

Book club 10: Identity & belonging

The Mermaid of Black Conch
by Monique Roffey

Rules

In this book club you will discuss *The Mermaid of Black Conch* by Monique Roffey in a group of 4-6 readers. You will start a conversation by responding to discussion questions about the text. The book club opens with a brief introduction that one of you reads out loud. The book club then continues in four rounds

- 1 Round 1 consists of 5 quiz questions about the text. One of the group members acts as the quiz master who reads each question out loud, after which everyone (including the quiz master) writes down their answer. The correct answers will appear on the screen after you have turned over the final question card. You may then check your answers and calculate your scores.
- 2 Round 2 consists of genuine questions that you have. Each group member consults the group about a part of the text that they thought was unclear. Together, you try to find answers to the questions that are raised. After everything has been cleared up, your group is ready to proceed to the next round.
- 3 Round 3 consists of questions for discussion. There are two categories to choose from. The person with the most correct answers to the quiz questions gets to be the first to turn over a card and respond to the question. The other members of the group may then add to the discussion by responding and sharing their ideas. Take turns until all cards are flipped.
- 4 Round 4 is when you get to review the text. How many stars would you give the text and why? Discuss this together until you have reached a shared verdict. Use the text box to explain your choice.

This book club was developed by the editors of LitLab, a digital laboratory for high school literature research. For more teaching materials, visit www.litlab.nl. A teachers' manual and a didactic justification of this teaching method are available at www.litlab.nl/docenten.



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Introduction

'David Baptiste's dreads are grey and his body wizened to twigs of hard black coral, but there are still a few people around St Constance who remember him as a young man and his part in the events of 1976, when those white men from Florida came to fish for marlin and instead pulled a mermaid from the sea.'

Set on the fictional Caribbean island of Black Conch, the novel *The Mermaid of Black Conch* by Monique Roffey tells about the discovery of the mermaid Aycayia, who is drawn to the island by the music of local fisherman David. David and his friends try to save Aycayia from a cruel fate imposed by the group of fishermen who have caught the mermaid but also from a more mysterious threat. In the story, the characters are confronted with different situations which influence their ideas about belonging, love, and desire. Just like the novel's characters, you will also be confronted with events that influence your ideas about what is real and what is not and make you wonder what it is exactly that makes us who we are. In this book club you are invited to discuss these topics, and find answers to your own questions about the book.

Round 1: Quiz

Turn over the 5 cards with quiz questions one by one. Write down the answer on a piece of paper.

Round 2: Initial questions

What questions popped into your head while reading *The Mermaid of Black Conch*? Were there any parts that left you confused or wondering? Take turns sharing your questions about the story and try to come up with answers together. Use evidence from the text to support your ideas.

Round 3: Discussion

The player with the most correct answers to the quiz questions gets to turn over a card first from one of the two piles of discussion questions. Once they have answered the question, the other members of the group may then add to the discussion by responding and sharing their ideas.

Round 4: Review

Review *The Mermaid of Black Conch* by rating the novel on a scale of one to five stars, and then provide an explanation for your choice. Discuss what aspects you enjoyed and what aspects you didn't, and provide reasons for your opinions. Reflect on whether the discussion influenced your individual perspective, and if so, how. Incorporate examples and arguments from your responses to the discussion questions to support your review.



Question 1

What is the meaning of Aycayia's name?

Question 2

Who else, besides Aycayia, was cursed by the jealous women and what shape did they give this person?

Question 3

What term of endearment does David often use for Aycayia?

Question 4

What connects Aycayia and Reginald when they first meet?

Question 5

What is the name of David's uncle and Miss Rain's former lover?

Answers

1. Sweet voice
2. An old woman, a turtle.
3. Dou dou
4. Sign language
5. Life



Question

3

Question

2

Question

1

Answers

Question

5

Question

4



Personal connections? 1

In some editions the novel has the subtitle 'a love story.' The most obvious love story would be between Aycayia and David, but what other stories of love can be found in the novel? Do these remind you of any other love stories you know? Explain your answer.

Personal connections? 2

The novel has two female protagonists, Aycayia and Miss Rain. How are these two women different but also the same? With whom do you identify the most? Explain your answer.

Personal connections? 3

How does the story of love between Miss Rain and Life show the struggles of interracial relationships? Have you ever experienced these struggles yourself or do you know someone who has experienced them?

Personal connections? 4

In a way, all of the characters in the novel desire Aycayia for their own personal reasons. Identify these different desires in the novel by making a list. Do you understand the characters' desires? What do you think makes Aycayia so attractive to the other characters? Explain your answer.

Personal connections? 5

After David has rescued Aycayia, she slowly turns back into a human being. As this change is never explained in the story, what do you think could be possible reasons why Aycayia changes from a mermaid to a woman? What reason, do you think, explains this change the best? Explain your answer.

Personal connections? 6

David asks Miss Rain in the novel: 'Why women hate other women so?' What do you think could be a possible to answer to this question? Have you ever experienced girls or women being mean to each other? Explain your answer.

Personal connections? 7

Aycayia's perspective is given throughout the novel in her own lyrical way. Why did the writer choose to show her perspective in this way? How did this influence your interpretation of the story as a reader? Explain your answer.

Personal connections? 8

At the end of the novel the omniscient narrator (*alwetende verteller*) states that everything has changed on Black Conch. Do you agree? What changes do you think the characters will experience after hurricane Rosamond? Explain your answer.



Personal connections?

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Personal connections?

2

Personal connections?

1

Personal connections?

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Personal connections?

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Personal connections?

4

Personal connections?

8

Personal connections?

7



Food for thought? 1

On the first pages of the novel, when he first meets Aycayia, David thinks about the old fishermen's talk about mermen: 'The mermen of Black Conch were just that: stories.' This clash between the believable and unbelievable is an important theme in the novel. In what places in the novel can you find this theme? Explain your answer.

Food for thought? 2

Read the quote in the introduction to this book club. In the novel, both David and Aycayia reflect on everything that has happened to them after 1976. The novel offers different perspectives on the events, namely David's journal from 2015, Aycayia's verse and an omniscient narrative narrating the story in 1976. What could be the function of these different perspectives? Explain your answer.

Food for thought? 3

The opening scene of the novel narrates how white men captured the mermaid Aycayia. How does the author use this scene of violence and dominance to highlight the novel's central themes? Explain your answer.

Food for thought? 4

One of the novel's main characters is a mermaid. How is this novel similar or different from any typical mermaid stories you have read or heard about? Why would the author use both familiar elements from mermaid myths as well as contradictory elements?

Food for thought? 5

Miss Rain states that '[s]he had come to terms with the strange fact of being a white woman with a Creole song in her mouth.' Miss Rain is not the only character whose identity is formed by two opposites. What other characters in the novel are made up of two halves? How does this influence their identity and their perception of their identity? Explain your answer.

Food for thought? 6

Throughout the story the characters think back on the time when the white men came and took control of the island. This part of its history is still visible through Miss Rain's presence and status on the island. What does the novel try to teach us through Black Conch's colonial history? Explain your answer.

Food for thought? 7

Reggie knows three different types of language: American Sign Language, Black Conch English, and Standard English. What role does language play in the novel and the characters' lives?

Food for thought? 8

David dreams of a time when there were no humans on the island of Black Conch. What is the novel's message on environmental conservation and the relationship between humanity and the natural world?



Food for thought?

3

Food for thought?

2

Food for thought?

1

Food for thought?

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Food for thought?

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Food for thought?

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Food for thought?

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Food for thought?

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