



Go Big Read

UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON COMMON BOOK PROGRAM

Book Discussion Questions for *Transcendent Kingdom* (Yaa Gyasi) 2021-2022 Go Big Read Program

Yaa Gyasi's first book, *Homegoing*, follows a family through many generations and across continents. In contrast, *Transcendent Kingdom* provides a close look at one family through the eyes of one character. How would the story be different if we were to view the events through a different character's perspective? Why do you think the author chose to tell this story in this way, using first-person narration? To whom do you think Gifty is telling her story?

Transcendent Kingdom is a complex novel spanning many years. How does the author weave the past into the present of the novel? What role do flashbacks serve? Which is more prominent in the book--the past or the present?

Characters throughout *Transcendent Kingdom* experience immigration and racism differently: the Chin Chin Man struggled to adapt and eventually returned to Ghana, Gifty's mother overworked herself but couldn't return home because "everything she had built for us and everything she had lost were held in this country" (243), and Nana and Gifty grew up American with little connection to Ghana. How do these narratives uphold or subvert stereotypes about immigration? How do Nana and Gifty's experiences differ from those of their parents? How do Gifty and her mother's experiences differ from those of Nana and the Chin Chin Man? In what way do all the characters experience racism and racialization differently?

Gifty tells the story of one of Nana's early soccer games during which a parent from the opposing team yelled at his son, "Don't you let them [n-word] win!" (59). Nana went on to score several more goals, further enraging the overtly racist parent and leading his team to victory. Gifty explains, "Nana and I were so happy, glowing in the warmth of our father's pride, delighted by Nana's accomplishments... it would be easy to assume that we'd all but forgotten what that man had yelled... But the memory lingered, the lesson I have never quite been able to shake: that I would always have something to prove and that nothing but blazing brilliance would be enough to prove it" (61). How does this lesson seem to impact Gifty and Nana as they grow older?

Nana's role in his community changes when he excels at basketball. His mother bristles when people in town remark, "Boy, does he have a future ahead of him" (110). She responds, "Of course he has a future ahead of him. He has *always* had a future ahead of him" (110). What assumptions about African Americans and sports underlie these exchanges? What assumptions

of African American masculinity are being made here? What are the implications of these offensive assumptions?

Though Nana's addiction is not well-hidden in the community, Gifty and her mother feel that the responsibility for Nana's recovery is theirs alone. Even when struggling to lift an unconscious Nana into their car in a public place, they are alone in their efforts. (161) When and why does the community's support for Nana's recovery after his basketball injury fade away? How does the community's reaction to Nana's addiction affect the way Gifty feels about her brother?

Despite being united in their support of Nana, Gifty and her mother don't discuss their pain, and after his death, they blame themselves for not doing more to save him. Why did Nana's addiction become something Gifty's family couldn't talk about, even among themselves? What roles did race, culture, and religion play in the way Gifty's family dealt with Nana's addiction?

Gifty and her mother's grief began before Nana's death and intensified thereafter. How did Gifty and her mother grieve for Nana before and after his death? How did their grief evolve throughout the book? How do Gifty and her mother's responses to grief and depression impact their relationship?

Gifty witnesses varying responses to mental health struggles throughout the novel. In America, the church and Gifty's mother largely ignore mental health issues; her mother "refused to name her illness depression" (36) and the church community's response to Nana's addiction made her realize that it was "catching, shameful" (159). While Gifty was in Ghana, she experienced a different reaction to mental illness, where "no one at all reacted to that [crazy] man in the market, not in fear or disgust, nothing" (4). How are these responses to mental illness similar and how are they different? What influence do these perceptions have on Gifty's life?

On page 88, Gifty recalls the time during her sophomore year at Harvard when she asked her Integrated Science small group, "How do you know God doesn't exist?" She goes on to explain that "Belief can be powerful and intimate and transformative." How might you respond to Gifty's question on page 89, "what could a Jesus freak know about science?"

Gifty studies optogenetics, a process used to control neural activity with light. She explains, "One of the exciting things about optogenetics is that it allows us to target particular neurons, allowing for a greater amount of specificity than DBS [deep brain stimulation]" (56). Gifty describes the use of DBS in Parkinson's patients, and her own research focuses on using optogenetics to manage addiction. What led to Gifty's interest in neuroscience? What other conditions may be addressed through a greater understanding of neuroscience?

While contemplating her career, Gifty says: "I didn't want to be thought of as a woman in science, a black woman in science. I wanted to be thought of as a scientist, full stop, and it mystified me that Katherine, whose work was published in the best journals, was content to draw attention to the fact of her womanhood" (83). What factors might contribute to Gifty and Katherine's different perspectives on bringing their identities into their careers?

On pages 209-211, Gifty discusses the concept of Anhedonia—"the feeling of 'nothing'"— and the role it plays in both her professional and personal life. What does the inclusion of this reveal about how Gifty is able to make sense of Nana's addiction and her mother's depression? How does this scientific explanation differ from the racial (172) and religious (217) lenses that are also applied to Nana and Gifty's mother's mental health throughout the book?

When Gifty finishes her experiments with the mice and focuses on her writing, she explains, "My papers were dry and direct. They captured the facts of my experiments, but said nothing of what it had felt like to hold a mouse in my hands and feel its entire body thump against my palms as it breathed, as its heartbeat... I wanted to tell someone about the huge wave of relief I felt every time I watched an addicted mouse refuse the lever. That gesture, that refusal, that was the point of the work, the triumph of it, but there was no way to say any of that" (251). How does Gifty's care and appreciation for her lab mice differ from other depictions of animal testing?

On page 256, Gifty details the end of her relationship with Raymond, saying: "...I had done it again, ruined everything. I was thinking that I could never shake my ghosts, never, never. There they were in every word I wrote, in every lab, in every relationship." What ghosts is Gifty referring to here? How do we witness these ghosts in Gifty's other romantic and sexual relationships throughout the book?

On page 263, the narrative flashes forward to Gifty and Han's life in New Jersey, where, "Once every few months, or whenever the mood strikes, I take the long way home from the lab I run at Princeton, just so that I can step into that church." What does it mean when she says that Han has "never heard the knock, and so he'll never know what it means to miss that sound, to listen for it" (264)? What role does her religious upbringing play in her life at the end of the novel, and how has it evolved throughout her journey?