



If Beale Street Could Talk

James Baldwin

Discussion Questions prepared by Anne Farrow,
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1. If you were asked to describe this book, what words would you use?
2. What do you think is the most important idea in this book?
3. Does *If Beale Street Could Talk* make you angry?
4. This book was published 41 years ago. Does it feel old-fashioned to you in some ways, or does it feel accurate for today?
5. When this book was published, some black leaders and activists said that author James Baldwin was showing hatred for black people. Do you feel that the author, who was African American, showed hatred for black people and black society?
6. Were you shocked by parts of this book? If you were shocked, which parts shocked you?
7. Who do you see as the hero or heroes of this book? Who shows courage?

8. *Beale Street* shows a black man imprisoned for a crime he did not commit. Do you see similarities in today's America? Does this book help us understand why so many African American men are imprisoned?
9. Who do you feel is the most vulnerable person in this book?
10. Which character or characters are the most changed by what happens in this book?
11. Why do you think Fonny's father Frank killed himself?
12. People often say, "Love conquers all." Do you feel hopeful for Tish and Fonny at the end of the book? Will their love conquer their hardships?
13. The title of a novel is a deliberate and important choice that any author must make. The title of a novel can give the reader clues about the theme, subject or context of the story. What might be the significance of Baldwin's title?
14. Fonny and Tish are the protagonists of the novel. Discuss the characters in *If Beale Street Could Talk* in relation to whether or not they help or hinder the main characters.
15. Do you agree with this statement?: "The women characters in *If Beale Street Could Talk* are portrayed either as saints or villains." Why or why not? Give evidence to support your opinion based on quotes from the novel.

For further discussion:

1. The U.S. criminal justice system is the clear antagonist in this novel. What specific images does Baldwin (through the narrator Tish) develop to express his critique of the government and its judicial processes? Consider Tish's descriptions and depictions of courts, jails, lawyers, and police officers to start.
2. Tish's narration provides an important perspective on the process and politics of incarceration: the family survivors' experience. Discuss her role, particularly as Fonny's partner and mother of their child. Why does it matter that she narrates

this story?

Then consider: Tish and Fonny's immediate families. They are confronted with two "crimes": Tish's pregnancy and Fonny's alleged rape. How do they react? Why do the Hunt and the Rivers respond so differently to these events? What models of community support are readers to regard as ideal, based on these examples?

3. The Black church comes under severe scrutiny and criticism in this novel. How so? To make what points? Do you agree with Baldwin's critique?
4. In contrast to their families and the church, Fonny and Tish's love for and commitment to one another are quite remarkable; why? What accounts for the strength and endurance of their bond?

One specific scene to consider: the night their baby is conceived (133-45). How does this event's unfolding speak to the depth of the bond? How do their different investments in Tish's pregnancy function to strengthen their bond?

5. Like all of Baldwin's later novels, *If Beale Street Could Talk* depicts sexuality in bold, frank ways. Sexual intimacy provides a "strange anointing," as Tish observes (81). How so? To make what points about freedom, commitment, and obligation?
6. By that same token, *If Beale Street Could Talk* is unlike Baldwin's later fictional work in this respect: the novel defines its male and female characters in strictly defined gender roles – men do what they "must"; women understand each other's motives because they are "mothers". How is that the case? Trace this pattern throughout the novel. Consider how this claim extends Baldwin's concern with freedom, commitment, and obligation.
7. Importantly, Harlem is not the neighborhood where Fonny and Tish live together. Fonny relocates them to NYC's West Village. Why does he make that choice? Consider this setting's double jeopardy: it liberates Fonny and Tish as a couple on the one hand; how so? On the other hand, it is the site where Fonny's arrested and imprisoned for his alleged crime. What does this imply about the meaning of the cityscape – here, think about the novel's title: *If Beale Street Could Talk*; focus on the Memphis allusion, "Beale Street". What does it mean for Memphis to be in Manhattan?

8. Fonny's friend Daniel does more than provide a plausible alibi that would exonerate Fonny; Daniel's plight reveals the horrors of imprisonment. Discuss Daniel's predicaments and think about the symbolism of his name; here, Baldwin activates the Bible to an important end. Then consider: what does it mean for Tish to yield so much narrative time to Daniel's story?
9. Though Fonny is wrongly accused of the crime of rape, Ernestine and Sharon's investigations reveal that Victoria Rogers' accusation isn't exactly false. Why does the novel enclose Fonny's plight within this ambiguity?
10. What does it mean that Victoria Rogers (born Sanchez) is Puerto Rican, and that to discover her testimony Sharon must journey to the island to find her? Put another way, how does this setting and geography expand our interpretation of the novel's title--*If Beale Street Could Talk*.
11. Fonny's "real life" (76) is defined by his artwork; he is a sculptor, first and foremost. How does his relationship to that craft shape his character? Pay special attention to the distinction he comes to make, but novel's close: that he is an "artisan" and not an "artist" (193). What does that difference mean for him?