

The Black Flamingo

By Dean Atta

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Michael has different names at different points in his life—some he is given, some he chooses for himself. How do the different names relate to Michael and his relationships? What different names or nicknames do you have for different parts of your life?
2. Identity impacts Michael in so many ways—his mixed heritage, his sexual identity, his family roles (son, brother, grandson, etc.). Which identities impact your life the most and how so? Despite his mother insisting that he isn't "half anything" (pg. 35), Michael often feels he doesn't neatly fit into his identities. When does he feel this way? When have you?
3. When Daisy asks Michael to protect her from the lesbians (pg. 176) at the club, Michael angrily calls out her homophobia; yet he is far less decisive about calling out her racism. What do you make of this difference in response? Later when Daisy apologizes and comes out to Michael (pg. 247), she admits to internalised homophobia. How else does internalised oppression impact Michael's relationships and identity?
4. Look at ways that Michael uses flamingos in his story and his poems, including his stage name. What makes this an effective metaphor in his story? What other metaphors and similes does Michael use to write about his experiences?
5. In "Men Are Sandcastles" on pg. 240, Michael compares men to pebbles and the patriarchy to the bucket that gives them rigid but unstable form. Have you heard of the patriarchy? Describe it. How does it shape Michael and the other men in the book? Why do you think this poem appears between Michael losing his virginity (pg. 225-227) and buying his first pair of heels (pg. 243)?
6. When Michael cuts his locs (pg. 268), he says "I'm shedding / something other / people use to define / me, falling to my feet." How do people in the book use Michael's locs to define him? What parts of you (how you present, activities you do, places you're from) do people use to define you positively or negatively?
7. In the poem "How to Do Drag" (pg. 330-331), Michael writes in one stanza "Don't punch / or kick downward at groups in society / with less power or privilege than you" (pg. 331). What does he mean by this? Where have you seen Michael or other characters "punch down" in the book? Why is it important not to "punch down," specifically for a drag performance?
8. Performance is a major theme in Michael's story. What different kinds of performance are happening and how do they impact Michael's life? In his two poems "How to Do Drag" (pg. 330) and "What It's Like to Be a Black Drag Artist" (pg. 334), Michael writes about how performance can be more authentic than reality. Do you agree? What kind of performance is a part of your life?