



6700 Merle Hay Road, Johnston, IA 50131 • Voice: 515-278-5233 • Fax: 515-278-4975 • [info@johnstonlibrary.com](mailto:info@johnstonlibrary.com)

## Johnston Public Library Book Discussion Questions

### Hell of a Book by Jason Mott

#### Summary

In *Hell of a Book*, an African-American author sets out on a cross-country book tour to promote his bestselling novel. That storyline drives Jason Mott's novel and is the scaffolding of something much larger and more urgent: since his novel also tells the story of Soot, a young Black boy living in a rural town in the recent past, and The Kid, a possibly imaginary child who appears to the author on his tour.

Throughout, these characters' stories build and build and as they converge, they astonish. For while this heartbreaking and magical book entertains and is at once about family, love of parents and children, art, and money, there always is the tragic story of a police shooting playing over and over on the news.

Who has been killed? Who is The Kid? Will the author finish his book tour, and what kind of world will he leave behind? Unforgettably powerful, an electrifying high-wire act, ideal for book clubs, and the book Mott says he has been writing in his head for ten years, *Hell of a Book* in its final twists truly becomes its title.

#### Discussion Questions

1. In HELL OF A BOOK, The Author says, "I am, after all, not an activist.... I'm a professional" (82). What do you think this character means by that? What do you think it means to write as an activist?
2. The police shooting of an unarmed Black boy is playing over and over on the news throughout the novel. Discuss how this aspect of the story makes you think about the way racism, injustice and violence function in our society.
3. The Author says, "In this world that we live in, the fact of the matter is that it's hard to think of anyone as being real" (98). Do you agree? How do social media and screens mediate our experiences of others? How do they affect our ability to empathize or make connections? Think about this in regards to when you've seen videos of anti-Black violence or violence against diverse communities go viral.

- 4.** According to The Author, his “pops was afraid. Always afraid. Every second of every day. His life was one long, sustained terror” (126). Why does The Author describe this fear as dangerous? What are the consequences of having to live in constant fear because of your skin color?
- 5.** The Author struggles with whether or not to tell The Kid what it means to be Black in America, that he will be treated differently because of his skin. Discuss the questions he grapples with: “What kind of thing is that to tell a kid? What kind of moment does it create? What does it take away? What does it leave them with?” (206).
- 6.** The Author was a kid who “belonged nowhere. And, because of it, most of his life, he felt like nothing” (250). What is the relationship between feeling a sense of belonging and self-esteem? How can community bolster one’s identity? What communities are part of your identity?
- 7.** Soot imagines another world where he could love himself and the color of his skin, which he calls home. Discuss this conception of home and how imagination can make reality less painful. What role does imagination play in your own life?
- 8.** In the world of this novel, reality and fiction have porous borders. How do they relate to each other? Have you ever felt like the lines were blurred between what is real and what is not?
- 9.** Discuss why Soot’s parents wanted him to be able to become invisible. What do you think they see as the relationship between being unseen and safe? What does that coping mechanism say about society in a broader sense?
- 10.** How do the perspectives of The Author, Soot and the other characters work together, and how do they differ? How are their perspectives influenced by the way they are treated by American society?
- 11.** What do you think about The Author’s struggle with facing reality? Discuss some of The Author’s ways of coping with problems and fears that sometimes feel insurmountable. Do you think that writing or reading can be a way of coping? What are some tactics you employ to cope with challenges in your own life?
- 12.** When you first started reading, did you notice that Jason Mott didn’t name The Author? Why do you think he did that? Do you agree or disagree that naming something makes it more real?
- 13.** Discuss the relationship The Author has with his agent and media trainer in the novel. Do you think they are offering good advice? How do you think being Black changes the way The Author experiences publishing a book?
- 14.** Jason Mott has described aspects of the novel as comedic, noting the inclusion of humorous anecdotes about being an author on tour and some language from his favorite old movies. In what ways is the book humorous? How do the more humorous moments juxtapose the more serious or tragic ones?

**15.** Early on in the book, we're told that HELL OF A BOOK is a love story. Do you agree? Was it the kind of love story you expected?

**16.** Since meeting The Author in the hotel at the beginning of the book, has your opinion of him changed? Why or why not?

Summary from GoodReads.com  
Discussion Questions from ReadingGroupGuides.com