



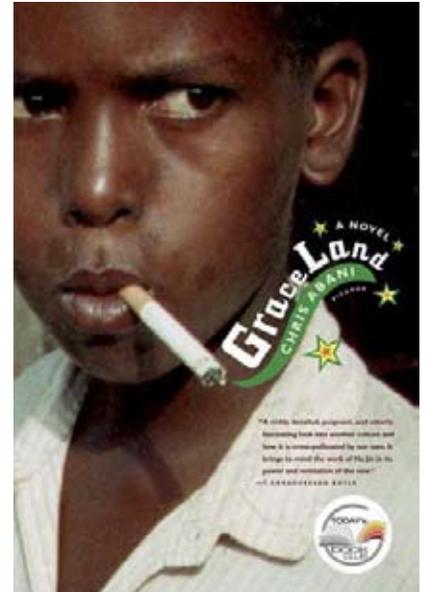
Reading Group Gold

GraceLand

by Chris Abani

About this Guide

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



ISBN: 978-0-312-42528-9 | 2005

About the Book

It was just his luck to be born into the only home in the small town with a psychotic father, a deadmother, and a Scottish-sounding witch for a grandmother...he wished his life were different.” Such is the family background for Elvis Oke, a sixteen-year-old Elvis Presley impersonator who is growing up in the violent, poverty-infested slum of Lagos, Nigeria, or as described by one character, “a pus-ridden eyesore on de face of de nation’s capital.” In order to survive, Elvis works as a laborer, cocaine packager, dancer, gigolo, and dealer in black market body parts, while keeping clear of the nefarious and deadly Colonel. With literature, music and film as his muse and under the guidance of the King of all Beggars and streetwise Redemption, Elvis navigates his way into manhood. Graceful, humorous, and with vivid imagery, *GraceLand* is the story of a boy who dreams of living the life of his choosing by “using the chains that bound him as leverage to pull himself up.”

About the Author

Chris Abani is the author of two previous novels: *Masters of the Board*, which won 2nd prize in the 1983 Delta Fiction Award when he was 16, and *Sirocco*. Both novels were only published in Nigeria. He has written and produced two plays, *Room at the Top* and *Song of a Broken Flute*. His latest collection of poetry, *Kalakuta Republic*, received the 2001 PEN USA West Freedom-to-Write Award and the Prince Claus of the Netherlands Award.



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Discussion Questions

1. At the start of the novel Elvis Oke works as an Elvis Presley impersonator where he is greeted by odd stares and given money to stop dancing and singing. What is the influence of Elvis Presley on Elvis Oke's life? How is Elvis Presley symbolic of American dreams and culture? What is the role of American culture in the novel? What is the significance of the title? Where is Elvis Oke's land of grace?
2. At the start and conclusion of each chapter are excerpts from Beatrice's journal- "things she wants to remember in her next life." Since the reader barely meets her, what can you learn about her through these excerpts? Why would she need them in her next life? How could the journal help Elvis and why does he carry it with him?
3. "Elvis had read a newspaper editorial that stated, rather proudly, that Nigeria had a higher percentage of millionaires than nearly any other country in the world.... The editorial fails to mention that ...Nigeria also had a higher percentage of poor people than nearly any other country in the world." Discuss the paradox that is Lagos. Consider Elvis's thoughts on Lagos, "How could a place be so ugly and violent yet beautiful at the same time?"
4. Redemption says that the "States is de place where dreams come true, not like dis Lagos dat betray your dreams." How does this statement define how Redemption and Elvis view America? Do they have an idealistic view of America?
5. Abani's choices of names define "a culture where your name was selected with care by your family and given to you as a talisman." Discuss the irony of the names chosen for some of the characters –i.e. Elvis, Sunday, Comfort, King of all Beggars, Innocent, and Redemption.
6. When Elvis confronts his father about his drinking they have an emotional conversation and Sunday tells him, "Everything for us fell apart when your mother died." Explain how Beatrice was the center of the family. What was the influence she had over Elvis and Sunday? Discuss how this quote is inspired by the title of Chinua Achebe's classic novel about Nigeria's transition to colonialism, *Things Fall Apart*?
7. Literature, film and music play a large role in Elvis's life. What does Elvis's interest in the arts reveal about his character? How does his choices in literature and film help him to escape the brutal realities of Lagos?
8. From being sexually abused, to working as a dancer, to having a tryst with a 13 year old as he works as her caretaker, Elvis has had various experiences involving sex. How is sex presented in the novel? How have these episodes defined his coming of age?
9. Among Elvis's acquaintances are the street hustling, Redemption and a self proclaimed King of all Beggars, the "icon for freedom and spiritual truth." Who has Elvis's best interests at heart? Whom does Elvis trust and why? Discuss the many influences in Elvis's life.



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10. As Elvis is ready to depart for America, Redemption tells him that “Your type no fit survive here long.” Do you agree with this statement? How would you define Elvis’s type? Does his dealings with the Colonel dispute or reaffirm this statement? How and why was he out of place in Lagos? Why is it necessary for Elvis to leave Lagos to achieve his dreams?

11. At the conclusion of the novel, Elvis is reading James Baldwin’s *Going to Meet the Man* and he began “to see a lot of parallels between himself and the description of a dying black man” who used his bound hands “as leverage to pull himself up and out of the torture” of being lynched. How does this define Elvis’s journey and coming of age? How will the road change for him once he arrives in America? Since he is uneducated and poor, how can he expect his life to be different in America.