

READING GROUP GUIDE

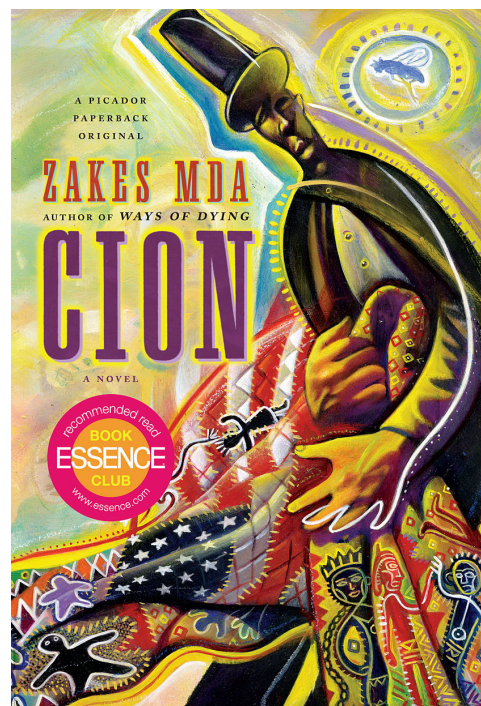
Cion

by Zakes Mda

A Picador Paperback Original

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About this Guide

The following author biography and list of questions about *Cion* 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 *Cion*.

About the Book

Toloki, the professional mourner, has come to live in America. Lured to Athens, Ohio, by an academic at the local university, Toloki makes friends with an angry young man he meets at a Halloween parade and soon falls in love with the young man's sister. Toloki endears himself to a local quilting group and his quilting provides a portal to the past, a story of two escaped slaves seeking freedom in Ohio.

Making their way north from Virginia with nothing but their mother's quilts for a map, the boys hope to find a promised land where blacks can live as free men. Their story alternates with Toloki's, as the two narratives cast a new light on America in the twenty-first century and on an undiscovered legacy of the Underground Railroad.

About the Author

Zakes Mda is a professor of creative writing at Ohio University. He lives in Athens, Ohio.

Discussion Questions

1. The book starts and ends with a mention of the sciolist. Who is he? What is his role in the novel?
2. “Ain’t we all from stories,” Obed asks Toloki (pg. 13). “We are indeed all from stories. Every one of us. All humanity,” Toloki answers. What does he mean? How does this idea apply to the larger story, to the connections between the past and present narratives?
3. Discuss the relationship of the flashback stories to the present-day narrative. What thematic connections do you see between the two? Are there characters in the 19th-century narrative that you think correspond directly to the present-day story?
4. *Cion* is the first of the author’s novels to be set in America. How do you think his portrait of America differs from others you’ve read by authors who were born here?
5. Do the citizens of Kilvert think of race differently than most Americans? How does the town’s unusual history inform their attitudes about racial identity?
6. What do you think draws Toloki to Orpah? What do the two have in common?
7. What is the role of Toloki’s profession in the story? What does his sensitivity to grief and mourning enable him to see or accomplish that others might not?
8. Why is Ruth so strongly opposed to her daughter’s artwork? What do Orpah’s drawings represent to her?
9. Toloki observes of Obed that “He cannot let go, for the past is all he has.” Do you think the Quigley family’s connection to their ancestors, their awareness of their history, strengthens or weakens them? How do Orpah, Obed, Ruth and Mahlon incorporate their heritage into their lives in different ways?
10. Why does Obed take up the cause of the casino? What does it signify to him?
11. Discuss the story of Niall Quigley, the Irishman who was made a slave. What does this story say about how we obtain our racial identity?
12. Do you think Abednego was right to kill Tobias, rather than accept his conversion and forgive him? Are there some crimes that can not be forgiven?

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