

READING GUIDE for **BLACK GIRL IN PARIS** by Shay Youngblood

Shay Youngblood's debut novel, **Soul Kiss**, received accolades from reviewers and writers alike. **The Washington Post** hailed it as "intelligent and erotic...immensely engrossing and satisfying," while **The Atlanta Journal-Constitution** called it "exquisite." Tina McElroy Ansa described it as "extraordinary...lyrical, intimate, funny, unsettling, enthralling." Now, in her second novel, Youngblood explores the endeavor of a creative coming-of-age, and infuses her story with the same mesmerizing, lush language and impressionistic style that won her so many fans the first time around.

Black Girl in Paris wends its way around the mythology of Paris as a city that called out to African-American artists. Like James Baldwin, Langston Hughes, and Josephine Baker before her, Youngblood's heroine leaves the American South nurturing a dream of finding artistic emancipation in the City of Light. She experiments freely, inhabiting different incarnations—artist's model, poet's helper, au pair, teacher, thief, and lover—to keep body and soul together, to stay afloat, heal the wounds of her broken heart, discover her sexual self, and, finally, to wrestle her dreams of becoming a writer into reality.

Youngblood's lyricism, as effortless as an inspired improvisation, and her respect for the tradition she depicts create a natural tension between old and new, reverence and innovation, and tell a story that feels at once timeless and immediate.

1. Paris of the 1920s-'50s saw a substantial number of American artists—many of them outsiders, many of them African-American or gay—who fled prejudice and persecution for a more tolerant home. How is the Paris of the 1980s different than the one James Baldwin knew? Does Youngblood's depiction of Paris still seem like an ideal city for artists? For African-Americans? Why or why not?

2. Eden begins her story by saying she's "not afraid of anything anymore." Do you think this is true? Do you find Eden brave, or naïve, or both? Can you cite examples from the text where Eden seems particularly courageous, and when she seems vulnerable?

3. There's much food imagery in Youngblood's novel, and Eden often compares herself and others to different foods. How might Youngblood be using food as a metaphor for Eden's own uncertainty? What might this imagery say about Eden's relationships with the people she meets and interacts with in Paris? What is Youngblood saying about how Eden sees other people, and how they see her?

4. Youngblood's Paris is peopled with artists and dreamers who've escaped constrictive environments (or obligations) for the romance of the city. Indeed, Eden leaves for Paris to both follow her dreams and to escape her small

hometown. What other sorts of escapes does Eden make throughout her journey? What might the other people Eden meets—Indego, Ving, Professor May Day, and Charlotte, for example—be escaping? What do you think they hope to find in Paris?

5. It's a truism that a good artist—be they writer, musician, or painter—needs to expose herself to different cultures, places, and people in order to grow artistically. Indeed, Eden travels to Paris as much to gain experience as find her literary forebears. Do you agree that artists need to take risks—be they physical or emotional—which make them uncomfortable in order to develop? Why or why not?

6. The city of Paris is as much a character in this book as Eden herself. How does Eden's own conflicted relationship with Paris echo that of a love affair? Do you think Eden will return to the United States? Why or why not? Compare Eden's feelings towards Paris at the beginning of the book versus the end: how have her feelings changed?

7. How has Eden changed by the end of the book? Do you think the ending is a hopeful ending, or do you think Eden has become disenchanted?

8. *Black Girl in Paris* is a highly sensuous book—what techniques has Youngblood borrowed from other artistic mediums (music, say, or art) to evoke a dreamy picture of Paris, and Eden's own adventures?