

READING GROUP GUIDE

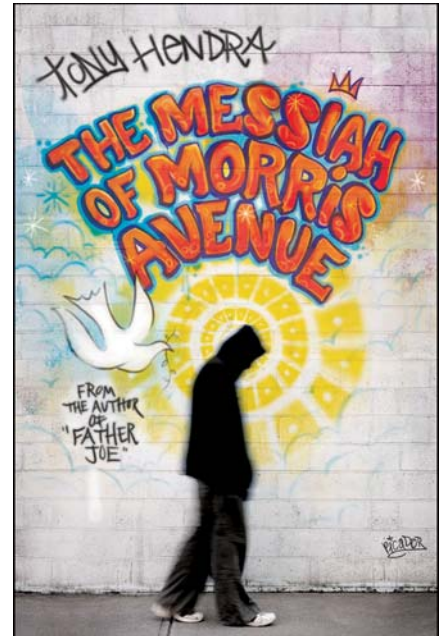
The Messiah of Morris Avenue

A Novel

by Tony Hendra

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About this Guide

The following author biography and list of questions about *The Messiah of Morris Avenue* are intended as resources to aid individual readers and book groups who would like to learn more about the author and this book. We hope that this guide will provide you a starting place for discussion, and suggest a variety of perspectives from which you might approach *The Messiah of Morris Avenue*.

About the Book

In the not so distant future, the tide of righteousness—in the form of executions, barking evangelists, tank-like SUVs, and a movie industry run entirely by the Christian right—has swept the nation. Aside from the non-white, the non-Christian, and the non-wealthy, all are believers. Among the skeptics is a washed-up journalist named Johnny Greco, who hears of a media-shy young man known as “Jay” roaming through ghettos, healing the sick, and tossing off miracles. Soft-spoken and shabbily dressed, Jay is an unlikely savior for this antsy and intolerant America. But as he makes his rounds, gathers followers, and makes furious enemies among the righteous powers that be, Johnny finds it harder and harder to doubt him.

“Hendra's writing sparkles.”

—*The New York Times Book Review*

“I was prepared for my usual serving of sharp Tony Hendra satire; I was not prepared for his sensitive and highly convincing exposition of the true teachings of Jesus Christ. I love this book.”

—George Carlin

“Hendra draws a funny, frightening portrait of a militantly Christian America . . . What this book has to say about media, religion, and culture is as valid in our society as in Hendra's imagined one.”

—*BookPage*

“*Messiah* is just what this country needs right now—a good dose of merriment in the face of cawthumping righteousness. It's a romp of a book but (this is strange) the forgiving spirit of *Father Joe* hovers. It's hard to think of forgiveness in these rigid times but it's there in *The Messiah of Morris Avenue*. A rowdy book but, Lord, it's beautiful.”

—Frank McCourt, author of *Angela's Ashes* and *Teacher Man*

About the Author

Tony Hendra was editor in chief of *Spy*, an original editor of *National Lampoon*, and played Ian Faith in *This Is Spinal Tap*. His first book, *Father Joe*, was a *New York Times* bestseller. He lives in New York.

Discussion Questions

1. Critics have called the novel a satire of contemporary America. Which elements of the imaginary, future USA do you think are closest to their counterparts in the present? Which are most outlandish? Is there any trait or tendency that all the objects of satire in the novel share?
2. Look at the physical descriptions of the main characters in the story (for example, Maria (pg. 39), Reverend Sabbath (pg. 13) and Jay (pp. 46-47)). How does the author translate the inner lives of these characters into their appearance? What can you tell from these physical descriptions about his representation of good and evil?
3. Why did the author choose Johnny Greco—a bitter, hard-drinking reporter with a record of compromising his beliefs—to tell this story? How does he use Johnny's particular experiences and perspective to tell the story of Jay's life and ideas?
4. Look at the “Sayings of Jay” (pg. 74.) Is this an accurate representation of the teachings of Jesus as you understand them? Do you feel that these ideas are in circulation among religious

(or non-religious) people in America today? How would a politician who went by this creed be received?

5. “Journalists like to pretend that tearing down and ruthlessly exposing is hard work,” Johnny says (pg. 81), “but what makes time fly is that tearing down is fun. It’s real easy. Whereas, whatever it’s opposite is, is fucking difficult.” Do you think this is true? If so, how do you think it plays out in America today?
6. “Blessed are the doubters, for doubt is the path to truth.” How do you think this idea of Jay’s is enacted in the novel? Are there characters in the story that do not experience doubt? What happens to them? In your experience, is doubt more of a handicap or a virtue?
7. Jay tells Johnny early on in the novel that “Words are a debased currency”. What does he mean in the context of his mission, and how does this idea translate into his actions? What truer form of communication do you think Jay means to substitute for words? Do you think words still have the same power in our society that they’ve always had?
8. When you were reading the novel, did your image of Jay incorporate elements of your own ideas about Jesus Christ? Or did you imagine him as entirely a character within the novel? How does this portrayal of the messiah square with your own image of him?
9. Do you think the book intends to satirize particular real-life figures? If so, who? Do you think the satire is justified? Is it effective?
10. Despite hearing accounts of miracles and being deeply affected by his own contact with Jay, Johnny never entirely comes around to believing in him as the messiah. Do you think most people are more willing than he is to believe in a higher power, or less so? If you had experienced what Johnny does, would believe in Jay?
11. Why do you think the author included Father Duffy’s remark (pg. 134) that Jay was just an average altar boy, “no worse than the rest”? What does this say about the kind of messiah the author has created, and about his vision of righteousness?
12. All things considered, do you think *The Messiah of Morris Avenue* is more of a satire or an inspirational story?

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