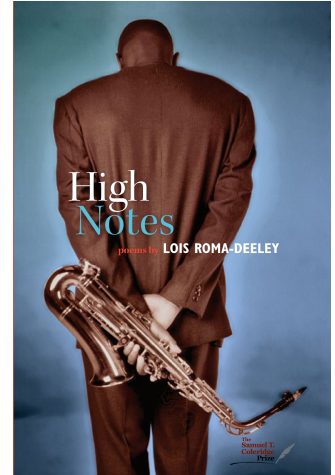


Individual Journaling Assignments

1. Which character do you relate most to and why? Which character do you find least sympathetic, and why?
2. The characters of this book are living in a particular time and place. Choose one character and consider whether, if that person were alive today, living where you live, he or she would make different decisions. Explain why or why not. Is this person wholly responsible for the conditions of his or her life, or are others responsible?
3. Discuss the meaning of the word “redemption” as it applies to this book. In what ways do you believe or not believe in redemption?
4. In the poem “Jasmine & Jazz,” what is meant by the line “Those ghosts own me”? Do any ghosts own you? Whatever your answer, are you happy or unhappy about that?
5. Sugar Baby is said to be addicted to “alcohol, heroin, and grief.” What does it mean to be addicted to grief? Is it morally more or less preferable than the other addictions?
6. Explain how you interpret the last line of the poem “Walking to Her Day Job, Sugar Baby Contemplates Her Dead Children.” Is it wise for love to “believe in whatever it makes”?
7. Summarize the poem “What the Poor Know” in one sentence. What is it that the poem implies



they know? In what ways do you agree and/or disagree?

8. In what way do the Angel and Harry Jones have a similar motivation? If both characters were active in your life, which do you think/hope would succeed?
9. Who or what has the most power in this book and why? Who or what has the least power?
10. What is your favorite poem in the book? Explain what the poem means in a general sense, and what it means to you personally.

Individual or Group Essay Assignments

1. In “Jasmine Watches the Little Rock Nine on TV,” there is a mention of Emmett Till, a 14-year-old boy who was killed in Mississippi for allegedly whistling at a white woman. What are the social conditions that led to the death of Emmett Till and how do those conditions affect Jasmine’s life as well? How does his death change her potential future?
2. Many forces are at play in this book: for example, racism, the drug culture, art/music, sexuality, religion, and family relationships. Choose at least two of those forces and explore how they are working in conflict or in harmony to determine the meaning and outcome of these characters’ lives.
3. Analyze the structure of High Notes. Is it a narrative; does it have a plot? How does the behavior of time within it shape your

understanding of the book's concrete and psychological events ?

4. What elements of jazz music are evoked in these poems? How do the artistic principles of jazz (particularly musical time, collaboration, and individual interpretation/ improvisation) contribute to the style and contents of the book?

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Small/Large Group Discussion Questions
(Note: Most of these can also be used as journaling exercises)

1. What is the importance of art and music to the characters in this book? What does it give the characters that would otherwise be missing from their lives?
2. Explain the role of the angel in the book. How does the presence of this particular observer change the meaning of events in the poems? What would change if the angel were taken out of the dramatis personae?
3. Why, when the characters are presented, does the author present their addictions?
4. In what similar way do art, religion and drugs offer to fulfill the deepest needs of the characters?
5. The Angel's addiction is said to be hope. How can hope be an addiction? Is it a positive or negative one?

6. Who suffers more in this book, Jake or Harry Jones? Why? Which of them is less likely to find redemption?
7. How do the male and female characters in the book experience the conditions of their time and place differently? What different pressures and expectations are driving their perceptions and choices? In what ways are their experiences the same?
8. In “Harry Jones Holds School,” how many ways can you interpret the phrase, “Bring to me whatever needs undoing”? Similarly, in the last line, how can a lesson be unlearned? What makes it hard to unlearn it? Why would you want to?
9. In what ways does the beauty of the poetry in High Notes enhance or diminish a reader’s understanding of the poverty portrayed in the book?
10. Why do you think the author chose the last poem to end the book? What does it imply about the potential future of the characters?