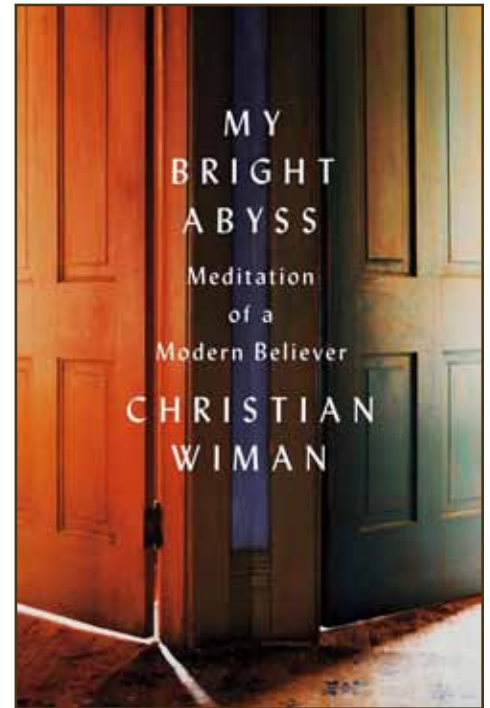


Reading Group Gold

My Bright Abyss

by Christian Wiman



ISBN: 978-0-374-21678-8 / 192 pages

In this provocative work, the award-winning poet Christian Wiman reflects on the nature of faith and verse—his two lifelong constants—and his shifting relationship to them in the face of a potentially terminal illness. The editor of *Poetry* magazine, Wiman was diagnosed with a rare form of cancer just as his literary life was coming to fruition. Immersed in both the comforts and the bewildering aspects of matters of the soul, Wiman began to probe the limits of his Christian beliefs and his love of poetry. Written in the wake of a bone marrow transplant, during a time when Wiman was convinced his death was imminent, *My Bright Abyss* is a powerful examination of what it means to face mortality, uncertainty, and the mysteries of undying love. Interwoven with excerpts from diverse poems, Wiman's chapters give voice to the deeply human questions that few have the courage to confront. We hope that the following discussion topics will enhance your reading group's experience of this radiant meditation.

QUESTIONS AND TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

1. The book begins and ends with Wiman's title stanza. At key turning points in your life, how have you approached God's bright abyss? How would you complete the line "and believing nothing believe in this:"?
2. From the naturalism of the English Romantics to the courageous anti-Stalin polemics of Osip Mandelstam, Wiman provides moving excerpts from a broad variety of poems. Which lines strongly resonated with your experiences?

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3. Discuss the format of the book, which combines brief, honed passages with lengthier explorations in verse and prose. How does this format reflect the variegated process of discerning God?
4. Drawing on passages from “Sorrow’s Flower,” how would you respond to the question of whether people who reject or don’t acknowledge the love of God can fully feel human love?
5. In “O Thou Mastering Light,” Wiman asserts, “The minute you begin to speak with certitude about God, he is gone” (p. 72). Are you comfortable with the notion that flexibility is essential to spiritual strength? What are the advantages and vulnerabilities of rigid doctrine?
6. On page 84, Wiman describes an encounter with an impoverished man in a nearly empty chapel. The experience led Wiman to realize “how easily a fatal complacency seeps into even those acts we undertake as disciplines, and how comfortable we become with our own intellectual and spiritual discomfort.” How important are actions and works in your spiritual life? Is contemporary Christianity too cerebral?
7. For Wiman, what similarities and differences exist between poetry and prayer? In what ways is poetry a path to and from the soul? What would it take to cause a “poetics of belief” to flourish, as described on page 124 in “Varieties of Quiet”?
8. How was Wiman shaped by his childhood in West Texas? To what extent was he influenced by the landscape? What beauty and quandaries does he now find in the way his family approached religion?
9. In the chapter titled “Hive of Nerves,” Wiman examines the nature of anxiety, particularly the anxiety of existence. How did these passages influence your perception of life and your consciousness of death?
10. What many manifestations of love are shown in this book? As Wiman describes his perception of fatherhood, his love for his wife, Danielle, and the love of God, what can we discover about the nature of love on earth?
11. Wiman distinguishes between faith (“a motion of the soul toward God,” p. 139) and belief, which he quotes Dietrich Bonhoeffer as linking to obedience (“If we are to believe, we must obey a concrete command,” p. 47). Are these paths separate or linked?
12. In “Mortify Our Wolves” and “A Million Little Oblivions,” Wiman is particularly explicit about his cancer treatments and facing the possibility of his early death. How does illness affect his understanding of faith? How does faith affect his understanding of illness?
13. Ultimately, what answers does *My Bright Abyss* uncover as the chapters unfold? What questions—answerable or not—did the book raise in your mind?

FARRAR, STRAUS AND GIROUX

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PRAISE FOR *MY BRIGHT ABYSS*

“Christian Wiman has written a moving, thoughtful meditation on faith and poetry that really is a treatise on meaning: Where we find it, what it offers us, whether it can mitigate pain. There’s a luminous clarity in these pages, the kind that comes only when a writer is facing ultimate questions. *My Bright Abyss* is a quest narrative, in its way—at once companionable and unflinching, and likely to be of comfort to many readers.” —Meghan O’Rourke, author of *The Long Goodbye*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Christian Wiman is the author of five previous books, most recently *Every Riven Thing* (FSG, 2010), winner of the Ambassador Book Award for Poetry, and *Stolen Air: Selected Poems of Osip Mandelstam*. He is the editor of *Poetry* and lives in Chicago.

Reading group guide written by Amy Clements / The Wordshop, Inc.

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