

FARRAR, STRAUS AND GIROUX

Reading Group Gold

Popisho

by Leone Ross



ISBN: 9780374602451 / 480 pages

Somewhere far away—or maybe right nearby—lies an archipelago called Popisho. A place of stunning beauty and incorrigible mischief, destiny and mystery, it is also a place in need of change. Xavier Redchoose is the macaenus of his generation, anointed by the gods to make each resident one perfect meal when the time is right. Anise, his long-lost love, is on a march toward reckoning with her healing powers. The governor's daughter, Sonteine, still hasn't come into her cors, but her corrupt father is demanding the macaenus make a feast for her wedding. Meanwhile, graffiti messages from an unknown source are asking hard questions. A storm is brewing. Before it comes, before the end of the day, this wildly imaginative narrative will take us across the islands, through their history, and into the lives of unforgettable characters.

Leone Ross's *Popisho* is a masterful delight: a playful love story, a portrait of community, a boldly sensual meditation on desire and addiction, and a critique of the legacies of corruption and colonialism. Inspired by the author's Jamaican homeland, inflected with rhythms and textures of an amalgam of languages, it is a dazzling, major work of fiction.

This guide is designed to enhance your reading group's experience of *Popisho*.

Reading Group Gold

QUESTIONS AND TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

1. In *Popisho*, setting and scene play as much of a role as the people themselves. Discuss the ways the landscape and setting come to life. The author mentions that it is loosely inspired by her homeland of Jamaica and her time in Grenada as a child. Is there another place the setting reminds you of?
2. Cors is a magical gift bestowed by the gods in *Popisho*: Xavier can make food taste incredible with just his palms, his brother Io can touch anything and have it change colors, Romanza has a range of physical responses when people lie to him, Anise is a healer. Of all the characters, whose cors do you feel is the most useful? Why? Is there a specific cors you'd like to have? Would you rather have something practical like Xavier, or something physically powerful like the woman with three arms? Explain your answer.
3. In contemporary society, many believe in food's ability to heal. On page 50, Ross describes Xavier's cors: "*Nothing going sweet you like that young Redchoose boy food*, people said. Provided you could bear that look when he came into your kitchen. Like he was cooking not for your appetite, but your failings." Discuss the different reasons people eat, in this book and in your own life. Do you think the people of Popisho are eating for sustenance or pleasure? How many characters demonstrate some healing from Xavier's cooking?
4. "Love was an action, after all" (page 139). There are many forms of love and relationships in *Popisho*. Consider the love Xavier feels for Nya versus Anise; Anise with Tan-Tan; the brotherly love and care Io expresses for Xavier; the love Zaza (Romanza) feels for Pilar; the engagement between Sonteine and her fiancé, Dandu. For the different relationships, is love more of an action or a feeling? Do you think any of these characters experience true love for one another?
5. Discuss the "genital incidents," as the radio host Hah calls the seemingly random health events happening to the women. She tells the governor, "If this was penises breaking off, I cannot help but think the matter would be treated more urgently" (page 243). Explain her statement. How do you understand the strange occurrences to women's genitals? What do they mean across the island community?
6. *The Guardian* calls *Popisho* an "erotic comedy." Do you agree with this assessment? Why or why not? Discuss the instances of sex in the novel. Are there times where sex serves a comic purpose? If so, what are they?
7. Sexuality and human desire take many forms in this novel. Consider the similarities and differences between heterosexual and homosexual experience on Popisho. How are the experiences depicted? Were there any characters that resonated with you when you read *Popisho*? Who were they, and what made them so compelling?
8. Discuss the people who paint messages around Popisho, and their motives. Why do you think Romanza decides to paint messages against society? Are you surprised the second painter is Io? What motive would Io have? Discuss their meeting in chapter 30.

Reading Group Gold

9. In *Popisho*, butterflies are ingested like alcohol and moths are like hard drugs, meant to evoke similar feelings. Discuss the use of substances in the novel, and how the characters use them to soothe themselves. Why do you think Leone Ross picked butterflies and moths as the means for her characters to get high? Is there anything about these insects that lends them to this use? Consider Xavier's addiction story throughout the novel. Do you think he overcomes it?
10. The dead in *Popisho* walk the earth, and it is the job of the living to free them. Nya's presence seems to torment Xavier. How do you think he feels when he learns that her ghost visited another man, Zebediah? Discuss how his marriage to Nya informs his behavior over the course of the novel, and how—and when—Xavier's thoughts on her death seem to shift.
11. *Popisho* takes its name from the Jamaican patois term “poppy show,” which means “puppet show,” a term often used to ridicule someone for doing something idiotic or foolish. Consider looking up different ways “poppy show” is used in real life. Upon finishing the book, how do you think this title suits the novel? Do you think the UK title, *This One Sky Day*, is more appropriate?
12. Discuss the fantastical and magical realism elements of the book. Does the magic enhance the story to you? Do you think Ross should have played up the fantasy more? Does the genre affect your feelings on the book overall?
13. What do you think the moral of the novel is? Is nature the healer in this novel, coming to clean the slate? Discuss the final moments of the book: the Governor's call to murder the indigents, Io's speech in front of the crowd, the sweet hurricane.

Reading Group Gold

ENHANCE YOUR BOOK CLUB

1. Before your book discussion, consider watching Leone Ross in conversation with Marlon James at Politics and Prose in 2021. [You can view this virtual book event here.](#)
2. In this interview with [PEN America](#), Ross says, “Popisho is at the same time for everyone and *specifically* for Jamaicans. I’m not worried about some people not getting that layer—the book is about love and addiction and duty and community, and that’s a lot to be getting on with, happily. Not everything is for you.” In other interviews, she says that the book is “a deliberate gift for my peeps.” Were you familiar with Jamaican history, setting, and culture before reading this novel? While reading, were you envisioning a Caribbean landscape, or another one?
3. For your next book club pick, consider reading another book by a Caribbean writer or one that takes place in Jamaica, such as *How to Love a Jamaican* by Alexia Arthurs, *A Brief History of Seven Killings* by Marlon James, *Claire of the Sea Light* by Edwidge Danticat, or *Augustown* by Kei Miller, among others.
4. Continue reading and engaging with works by Leone Ross, including her collection of short stories, *Come Let Us Sing Anyway*. You may also connect with her on Twitter at @leoneross and on Instagram at @leone.ross.
5. Consider mapping out the characters’ connections as you read, in the form of a relationship tree. Discuss the complex family connections and networks that exist between the characters, as well as how their stories intersect by the book’s end.

Discussion guide by Brianne Conklin-Sperber