A Reader's Guide

All-Bright Court
by
Connie Rose Porter

Imani All Mine
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In the upstate New York mill town of Lackawanna, the company-built housing project known as All-Bright Court represents everything its residents have dreamed of — jobs, freedom, and a future. The outcome of those dreams is the stuff of Connie Porter's acclaimed debut novel. Through twenty years, as the promises of the 1960s give way to hardship and upheaval, Porter chronicles the loves, hopes, troubles, triumphs, and ambitions of Mississippi-born Sam and Mary Kate Taylor and their neighbors. As the late 1970s fade the Court's bright colors and a people's optimism, young Mikey Taylor — gifted, ambitious, and proud — comes to embody an entire community's dreams and disappointments.

For Discussion

1. Porter has said that in this novel, "The reader can see the impact of the political life of this country on a group of people." What impact do the major events and issues in American "political life" have on the people of All-Bright Court? How are some of these political and social issues still important?

2. What arguments do the characters present for and against playing by the white man’s rules — for example: getting an education, paying taxes, working hard? In what circumstances are those arguments voiced? What are the desired and actual results of each way of acting? In what ways do the same arguments apply today for black Americans, Hispanic Americans, and Asian-Americans?

3. In chapter 8, Porter writes that Moses "hid within the shell of his words. They were a way of protecting him from the truth." How and why do various characters use words both to hide from the truth and to express or expose the truth? How is it that language may be used for both purposes?

4. Porter writes, "It was Samuel who challenged" what Mary Kate knew and thought she knew. "He challenged who she thought she was ..." In what ways does Sam challenge his wife's view of herself? What are the consequences of Sam's challenge? What additional challenges — emotional, intellectual, and social, for example — are presented to the characters by one another? What are the outcomes of those challenges?

5. What southern country ways, habits, and beliefs do the people of All-Bright Court retain? Why? How do these habits and beliefs help these people cope with the demands and circumstances of their lives in the North?

6. What are the effects on Mikey of his privileged education? In what ways is Mikey both a personal success and a personal failure? "His parents could both see the learning was changing him, but so was the unlearning," Porter writes. What does Mikey learn and what does he unlearn,
and how do the "learning" and the "unlearning" change him?

7. At the union meeting in chapter 25, the union representative quotes the union president as saying that "democracy in the labor movement, as in various segments of life, can be carried too far." What is your reaction to this statement? In what ways, if at all, can democracy — in any "segment" of American life — be carried too far? What expressions of this attitude have there been in recent American history?

8. What are the implications of the novel's final scene, in which — in the midst of a blizzard — Sam looms over his fallen son, "no more than a ghost," and in which Mikey cannot hear a word that Sam is saying? What are the implications — for Mikey's future, for the future of all young black people, and for the future of all young Americans — of the novel's final sentence: "The wind was reaching into his father's mouth, snatching his words away, sending them flying into oblivion"?

Imani All Mine

Connie Porter's eagerly anticipated, intensely affecting story of Tasha Dawson, fifteen years old and the mother of a baby girl, brings together her keen insight into childhood and her firsthand knowledge of life in the ghetto that is Tasha's home. In her own pitch-perfect voice, Tasha recounts her days of diapers and schoolwork, of jumping rope and dodging bullets. Her daughter's name, Imani — which means "faith" — is a sign of her fundamental trust and self-determination. Tasha herself, a child mothering a child, and the memorably singular characters who surround her reveal the pains of poverty and the unconquerable power of the human spirit.

For Discussion

1. To what extent does Connie Porter avoid presenting Tasha as a stereotypical unwed teenage mother? What makes Tasha the singular, sympathetic character that she is?

2. Porter has said, "I see Imani All Mine as being a kind of bridge, a way for adult women and adolescent women to have some conversations about some issues women face." What are some of those issues? Are the issues raised in this novel applicable only to women?

3. In what ways does Tasha become "grown" and in what ways does she remain a child? What personal, familial, social, and cultural factors influence her in both respects? To what extent is her ceasing to be a child the result of an accumulation of experiences or of a single experience? To what extent is she a grown woman by the novel's end?

4. How would you describe the relationship between Tasha and her mother, past and present? What events and what personal traits cause changes in that relationship? Why cannot Earlene
show more sympathy and understanding to a daughter whose situation is so similar to what hers once was?

5. Imani reports that "Mrs. Poole say you want respect from your child, give respect to your child." How does respect or lack of respect affect the lives of all the people in Tasha's world? What kinds of respect are seen as important? What are the consequences of disrespect? What instances are there of respect and disrespect irrevocably changing the lives of the individuals involved?

6. What lessons does Tasha learn about being a daughter, being a mother, being a friend, being a woman, and becoming a responsible adult? Where and how does she learn these lessons? How does what Tasha learns compare with what you learned as a teenager? To what extent is Tasha self-taught in this regard?

7. Imani means Faith, "in some African language." In what ways does Imani embody faith for Tasha? The preacher of the New Light of the Covenant church says, "You need faith. In your life. In your heart." What kinds of faith occur in the novel, and why are they important to those who profess or claim them? What is the "faith that's all mine" with which the book closes?

8. Describing the morning-after memorial to Stephan Richardson, Tasha tells us, "Seems like memorials be everywhere now. ... I ain't never seen a memorial where the person resting in peace was older than twenty-one." What do these memorials tell us about the world in which Tasha lives and the world in which we live? What is the future of a community in which there are so many memorials for children? What special significance does the final memorial have?

9. What is the importance of the single biblical quotation in the novel, the preacher’s reading of Isaiah 40:31 in chapter eleven? In what ways are the people of this book "a waiting people," as the preacher claims? In what ways are we all "a waiting people"?

Both Books

For Discussion

1. How do the chapter headings help us to understand each novel's characters, action, and principal themes? What purposes are served by the Imani All Mine chapter headings being drawn from children's songs and games? Do the chapter headings in All-Bright Court have a similar coherence?

2. What similarities and differences are there between the presentations of black families in the two novels? To what extent is family structure intact in both books, and to what extent are families in various states of disintegration? How do various forces — personal, social, economic,
and cultural, for example — influence family cohesion and family disintegration?

3. Porter has said, "I think God opens doors in people's lives." What doors open for the individuals of these two novels, and what or who opens those doors? What do the characters do with those open doors?

4. What incidents of youth violence and crime occur in the two novels? How does Porter handle these incidents? How are the incidents of violence in the 1960s and '70s of All-Bright Court similar to or different from those in Tasha's more contemporary world? What causes, consequences, and possible solutions does Porter attach to youth violence and crime?

5. At one point, Tasha loses patience and shakes Imani, "Because I was feeling like I was some kind of prisoner to her and I can't never get away." What instances are there in the two novels of characters thinking of themselves as prisoners? In this regard, how are the two novels similar or different? To what extent do you think Porter views her characters as prisoners?

6. What instances of overt and disguised racism occur in the novels? In what ways do the kinds and degree of racism change or remain the same between the time of All-Bright Court and the time of Imani All Mine? What are the effects on blacks, whites, and Puerto Ricans and on their communities? Do the characters’ reactions to racism reflect historical reality? Do they suggest ways of correcting or ending racism?

7. In what ways are the personal, social, economic, and cultural issues faced by the teenagers and adults of the two books similar or different? Which of these issues may be encountered in any society at any time, and which are specific to the times and communities portrayed in the two novels?

About the Author

Connie Porter grew up near Buffalo, New York, the second youngest of nine brothers and sisters. After graduating from SUNY-Albany in 1981, she earned an M.F.A. from Louisiana State University and later attended the Bread Loaf Writers’ Conference. She has taught English and creative writing at Milton Academy and Emerson College in Massachusetts and at Southern Illinois University at Carbondale. Her six Addy books have sold more than three million copies. Named a regional winner in Granta’s Best Young American Novelists contest for All-Bright Court, Porter lives in Virginia.
What writers have influenced your work? Who do you like to read?

As a young girl I loved reading stories about girls, and read a number of books by Lois Lenski and Beverly Cleary. But when I became a teen, I was more interested in reading stories about and by black writers. I read Langston Hughes, Nella Larsen, Nikki Giovanni, Richard Wright, Louise Meriwether, Rosa Guy, and Maya Angelou. I very much admire all of their work and also the work of Toni Morrison, Jean Toomer, Ralph Ellison, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Alice Walker, Gloria Naylor, and Terry McMillan.

How did you come up with idea for All-Bright Court?

The novel grew out of a short story that I wrote for an assignment during my last year at LSU. At that point it was only twelve pages. I had always wanted to write more about where I grew up and the steel industry there. This book gave me the chance to do both.

In Imani All Mine, Tasha is a black, poor teenager with a baby. By making her all these things, isn’t she a stereotype?

Tasha is far from being a stereotype. Tasha's general description does fit that of thousands upon thousands of black girls, and this is partly the reason why I wrote this book. I grew up very poor. I'm one of nine children who were raised in a housing project, went to public school, public universities. I feel truly blessed because of my upbringing. Never have I lost sight of the fact that as a child, because of my class and color, some people actually did stereotype me as doomed to fail. Not only me, but also every child my mother gave birth to, every child on my street, on my block, in my neighborhood. Of course, I'm talking about a time twenty-five, thirty years in the past, but I don't feel much of a shift in attitude today.

You write about black family life. How do you see the state of the black family, especially poor families?

It is easy to say that the family structure is falling apart. There are many single-parent homes. But in many cases where you find an "intact" structure, the problems of increasing violence in poor neighborhoods, the influx of drugs like crack, the increase in the dropout rate, and the lack of job opportunities make it hard for families. Parents can control only what goes on in their houses. You have true warlike conditions in some of these neighborhoods. There are some very real pressures and concerns that did not exist when I was growing up in a housing project.
How would you describe yourself as a writer?

I would describe myself as a black female writer. I surely have been black and female all my life and now, because I am a writer, I do not want to stop describing myself in that way. I do not fear that, because there is some descriptive tag before the word "writer," I will be pigeonholed. Racism and sexism are what can pigeonhole you. They can limit, even stop you. Not describing myself as a black woman will not prevent that from happening.