

CRYSTAL WILKINSON



THE
BIRDS
of
OPULENCE

Discussion Guide

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Kentucky Reads

Kentucky Humanities has selected Crystal Wilkinson's *The Birds of Opulence* for its 2021 Kentucky Reads. The novel will be at the center of statewide conversations on the dynamics of family and community, the strength of women, and the stigmas surrounding mental illness.

The Berry Center has also selected Wilkinson's novel as their big read for 2021.

Published by the University Press of Kentucky, *The Birds of Opulence* is the winner of the 2016 Ernest J. Gaines Prize for Literary Excellence. *The Birds of Opulence* centers on several generations of women in a bucolic southern black township as they live with and sometimes surrender to madness. Crystal Wilkinson offers up Opulence and its people in lush, poetic detail. It is a world of magic, conjuring, signs, and spells, but also of harsh realities that only love—and love that's hand-

ed down—can conquer. At once tragic and hopeful, this captivating novel is a story about another time, rendered for our own.

This marks the third installment of Kentucky Reads. In 2020, Wendell Berry's *Hannah Coulter* was selected. *Hannah Coulter* was chosen in conjunction with the arrival of the Smithsonian traveling exhibit *Crossroads: Change in Rural America* coming to Kentucky. The novel led to tremendous conversations throughout the Commonwealth on the changes in rural America and rural Kentucky, including what it means to be part of a rural community.

All the King's Men, the Pulitzer Prize-winning novel by Kentucky native Robert Penn Warren was selected in 2018, the inaugural year of Kentucky Reads. Scholar-led book discussions focused on the themes of the book including contemporary populism and political discourse, and their relationship to journalism.

Meet Crystal Wilkinson

By Wiley Cash

"I was trying to make the invisible visible. Appalachian stereotypes are rampant throughout the country. If you're an African American on top of that, people don't think we exist."

From Jean Toomer to Zora Neale Hurston to Ernest J. Gaines to Jesmyn Ward, Crystal Wilkinson is part of a long legacy of African American writers whose work focuses on the lives of rural Black people in the American South. Like these writers, Wilkinson does not rely on the cloying stereotypes that are often associated with the region, largely because she is a native Kentuckian who is more interested in pursuing and portraying the beauty and challenges of rural life instead of the clichés that too often cloud perceptions of the region, its people, its culture, and its history.

"My primary identity has always been, and still is, as an African-American-country-woman."

Born in Hamilton, Ohio, Wilkinson was brought to live

on her grandparents' farm in Indian Creek, Kentucky, when she was just six weeks old. Wilkinson's family was the only Black family in the area, and while her grandfather farmed tobacco, corn, and other crops, her grandmother cooked and cleaned in local homes. Wilkinson's grandparents' home had an outhouse, no running water, and was heated by burning wood and coal. She has spoken of her childhood as being "enchanted" as life in rural Kentucky gave her the freedom to roam the woods and fields and streams, and it was there that she first began her lifelong pursuit of putting the intricacies of the natural world and the human heart on the page.

"In the beginning, it was just sort of a calling. I could almost compare it to being called to preach or being called to be a musician. I've always been a writer since I was a child."

Wilkinson graduated from Eastern Kentucky University with a degree in journalism in 1985, soon embark-



ing on a professional life that saw her work as a public information officer, a community organizer, and a customer service representative. Apart from her professional life, Wilkinson was always working in the service of literature: organizing public readings, building a literary community, and, most importantly, writing. In the early 1990s, Wilkinson joined other Black regional writers and poets in adopting the term “Affrilachian,” which was coined by Kentucky Poet Laureate Frank X Walker to forge a public identity for writers whose work and presence in the region were historically overlooked.

In 2000, Wilkinson published her short story collection *Blackberries, Blackberries*, in which she recalls life in rural Kentucky. The book won the Paul and Lillie D. Chafin Award for Appalachian Literature. Two years later, she published *Water Street*, another book of stories that are often comprised of poetic fragments that touch on issues of mental illness, race, class, and gender. The book was a longlist finalist for the Orange Prize and the Hurston-Wright Legacy Award.

In 2003, Wilkinson earned an MFA in Creative Writing from Spalding University, and in the spring of 2004, she served as the writer-in-residence for the Appalachian College Association. Since then, she has taught creative writing at Eastern Kentucky University, Indiana University (Bloomington), and Morehead State University. She is currently an associate professor at the University of Kentucky.

But no matter how much she wrote or how far away she moved from the rural setting of her youth, Wilkinson’s past – both its glories and its ghosts – was always with her.

“One of the things that haunts me is the reality of mental illness, especially mental illness in rural communities and mental illness in Black communities.”

When Wilkinson’s mother was 20 years old, she was diagnosed with paranoid schizophrenia, which had an inestimable effect on Wilkinson’s childhood and her writing. While all of her published work has touched on mental illness, she always felt that she had never confronted the issue head on, especially in terms of how it affects people in rural communities, primarily Black women. When she began writing the book that would become *The Birds of Opulence*, she knew that mental illness and the challenges faced by Black, rural women would be major themes, especially in how illness is confronted or not confronted, treated or left untreated, and eventually passed down from one generation to the next. But while Wilkinson



knew that she wanted to write about these issues and themes, the book presented the problem of which genre would best meet the demands of the book itself. Wilkinson, a writer who had always found freedom in her work as a poet and writer of fiction and nonfiction, suddenly found herself pulled in different directions.

“The moment I said that Crystal the poet, Crystal the nonfiction writer, and Crystal the fiction writer were the same person and the same writer, then it all came together.”

In *The Birds of Opulence*, nearly all of the characters, especially the book’s women, are haunted by mental illness. While the book focuses on the small African American community of Opulence, the book is expansive as Wilkinson seemingly opens up the characters’ lives, memories, and dreams on a time continuum that shows how closely the past affects the present and how both will come to bear on the future. Wilkinson expertly combines all of her literary powers – the nonfiction writer’s search for truth, the novelist’s eye for character, and the poet’s grasp of language – to present a portrait of a community where generations of women and men love and struggle, live and die, look back and move forward. In *The Birds of Opulence*, Crystal Wilkinson makes the invisible visible, and the writing is so beautiful and alluring that we cannot look away despite the harsh truths we may have to confront.



The Birds of Opulence: Essay

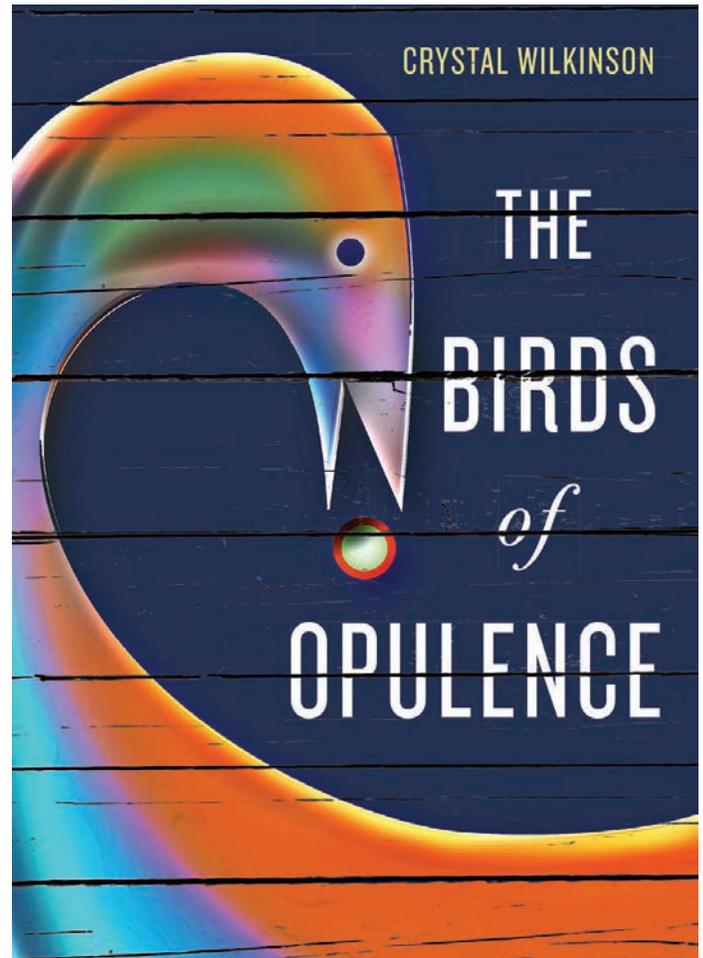
By Wiley Cash

Crystal Wilkinson's lyrical novel *The Birds of Opulence* chronicles African American life in the Appalachian community of Opulence, Kentucky. The book primarily features the women of the Goode family: great-grandmother Minnie Mae Goode, grandmother Tookie Goode, mother Lucy Brown, and daughter Yolanda. The family's men — father Joe Brown and son Kevin "Kee Kee" Brown — play important roles in the novel, but the story undoubtedly belongs to the women, beginning with Minnie's deep connection to the region — exemplified by her clinging to a piece of land known as the Homeplace that has been in the family for generations — and ending with Yolanda, who, despite the pressures and expectations of contemporary life and popular culture, remains in Opulence where she marries and raises a family. While the novel explores a multitude of themes and issues — gender roles, the rural/urban divide, mental health, domestic violence, and issues of consent — the theme of time is perhaps the most consistently portrayed.

In the novel, Wilkinson uses time to clock both chronological time, represented by the characters' aging, and the larger notion of time, which is represented by the community's economy moving from agriculture to tourism. But Wilkinson also uses time as a fluid concept, allowing her characters' thoughts and memories to slide back and forth from the present, into the past, and on toward the future. For the people of Opulence, Kentucky, time is a river that moves all around them as they stand motionless in its waters. Their thoughts slip upstream toward the past or downstream into the moments yet to come. By using time in a multitude of ways, Wilkinson is allowing her characters — and her readers — to meld seamlessly into the mosaic of Opulence's past, present, and future.

While time is used to achieve this mosaic effect throughout the novel, the excerpt that follows is particularly representative of the ways in which Wilkinson employs this technique. In this scene, Lucy has recently given birth to her second child — a girl named Yolanda — and she is remembering the early days of her life while feeling the onset of postpartum depression.

Neighbors are out on their porches, fanning themselves with newspapers and cardboard scraps. Gnats and mosquitoes have come along with the rain; the sound of skin being slapped echoes from house to house. This rain



will bolster their gardens, and they will celebrate the fat tomatoes and the second round of kale greens now holding water in curly leaves. Pink zinnias and red begonias will perk up bright. On up the road, across Mission Bridge, old black farmers in the farther reaches of the country are nodding with the quiet pleasure a good rain brings. They have crossed their arms, chests swollen with pride, their snowy heads held up high beneath the shelter of barns and porches. Some will stand fully in the rain and let it take them, as she and Joe did when they were courting. Crops will green up again. The family garden is glistening wet, the remaining squash turning graceful yellow necks toward the downpour.

Wilkinson is giving the reader a gorgeous image of life in this community by portraying the sounds, sights, and,



if we note those rain-damp gardens and flowers, scents of the early summer evening. She is also manipulating how the reader experiences time. The long sentences strung together with short clauses allow the reader to languish on each image without feeling like the sentences are too long or too meandering. The clauses feel short and punchy, but they are part of long sentences, so Wilkinson is both moving the reader along and allowing them to linger.

What is perhaps most interesting about this excerpt is how Wilkinson plays with time using verb tense. The excerpt starts out in the present tense by revealing what Lucy is seeing at that moment. But the present tense quickly moves to present perfect, which is a step back from present tense, establishing that some of these things are already happening before Lucy sees them. In the very next sentence, the tense shifts to future tense, implying that things will happen. In just three sentences, Wilkinson shifts through three verb tenses, ensuring that the reader is swept up into the dreaminess of the moment. The reader is caught up in Lucy's imagining, seeing this world as she sees it, thinking of it in the way she thinks of it. The sentence beginning "On up the road" returns to present tense. The sentence that follows it slips to past perfect, and the sentence that follows that one moves forward to future tense. This pattern is an exact replica of the three sentences that open the excerpt, a formula that continues to move the reader through Lucy's imagining, which is what this has become because she cannot see these farmers who are "in the farther reaches of the country," but Lucy is connected to them nonetheless because Wilkinson uses time to connect all the characters in the present moment to the past and the future.

This excerpt also uses time to give the reader insight to how Lucy feels in this moment. The excerpt begins with gnats and mosquitos, parasitic animals that feed off hosts. Perhaps this is where Lucy's mind and heart are after so recently giving birth and nursing a newborn. But the excerpt moves away from the immediate scene and into a romantic memory of her and her beloved husband Joe being caught in the rain while courting. This memory, unlike the image of the gnats and mosquitoes, is warm and heartfelt, and it is the only sentence in the entire excerpt that is written in the past tense, which implies that Lucy draws strength from the past in order to live in the present moment while facing the future. When the verb tense springs into future tense, promising that the crops, which signify new life, "will green up again," perhaps Lucy is

trying to assure herself that her own life will "green up" as well.

In *The Birds of Opulence*, Crystal Wilkinson's writing slips easily from the present to the past and into the future, manipulating time through verb tense and other techniques as her characters think, remember, and imagine. In *Opulence*, time flows like a river, ensuring that characters and readers alike can slip out of their shoes, roll up their pants legs, and enter the story to find a place to stand, midstream, and experience every moment.

Wiley Cash Discussion Guide Author

Wiley Cash is the *New York Times* bestselling author of the novels *The Last Ballad*, *A Land More Kind than Home*, and *This Dark Road to Mercy*. The founder of the Open Canon Book Club and co-founder of the Land More Kind Appalachian Artists Residency, he has been a fellow at the MacDowell Colony, Yaddo, and the Weymouth Center. He serves as the writer-in-residence at the University of North Carolina-Asheville and lives in North Carolina with his wife, photographer Mallory Cash, and their two daughters. His novel *When Ghosts Come Home* will be published in 2021.





Discussion Questions

By Wiley Cash

The Birds of Opulence centers on female relationships, their complications and their gifts. Consider the ways kinship (Minnie Mae and Tookie, Lucy and Yolanda) and friendship (Yolanda and Mona, the women who visit after births and deaths) complicate female relationships in the novel.

The characters in the novel, including the men, navigate their lives using some kind of talent or quality. For Joe Brown, it is his work ethic. For Kevin, it seems to be his charming personality. The women in the novel possess and/or rely on different types of talents and qualities. Can you list the female characters and consider what each one of them uses to navigate the world?

Zora Neale Hurston, author of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, wrote that Black women are “the mules of the world.” Even if you have not read Hurston’s novel, can you speculate about what that quote might mean? What could it mean in the context of *The Birds of Opulence*?

There are many broad conflicts in the novel, the dynamics between women and men being the most obvious. The conflict between rural and city life also comes to mind. Are there others?

It is usually suggested that beginning writers stick with a consistent verb tense (present, past, future, etc.) and maintain a single point-of-view (first, third, omniscient) in a scene because writers must understand the rules of fiction before they attempt to break them. Crystal Wilkinson is no beginning writer, and in *The Birds of Opulence* she demolishes the rules of verb tense and point-of-view. Can you choose a part of the novel where Wilkinson changes verb tenses and allows the point-of-view to jump from one character to another? Discuss the potential reasons for why she made the conscious decision to break these rules.

Wilkinson works hard to situate her readers in the correct historical era without making it too obvious. For example, she does not begin a scene by writing, “It was September 5, 1972, when Lucy...” Instead, she inserts markers in the text and lets the reader discover them, thereby situating themselves in an era. Some of these markers may be cultural (music, dress, cars, technology) and others may be historic (presidents, wars, social movements). What are some markers that Wilkinson uses to situate her reader in particular

eras throughout the novel? What are some markers from your own life that you could use when writing a story?

Beginning with the earliest American literature, women have often been confined to the private life of the home while men have been allowed to enter professional fields and participate in civic life. American life and literature still struggles with and portrays these limitations and the hold they have on our conceptions of gender roles. When viewed through the lens of gender, how are public and private life portrayed in *The Birds of Opulence*? Do the limitations of these opportunities grow weaker with each generation? How might life be different for Kevin, Yolanda, and Mona than it was for Tookie and her brothers?

In Frederick Douglass’s famous speech “What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?”, given on July 5, 1852, while he was still legally considered a slave, he asks, “What have I, or those I represent, to do with your national independence? Are the great principles of political freedom and of natural justice, embodied in that Declaration of Independence, extended to us?” In *The Birds of Opulence*, the residents of Opulence meet for Dinner on the Grounds a few days after July Fourth. Wilkinson mentions that decorations, although they’re beginning to show signs of wear, can still be seen around the white parts of town. The dinner is held on the church grounds, and it is an opportunity for residents to reunite in fellowship with others who have left the community. If we think about Douglass’s speech, how can Dinner on the Grounds, which is held so close to the Fourth of July, be seen as a separate celebration? What is it celebrating?

In the final pages of the book, we learn what has become of the old homeplace and the ways in which tourism is replacing the agricultural economy. As the book grows closer to its closing pages, are we watching a culture disappear, or are we watching as a culture evolves and adapts? How does Wilkinson use Joe Brown’s character in these final scenes to make these points?

Birds as images, props, and symbols abound in *The Birds of Opulence*. Can you identify a few scenes that feature various birds and come to a conclusion about why particular birds are used in particular moments in the book?

Discussion Questions



By Virginia Berry Aguilar & Dr. Leah Bayens, The Berry Center

The opening lines of *The Birds of Opulence* ask us to “Imagine a tree, a bird in the tree, the hills, the creek, a possum, the dog chasing the possum.” Many of the sections and chapters throughout the novel begin with descriptions of the season, the weather, and the natural world of this fictional place. How do these descriptions ground you in the world of the characters? When and to what effect does the novel present natural elements symbolically?

Cooking, food, and the “rhythms” of the kitchen are described throughout the novel. In “Warming of Old Bones. New Ways. That Hurting Place,” we read about the dishes that are prepared for the annual Dinner on the Grounds: “corn pudding, candied yams, collards and kale, yeasts rolls, mashed potatoes, and coleslaw; sweet potato pie, blackberry cobbler, and upside-down cake” (pg. 82). How do these foods shed light on the agricultural history of Opulence? How are food, culture, and identity connected?

Although it is hot, uncomfortable work to prepare for Dinner on the Grounds, and the women of Opulence have “vowed never again to do this in the middle of July,” the work continues each summer, “The heat and worry of the previous year is forgotten” (pg. 82). Why do you think the women still do it? How does the seasonal celebration build or reflect on the Opulence community’s story? Have you ever experienced this type of annual celebration?

How do the Goode women challenge stereotypes about women’s roles in farming and in rural communities? What responsibilities do the characters have to one another and to their neighbors?

In “Dinner on the Grounds,” out-of-towners arrive on a bus with “air conditioning and bathroom on board.” The bus “comes to a high-profile stop right in front of the church like a limousine,” and other out-of-towners bring exotic gifts (pgs. 103-104). What tone is set by this arrival? What unites the two groups? What separates them?

In the final chapter, Joe Brown reflects on the tourism that has come to Opulence and the visitors who buy “cheap replicas” of the town’s history: “This kind of foolishness, trying to grab so tightly to something that used to be, makes Joe laugh, but mostly he wishes these tourists

would find somewhere else to go. He has become skeptical of city folks, though he was once one of them himself” (pg. 192). Why do you think Joe is skeptical of these “city folks”? How do you think this new tourist economy changes the town?

What economic and cultural forces have led to there “not being as many black farmers out here as there used to be” (pg. 192)? What roles do June and Butter play in illustrating shifts in African American farming communities? What has kept the children of these farmers from returning home after college? What factors keep young people from choosing to live in rural places? Is this an experience that is familiar to you and your family?

Although Joe Brown was raised in the city and is a transplant to Opulence, by the end of the novel he has become “more a Goode than a Brown.” How does Joe demonstrate his loyalty to his family and community throughout his life in Opulence? How does he respect and honor the generational work of his wife’s family? What might Joe’s example symbolize about the rural newcomer’s prospects?

The importance of the Goode family homeplace is established early in the novel, and it appears that the history and future of Opulence and the homeplace are closely tied to one another. In “The Homeplace” Minnie Mae explains to her sons, that this land has been “up under your people’s feet since slave times” and that her children were “raised up on the money the tobacco brought in and the garden food we put on the table” (pgs. 112-113). What freedoms were possible to the Goode family through their ability to support themselves on this land? How does each member of the Goode family feel about their connection and obligation to this generational land? What is lost if June and Butter do not accept their obligation to this place? Does your family have a homeplace, or do you feel you have a devotion or obligation to particular place?

For Further Reading

Dispossession: Discrimination against African American Farmers in the Age of Civil Rights, by Pete Daniels
A Gathering of Old Men, by Ernest Gaines
Black Farmers In America, by John Francis Ficara
O Tobacco, by Crystal Wilkinson



Kentucky Humanities

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