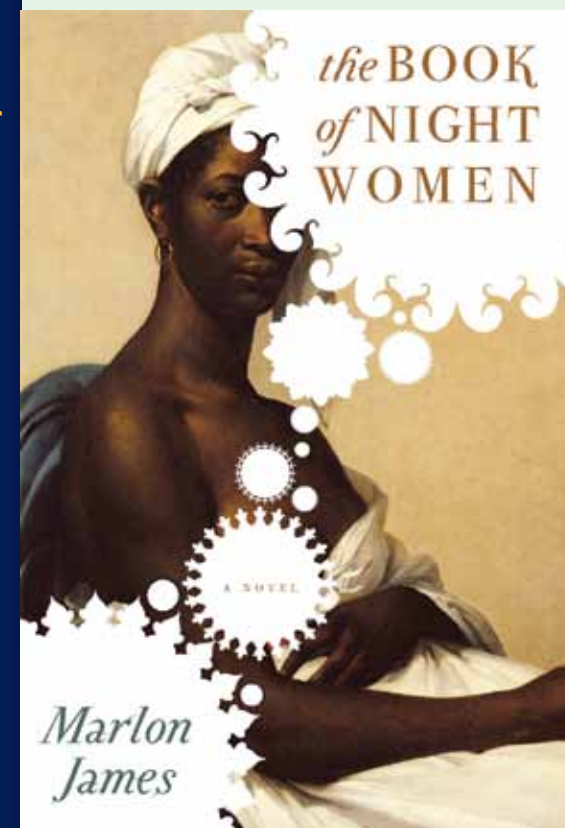
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A Reading and Discussion Guide Prepared by the Minnesota Book Awards/ The Friends of the Saint Paul Public Library

22ND ANNUAL

MINNESOTA
BOOK AWARDS

Novel & Short Story Winner



The Book of Night Women
by Marlon James

RIVERHEAD BOOKS/PENGUIN GROUP

The Book of Night Women

SUMMARY:

This sweeping and astonishing novel tells the story of Lilith, a slave on a Jamaican sugar plantation who possesses a dark power. A group of slaves who call themselves the “Night Women” are plotting a revolt and assume Lilith’s powers will be the key to its success. However, as Lilith begins to assume her identity, she chooses a different path which poses a threat to the conspiracy. *The Book of Night Women* was a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award for fiction.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. What cultural and historical insights did you gain from reading the book? What did you find were the main differences between slavery in Jamaica and slavery in the American South, and how are those differences reflected in the novel?
2. Throughout the novel, the author moves between British English and Jamaican patois. What effect, if any, does the switch in language have on the narrative? What are the challenges and rewards to reading the patois?
3. Do you believe Lilith actually possessed a dark power different from most people? If so, how do you describe that power and how did Lilith acquire it? Could it be said that all humans have the potential to use a dark power?
4. In what instances are the destruction and violence committed by the slaves in the book justified? Are the non-slaves’ acts of destruction and violence ever justified? How did these actions affect your understanding of slavery?
5. The author describes Miss Isobel as his favorite character to write. Why do you think this was? Discuss the social position of a young white woman raised in the colonies as portrayed in the novel. In what ways is Miss Isobel equally as enslaved as Lilith?
6. What do you think of the book’s ending? How would the book conclude if you wrote the ending?
7. Why do you think the author chose to show the dark side of all his characters? Describe the good and the bad that you saw in each of these characters: Lilith, Miss Isobel, Jack Wilkins, Homer, Massa Humphrey, and Robert Quinn. For which of these characters and/or other characters in the book does good prevail?
8. What is the significance of Lilith and Robert Quinn’s affair? Is it fair to describe *The Book of Night Women* as “ultimately a love story”? Discuss how love manifests itself in the various relationships portrayed throughout the book.
9. How does Lilith change over the course of the book? What factors shape the person she becomes?
10. *The Book of Night Women* is written from a female perspective by a male writer. Discuss the challenges Marlon James might have faced writing from a female point of view. How might this story be different if it were told from a male perspective? Could this book have been written by a woman, and if so, how might the characters and the story be different?

ABOUT MARLON JAMES

Marlon James was born in Kingston, Jamaica. His first novel, *John Crow’s Devil*, was shortlisted for the Commonwealth Prize and was a finalist for the Los Angeles Times Book Prize. Marlon lives in Saint Paul and is a professor of literature and creative writing at Macalester College.



Photo by Scott Strebile



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