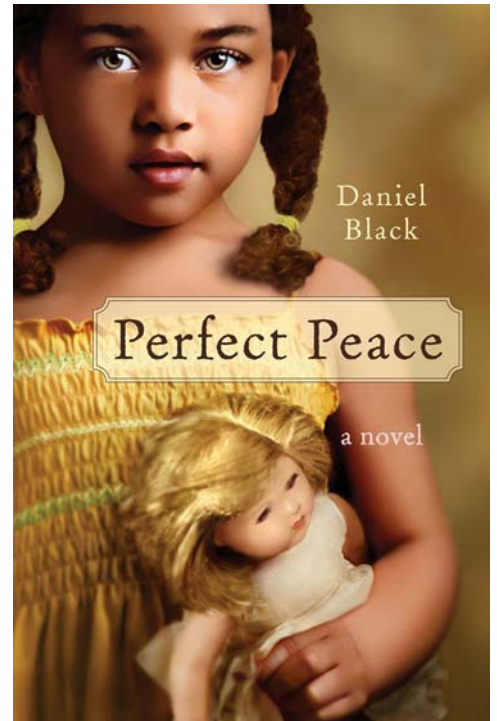




Perfect Peace

by *Daniel Black*

ISBN-13: 978-0-312-58267-8
ISBN-10: 0-312-58267-6



About this Guide

The following author biography and list of questions about *Perfect Peace* 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 *Perfect Peace*.

About the Book

The heartbreaking portrait of a large, rural southern family’s attempt to grapple with their mother’s desperate decision to make her newborn son into the daughter she will never have

When the seventh child of the Peace family, named Perfect, turns eight, her mother Emma Jean tells her bewildered daughter, “You was born a boy. I *made* you a girl. But that ain’t what you was supposed to be. So, from now on, you gon’ be a boy. It’ll be a little strange at first, but you’ll get used to it, and this’ll be over after while.” From this point forward, his life becomes a bizarre kaleidoscope of events. Meanwhile, the Peace family is forced to question everything they thought they knew about gender, sexuality, unconditional love, and fulfillment.

Chance is a mixed breed Pit Bull. He’s been born and raised to fight and seldom leaves the dirty basement where he is kept between fights. But Chance is not a victim or a monster. It is Chance’s unique spirit that helps him escape and puts him in the path of Adam.

What transpires is the story of one man, one dog, and how they save each other—in ways they never could have expected.

Praise for *Perfect Peace*

"*Perfect Peace* is a morality tale of the consequences of letting our selfish needs trap the ones we love into roles they weren't born to play. The characters here are as flawed, their sins numerous, as any living human being held under the lens, but the author brings a compassion and understanding to their plights."

—**Mat Johnson, author of the award-winning *Hunting in Harlem and Incognegro***

"*Craft* is not the word for this joyfully inscribed novel. The proper word is *art*. The book is a brave and complicated story perfectly told. Mr. Black offers a cultural gift to be welcomed."

—**Houston A. Baker, Jr. Distinguished University Professor Vanderbilt University**

"Part cautionary tale, part folk tale, part fable, Daniel Black's *Perfect Peace* is a complete triumph. It bursts with emotions as intense as opera. *Perfect Peace* will bring you to tears and laughter. You will recognize characters from your own life, and perhaps even recognize yourself. In Emma Jean Peace, a mid-20th-Century rural Southern black woman who wants a daughter so desperately that she raises her infant son as a girl, Dr. Black has created a character as complex, equivocal and unforgettable as Scarlett O'Hara."

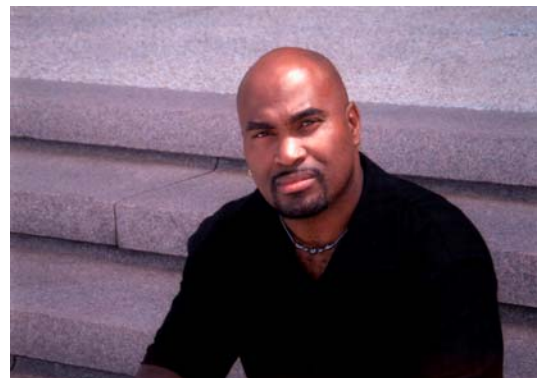
—**Larry Duplechan, author of *Blackbird, Captain Swing*, and the Lambda Literary Award-winning *Got 'Til It's Gone***

"I suspect the most monumental task of a writer must certainly lie in maintaining the illusion of effortlessness in crafting the sound, shape and color of characters. This must be particularly true when the writer's tale requires the distinct and unique dimensionality of many in order to be effectively told. In *Perfect Peace*, as in the lives of all of us, generations long dead and gone, their thoughts and actions and, most importantly, the lack of expanse in their individual perspectives and needs draw the sharp defining lines of myriad characters, who, in turn, most literally "create" the story's protagonist. Daniel Black, with his easy, unstrained prose, did not invent the character of *Perfect Peace*. Rather, he's painted the intricate portraits of all the others, seen and unseen, in a too real world. His vividly rural pre-civil rights South is not long ago and far away. Its people cannot be relegated to times and things past. And this author's subtle craft will not spare us seeing ourselves in their choices, both sublime and tragic, cowardly and brave. It is upon that rich and layered background that the painfully, gloriously complex, conflicted, and, like us, ultimately triumphant spirit of *Perfect Peace* could have done none other than but to eventually appear. Mr. Black's novel nudges our sense of awareness and accountability. His narrative eloquently poses difficult questions with disarming kindness: "Do you know who you are? Do you know what you do? Do you know that there is never an excuse?" The relevance of this work with regard to all we are and all we do far exceeds his adroitly simple telling of the tale."

— **Keith Hamilton Cobb, actor**

About the Author

DANIEL OMOTOSHO BLACK teaches at Clark Atlanta University in Atlanta, Georgia. He earned a Ph.D. in African American Studies from Temple University then returned to Clark Atlanta as a professor with hopes of inspiring young black minds to believe in themselves.



Discussion Questions

1. Emma Jean's decision seems to be unjustifiable. However, is it possible to understand why Emma Jean does what she does? Who is really to blame? Without having healed from her own childhood abuse, can she really be held responsible for her current psychological well-being?
2. How does Gus's emotional fragility contribute unto his abuse of Paul? How is he contradictory in this respect?
3. How do Perfect's brothers both help and hinder his transform into malehood/masculinity?
4. What is the role Sugar Baby plays in Paul's spiritual evolution? Although they speak infrequently, Sugar Baby's impact on Perfect Paul is indelible. Why?
5. What are the places in the novel where Emma Jean's love for her children is made obvious? Cite examples of her being a dedicated, nurturing mother.
6. What role does the church play in the social construction of gender in Swamp Creek? How does the church/church rhetoric "enslave" its members around issues of gender/sexuality?
7. Most readers are surprised by the revelation of Mister's sexuality. Why do you think readers don't suspect him?
8. Eva Mae loves Perfect Paul, regardless of his gender identification. Why isn't Paul attracted to her, especially with all she's done to love and protect him?
9. The Jordan River is personified, such that it assumes a life of its own. How does the Jordan assist Swamp Creek residents in dealing with their communal and personal issues? Is it a "kind" character or a "mean, wrathful" one?
10. When Emma Jean begins to hear The Voice, it sounds like her own conscience at one point and, at other times, it sounds like her mother, and at other times it sounds like something Omniscient. What is the role of The Voice and how does it lead to Emma Jean's ultimate cleansing?

Daniel Black on writing *Perfect Peace*

I conceived this book one day, in 2005, when I saw a child and couldn't determine if it was a boy or girl. Then I wondered why it mattered at all. I knew the child was *human*; that wasn't up for question. But by desire to know lingered. I began to imagine the price the child was paying as the world sorted out its gender, or created one. My imagination ran free. I situated the story in the rural, segregated south in order to explore the specific ways in which southern black folk grapple with issues of gender, and I wanted to examine just how far a community is willing to go to "right" what they feel is wrong in one of its members. I also wanted to examine the ways in which patriarchy and homophobia have shaped the black community's constructs of God and salvation, leading its members to denounce and demean all in the name of something holy.

Perfect Peace was extremely difficult to write for three reasons: (1) appropriating the language and perception of black people at the time with regards to social dimensions of gender and sexuality, (2) trying to imagine how a child would cope with such an extraordinary identity crisis in the midst of people who aren't sympathetic to such a dilemma, and (3) trying to figure out how such a kaleidoscope of events could be survived BEFORE the age of therapy and counseling, at least in the black community. But this was important because many who were different DID survive. *Perfect Peace* is one telling/imagining of that great survival.

This novel is dear to me and close to my heart because it speaks for those who have been silenced. It validates their existence and suggests to the world that they are not only human, but very possibly divine. More specifically, it forces readers to look at their very narrow ideas of gender and sexuality in hopes of freeing them to love and respect those whom they've traditionally abused and rejected. This book is my Word from God. It announces, partly, why I walk the planet at all: to teach the world that every person is a flower in God's bouquet—precious, rare, sweet, fragile—and should be honored thusly. Only then will God reveal God's self to the world, and we'll see that we all were made in the image. With each word I write, I hope to move humanity toward the day when we'll see that image face to face and we'll know, finally, that God was nothing but all of us combined.

To comment on the book or have Daniel Black visit your reading group visit:

<http://danielblack.org/comments.htm>



Contact us at readinggroup@macmillanusa.com
Don't forget to check out our monthly newsletter!
www.readinggroupgold.com