



Far from New York State **By Matthew Johnson**

Book Club Discussion Guide and Reflection Questions

- How does *Far from New York State* depict the contrasts between urban and rural life as the setting shifts from the City to Upstate New York throughout the collection? Poems to read and consider could include, “Friday Night in a College Town,” “Jamaicans in the Orchard,” and “Scenic Sunday Drive Upstate” for the Upstate and Downstate regions of New York. For the City and its Boroughs, poems to examine could be, “A Puerto Rican Dance Festival,” “Big Apple Blues,” and “Red Light District Love.”
- Reflect on why sports hold such a prominent place in the cultural imagination of a place. What is it about sports that transcend the games themselves and speak to deeper truths about the experience of a people and its place? Poems to read and consider could include “Pedro Strikes Out 17 at Yanks,” “Mount Vernon Got Game,” and “L.T. After Super Bowl XXI,” among others.
- Consider how *Far from New York State* navigates the complex relationship between art and politics, drawing inspiration from the political activism and cultural resistance of Harlem Renaissance artists, such as Claude McKay, Duke Ellington, and Paul Robeson, among others. How do the poems in this collection blend the literary with social critique? Poems to read and consider could include “A Long Way from Jamaica,” “Duke Ellington Leads the Cotton Club House Band” and “In Tragedy – Paul Robeson as Othello.”
- Using the poems, “An Opinion Piece on the Death of Newsprint,” “Before the Central Park Five Were Exonerated” and “Urban Legend of the Bad Samaritans” (the tragedy of Kitty Genovese), discuss how public perception and media coverage can shape our understanding of guilt, innocence, accountability, justice, truth, and forgiveness?
- Examine the ways in which *Far from New York State* acts as a form of literary cartography, mapping out the diverse landscapes, cultures, histories, and experiences of New York State. How do the poems in this collection invite readers to embark on their own journeys of exploration and discovery within the state?
- Consider how *Far from New York State* explores the intersections of time and space within the state of New York, encompassing both past and present, memory and imagination. How does the collection create layers of meaning by juxtaposing different temporal and spatial dimensions? For example, could there be similar connections in the poems, “On Washington Irving and his Literary Friends at Sunnyside,” “On Countee Cullen,” and “Listening to Illmatic,” which are poems centered on writers of different and distinct genres?