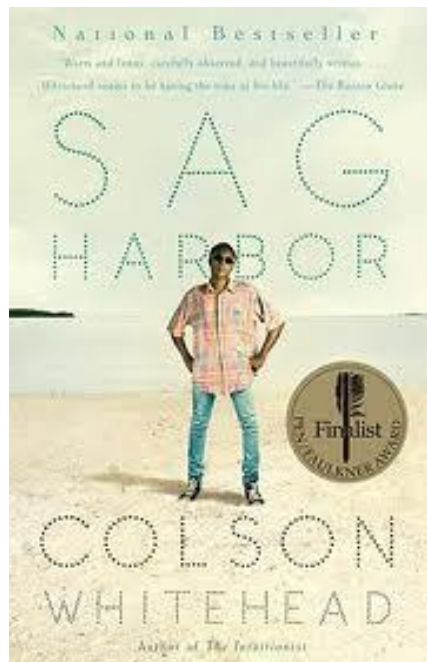


Long Island Reads 2011 Reader's Guide



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About Long Island Reads

One Island, One Book

One Book projects are community-wide reading programs. The first **One Book** project was initiated by the Washington Center for the Book in 1998. Since then, the concept has spread across the United States and around the world. Seattle librarian, Nancy Pearl, author of *Book Lust* and *More Book Lust*, and NPR book critic, is the mastermind behind the **One City, One Book** phenomenon. If your city is interested in starting its own program, you can obtain “How To” information by going to Seattle Reads (www.spl.org).

To see a listing of **One City, One Book** projects visit the Library of Congress website at www.loc.gov/loc/cfbook/one-book.html. Projects are listed by state, city and author. While at the Library of Congress site, check out their Center for the Book.

Other sites of interest include:

All America Reads www.allamericareads.org

The Big Read-National Endowment for the Arts www.artsmidwest.org

The **Long Island Reads** Committee is a group of librarians and library employees from Nassau and Suffolk counties on Long Island, New York who volunteer to work on this Island-wide reading initiative. Each spring, people in Nassau and Suffolk read the same book, participate in discussions of the selection, and enjoy related events in public libraries.

Many events take place during
National Library Week, April 10-16, 2011.

**For more information about Long Island Reads
One Island, One Book visit:**

www.longislandreads.org

About Colson Whitehead



Biographical and Professional Information

Colson Whitehead was born in 1969, and was raised in Manhattan. After graduating from Harvard College, he started working at the Village Voice, where he wrote reviews of television, books, and music.

His first novel, **The Intuitionist** (2000), concerned intrigue in the Department of Elevator Inspectors, and was a finalist for the PEN/Hemingway and a winner of the Quality Paperback Book Club's New Voices Award.

John Henry Days (2001) is an investigation of the steel-driving man of American folklore. It was a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award, the Los Angeles Times Fiction Award, and the Pulitzer Prize. The novel received the Young Lions Fiction Award and the Anisfield-Wolf Book Award.

The **Colossus of New York** (2003) is a book of essays about the city, and was a New York Times Notable Book of the Year.

Apex Hides the Hurt (2006) is a novel about a "nomenclature consultant" who gets an assignment to name a town, and was a recipient of the PEN/Oakland Award.

Sag Harbor (2009) is a novel about teenagers hanging out in Sag Harbor, Long Island during the summer of 1985. It was a finalist for the PEN/Faulkner award.

Colson Whitehead's reviews, essays, and fiction have appeared in a number of publications, such as the New York Times, The New Yorker, New York Magazine, Harper's and Granta.

He has received a MacArthur Fellowship, a Whiting Writers Award, and a fellowship at the Cullman Center for Scholars and Writers.

PLOT SYNOPSIS

SAG HARBOR is "...a tender, hilarious, and supremely original novel about coming-of-age in the 80s.

Benji Cooper is one of the few black students at an elite prep school in Manhattan. But every summer, Benji escapes to the Hamptons, to Sag Harbor, where a small community of African American professionals have built a world of their own.

The summer of '85 won't be without its usual trials and tribulations, of course. There will be complicated new handshakes to fumble through and state-of-the-art profanity to master. Benji will be tested by contests big and small, by his misshapen haircut (which seems to have a will of its own), by the New Coke Tragedy, and by his secret Lite FM addiction. But maybe, just maybe, this summer might be one for the ages..."

Synopsis provided by Vintage/Anchor Books.

INTERVIEWS & REVIEWS

Here is an author interview on Powells.com, June 14, 2001. The title of this interview is very misleading “Post Office to Unveil Colson Whitehead Stamp.” The stamp is of John Henry, the subject of Whitehead’s second book, **JOHN HENRY DAYS**.

<http://www.powells.com/authors/whitehead.html>

New York Magazine article, **Off the Shelf: Colson Whitehead**, where the author tells the story behind five books plucked at random from his personal collection.

<http://nymag.com/arts/books/features/16457/>

This is a conversation between Charlie Rose and Whitehead about his book JOHN HENRY DAYS, which juxtaposes the famous folk tale with a contemporary story of a young African-American journalist.

<http://www.charlierose.com/view/interview/3022>

This is an interview from authormagazine.org on July 15, 2010:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t0qiBGeLvZk>

Here you can listen to an NPR show, *On Point with Tom Ashbrook* (about 45 minutes in total), click on a link to a You Tube video of Whitehead walking around Sag Harbor talking about the book and its backstory. <http://www.onpointradio.org/2009/05/colson-whiteheads-sag-harbor>

Whitehead created an annotated map of the Main Street area of Sag Harbor for *The Wall Street Journal* article, “Mapping Out a Novel.”

<http://online.wsj.com/article/SB123085382009947537.html>

This is a link to 15 *New York Times* articles and interviews about Whitehead:

http://topics.nytimes.com/topics/reference/timestopics/people/w/colson_whitehead/index.html

Colson Whitehead unveils his new novel on Twitter (Feb. 2, 2011):

http://www.mediabistro.com/galleycat/colson-whitehead-unveils-new-novel-on-twitter_b22407

Suggestions for Reading Critically

Adapted from the Library of Congress Center for the Book Guidelines

The best stories are those that connect to human experience. They reveal an important truth, or provide a profound sense of kinship between reader and writer. Searching for, identifying, and discussing these truths deepens the reader's appreciation of the story. Asking questions, reading carefully, imagining yourself in the story, analyzing style and structure, and searching for personal meaning in a work of literature all enhance the work's value and the discussion potential for your group. Here are some helpful suggestions on how you can become a more critical reader.

- **Make notes and mark pages as you go.** Reading for a book discussion – whether you are the leader or simply a participant – differs somewhat from reading purely for pleasure. As you read a book in preparation for a discussion, ask questions of yourself and mark down pages you might want to refer back to. Make notes like, "Is this significant?" or "Why does the author include this?" Making notes as you go slows down your reading but saves you the time of searching out important passages later.
- **Ask tough questions of yourself and the book.** Obviously, asking questions of yourself as you read means you don't know the answer yet, and sometimes you never will discover the answers. Don't be afraid to ask hard questions because often the author is presenting difficult issues for that very purpose. Look for questions that may lead to in-depth conversations with your group and make the readings more meaningful.
- **Pay attention to the authors' messages.** As with any skill, critical reading improves with practice. Remember that a good author uses every word in a text deliberately. Try to be aware of what the authors are revealing about themselves and what they want you to learn about life from their perspectives.
- **Analyze themes.** Try to analyze the important themes of a story and to consider the premises the author started with. Imagine an author mulling over the beginnings of the story, asking, "what if" questions.
- **Get to know the characters.** When you meet the characters in the book, place yourself at the scene. Think of them as you do the people around you. Judge them. Think about their faults and their motives. What would it be like to interact with them? Are the tone and style of their dialogue authentic? Read portions aloud to get to know the voices of the characters.
- **Notice the structure of the stories as well as the organization of the entire book.** Sometimes the structure of the book illustrates an important concept or helps to create a mood. Notice how the editor structured the book. How do the stories relate to each other? How are the individual stories and selections structured?
- **Who are the narrators?** How does the sequence of events unfold to create the mood of the story? Is it written in flashbacks? Does the sequence of actions make sense to you?
- **Make comparisons to other stories and works.** Compare the book and the stories to others that have a similar theme or style. Often, themes run through an author's works that are more fully realized by comparison. Comparing one author's work to that of another can help you solidify your opinions, as well as illuminate qualities you may otherwise miss.
- **Think about what the author doesn't say as well as what they do say.** During a book discussion, what you're really talking about is everything that the author hasn't said – all those white spaces on the printed page. (Incidentally, this "everything that the author hasn't said" idea is why poetry makes such a rich topic for discussion.)

Suggested Book Discussion Questions (A, B, and C sections)

A. DISCUSSION QUESTIONS from Lee Fertitta, Librarian and Book Discussion Leader,
Port Washington Public Library:

1. How does this coming of age story differ from others you've read?
2. *Sag Harbor* reflects the author's teen summers, including working at the ice cream parlor. What was your first job like? Can you relate to his experiences at the ice cream parlor?
3. Benji's sister Elena warns him to leave home at the first opportunity and implies that he knows why. Does he? What do you think is wrong in the family dynamic?
4. Race plays a big part in the story. What is your experience of discrimination on Long Island? Other places?
5. Supervision of the teens in the book is minimal during the week. What is your reaction to the meals and actions of the boys as described? How do you react as a parent? As a teen?
6. During the gun battle, Benji is hit near his eye by a BB. His decision not to tell his parents or visit a doctor is telling. What compels him to keep it quiet?
7. Benji sets himself a goal for the summer. What is it? Does he accomplish it?
8. As Benji relates the summer, the reader gets a sense of things changing. Agree or disagree?
9. The brothers have so close a bond that they are known as one unit, Benji-n-Reggie. When and why does that change?
10. Would you recommend this book to a teen?

B. DISCUSSION QUESTIONS from Random House:

<http://www.randomhouse.com/catalog/display.pperl?isbn=9780385527651&view=rg>

Reader's Guide

1. How does each of Benji's comrades (Reggie, NP, Randy, Bobby, Marcus, Clive) contribute to the group? What challenges do they face as friends?

2. Explain the differences between Benji's age group and that of his sister. During these years, why is the disparity between high school and college so acute?

3. Benji comments that "the rock" on the beach near his beach house serves as a racial barrier. White people won't walk much further past it. What similar examples can you think of that exist today or in your own community? How have racial barriers changed in the last 20 years? How are they still the same?

4. The emergence of hip-hop is a strong influence in the lives of Benji and his friends. In what ways does music affect their generation? In what ways has music affected your own life?

5. Benji grapples with his identity throughout the novel. At one point he states:

"According to the world we were the definition of a paradox: black boys with beach houses. A paradox to the outside, but it never occurred to us that there was anything strange about it." (Pg. 57)

How is this community a paradox? How is Benji's identity shaped by the two worlds he inhabits, both during the school year, and then during the summer season?

6. Benji often refers to the handshake, song, and/or dance he will surely conquer by the "end" of the summer. To what degree is he constantly trying to reinvent himself?

7. What do you think are the characteristics of a typical 1980's adolescent? How does Benji fit the stereotype? How is he different?

8. Benji clearly realizes toward the end of the summer that what he loves, is perhaps not the girls he pines after, but his beach home and "what he put into it." He reflects back on a tender moment with his family and the fond memories of being a child. What is it about our childhoods that evoke such special memories within us? Is there a place from your own past that touched your life as Sag Harbor touched Benji?

9. Throughout the novel there looms a hint of darkness behind the relationship between Benji's father and his family. His father seems to have a violent strain. How does this affect Benji and his family? What is the role of the father in a young man's coming of age?

10. From *Catcher in the Rye* to *Stand By Me*, the coming-of-age novel is a perennial in American literature. What do you think is so appealing and universal about this genre?

C. DISCUSSION QUESTIONS and suggested answers from *Novelist*.

While answers are provided, there is no presumption that you have been given the last word. Readers bring their own personalities to the books that they are examining. What is obvious and compelling to one reader may be invisible to the next. The questions that have been selected provide one reasonable access to the text; the answers are intended to give you examples of what a reflective reader might think. The variety of possible answers is one of the reasons we find book discussions such a rewarding activity.

1. What is Ben's family life like?

Ben and Reggie spend the summer exclusively in Sag Harbor, while their parents remain in the city during the week and come out on weekends. Because of this pattern, the reader spends little time directly with the elder Coopers. What we do see of their marriage suggests that beneath a wholesome surface, something very unhealthy festers. The first real hint comes when Reggie finds something their mother has written:

It was our mother's handwriting, on one of our father's old pads, the one we used for scratch when he got his new stationary. It was bullet-pointed in her work fashion:

- yells at me in front of my friends
- mean/verbally abusive
- drinks every day
- blows up and then forgets it the next morning (pp. 167-168)

This glimpse into Mrs. Cooper's inner life does not present a happy picture, and includes many of the markers of an unhealthy relationship: substance use, verbal abuse, and public humiliation. It may seem odd to some readers that it has taken Ben this long to realize that things are not all well between his parents, but some of the signs have been there for awhile, and the Cooper children may have been aware of them without having explicitly acknowledged them. Like their parents, Ben and Reggie's older sister Elena is barely present in the novel. However, later in the novel one of Ben's conversations with her indicates that their parents' problems are not a secret:

She stamped out her cigarette and said, "You know how it can be in that house."

"What do you mean?"

"You know what I'm talking about."

She looked through the window of the restaurant after Derek. "Just do me a favor, Benji, and get out while you can," she said. "Work hard and get into a good school. That way you're out of that house and that's it."

"I don't understand."

"Yes, you do." (p. 285)

The family problems are less skeletons in the closet, and more elephants in the room. Ben may never have voiced these issues before, but this conversation with Elena suggests that all of the children are, on some level, aware of them.

We are never given a reason for this marital tension. The whole story is seen through the limited perspective of a 15-year-old boy over the course of one summer. Ben himself seems never fully to understand this strife or the effect it has on his mother in particular:

This was how my mother disappeared, word by word. She got older by the second, the magical Sag Harbor effect fading. Something happened to my mother in her life that she never defended herself or protected herself. That she never defended or protected us, when it was our turn. I don't know what it was. I suppose it was the same thing that prevented me

from defending or protecting her, once I was old enough. I kept my mouth shut and watched TV. (p. 228)

As in many families, the Coopers' issues have deep, tangled roots which are difficult to trace or dislodge.

2. How do the 1980s appear from Ben's perspective?

Ben lives in a world that is still feeling the effects of social change. The ways in which African-Americans define and view themselves have transformed over the last several decades, leading to a range of political and social views among Ben's community in the Hamptons. He describes this while recalling his father's objections to anything from "the Street"—anything that might remind him of his own upbringing in a rougher, poorer neighborhood.

That stereotype stuff was hard, no joke, no matter where you came from. Look, we had all kinds in Azurest. We had die-hard bourgeois, we had first-generation college strivers, fake WASPs, the odd mellowing Militant, but no matter where you fell on the spectrum of righteousness, down with the cause or up with The Man, there were certain things you did not do. Too many people watching. (p. 107)

There are social pressures which require that Sag Harbor's residents conform to certain standards of behavior. These, in turn, have been shaped by the social changes experienced by black Americans over preceding decades. These social movements have also created the diverse political and cultural mix in the community. While predominantly African-American, Sag Harbor's summer residents hold a variety of different beliefs and attitudes. Race is not the sole determinant of political or social orientation.

Ben's world is not static. He notices many of the ways in which the world around him continues to remake itself, and the effects these changes have on his own life. In comparing two sets of song lyrics, written about a decade apart, Ben notes the intensification of violent imagery—fist fights have been replaced by murder. Something had changed, and in a relatively short time:

All of us, the singers and the audience, were of the same generation. Something happened. Something happened that changed the terms and we went from fighting (I'll knock that grin off your face) to annihilation (I will wipe you from this Earth). How we got from here to there are the key passages in the history of young black men that no one cares to write. We live it instead. (p.176)

Ben is from a firmly upper-class family. Both his parents are professionals, they have a beach home, and he attends an elite prep school. He is likely to attend a prestigious university. However, many social problems, including the growing culture of violence among young black men, still intrude into his idyllic world.

3. How does Ben come across as a character?

The novel takes place in the fifteenth year of its narrator's life. Ben is trying to define himself, surrounded by concurrent change in the broader world. In an informal version of an ancient coming-of-age ritual, he does so by shedding his childhood nickname and adopting a more adult moniker:

. . . No more of this Benji shit. It was a little kid's name, and I was not a little kid anymore. Ben. Ben. Case in point: stuck there next to my brother in that "Benji'n'Reggie" construction—it was demeaning. Benji was the name of a handholder, not a fingerfucker or an avid squeezer of breasts, or whatever tyro sexual-type act I would engage in once I found a willing subject. Once step at a time, and a step away from Benji was a good one. (p. 41)

Ben is attempting to define himself as a distinct, fully-realized human being. This involves not only asserting a more adult name, but also unloading some of the baggage of his family and younger brother. "Ben" asserts its bearer's independence. A physical adult may shed his juvenile name, and one of Ben's goals is to embrace his sexuality in a more active way.

The novel is full of references to the passage of time. Ben watches his sister and her friends age out of the group that spends their entire summer in Sag Harbor. Those who remain in his age bracket take on more adult activities, including smoking and drinking. Ben himself becomes more aware of these changes and of his own growing maturity. As he remarks in the final pages of the novel:

It didn't seem like that much time had passed, but I had to be a bit smarter. Just a little. Look at the way I was last Labor Day. An idiot! Fifteen looks at fourteen and says, That guy was an idiot. And fifteen looks at eight and says, That guy knew so little. Why can't fifteen and three-quarters look back at fifteen and a half and say, That guy didn't know anything. Because it was true. (p. 328)

Ben is not yet fully an adult, but he is recognizing that age brings maturity and a changed view of things.

4. What role does music play in Sag Harbor?

Music serves many roles in the story. It often serves as the marker of cultural identity and loyalty, with repercussions if one strays outside the group's view of acceptable music. At one point Ben comes under fire from a friend for listening to "that white music, you fuckin' Siouxsie and the Banshees-listenin' motherfucker" (p. 78). While this accusation is not false, Ben has his reasons for listening to "white" music, and they reveal a great deal about him and about his surroundings:

Let the record show that my black T-shirt was in fact a Bauhaus T-shirt, purchased that previous fall down in the Village on the very first of my weekly trips to scavenge for new albums, generally vinyl dispatches from the world of the pale and winnowed, but it was true that I had worn my Siouxsie and the Banshees T-shirt the week before. I didn't buy rap—I heard it all the time. Reggie and Elena had all the good stuff, so there was no reason to spend my allowance on it. Rap was a natural resource, might as well pay for sunlight or the very breeze or an early-morning car alarm going off. No, I spent my money on music for moping. (p. 78)

Rap suffuses Ben's world through his siblings and his day-to-day environment. His exploration of "white music" does not represent a betrayal. Rather, Ben is seeking to expand the emotional palette through which he understands the world by including music he finds more suitable for exploring his "elaborate miserableness" (p. 78).

The novel also explores the effect music has on the listener, particularly in a concert performance. Ben and one of his friends sneak into a club and Ben notes the amazing, transformative properties of the club environment and the music there:

I didn't know anyone. And it was okay. Something good was about to happen. I just had to wait. Weird trendoids surrounded me, fearsome geezers, drugged-out wackos, but now we were comrades. We were all there for the same thing. The DJ hovered above us, throwing down his thunderbolts. He mixed in a segment of Debbie Henry singing "Rapture" and they screamed. Actually, I decided, I'm not dancing that badly at all. I thought, This is Good. No qualifier, chaotic or otherwise. Simply: Good. (pp. 262-263)

A group of complete strangers transforms into a unified crowd of comrades, communicating through music and dance. A DJ becomes a demi-god, transforming their world from his position in the heavens. And an awkward teenage boy learns how to cut loose and have fun. This is a powerful, intense experience, brought about by music.

5. What is the role of sexuality?

Any work about teenagers must, at some point, deal with sex and sexuality. In Sag Harbor, defining his sexuality is part of Ben's character development over the course of the summer. In the final pages of the novel, Ben resolves to reinvent himself as a modest ladies' man:

Start things off right. Girls would take this as a sign that I was different. That was another thing; make out with three girls a semester. September, October, November, December. Four months. That came out to one every five or six weeks. At least! Spring semester was longer, so that was like one every seven weeks. Six girls. Quite the regimen. Was that too ambitious? I could do it. (p. 328)

One could interpret this as Ben's adoption of macho culture, using women and their conquest as a sign of his masculinity. A more generous interpretation would be that Ben has thrown off the shackles of childhood (symbolized, perhaps, by his braces) and is now going forth into the world as an emerging adult. Though inexperienced, he is ready to attempt a more "grown up" way of doing things. Ben also mentions his first job as another part of his transformation (p. 328). Working for a living is a traditional marker of adulthood.

Ben has had the opportunity to observe the ways in which sex and sexual desire shape human interaction firsthand. His sister Elena is a few years older, and arrived at that stage of life sooner. Ben finds that having an attractive older sister changes the ways in which older boys treat him:

There were twenty or so kids in my sister's group, and over the summers they all dated one another, nursed crushes across the years, traded first loves and first kisses and assorted first fondlings between them. One summer Elena dated Bill, two summers later she was driving around in Nat's convertible, and so on. Reggie and me benefitted from this situation. The big kids had to be nice to us, lest word of their bullying misdeeds get back to our sister and ruin long- or short- term plans. The older boys ferried us in their backseats to the ocean, to the movies, they bought us comics at the Ideal in town, forked over cash for ice cream at the Tuck Shop. Not bad at all. (p. 61)

Lust and romance shield Ben and Reggie from the wrath of older bullies, who vie for their sister's affections and see her younger brothers as a way in to her good graces. Interestingly, Ben notes this without wondering if his own growing sexuality will eventually lead him to similar behavior. In the novel, the different age groups of children go through the same phases of life in Sag Harbor, so Ben may eventually find himself indulging a younger boy as a way of impressing an older sister.

6. What does Sag Harbor mean to those who spend the summer there?

Ben's narration gives the impression that the rest of the year is a waiting game, and when June arrives the rush to Sag Harbor consumes all else. The traditional greeting to fellow residents at the beginning of the summer is, "When did you get out?" The city is something from which one escapes to the fresh sea air and sunshine of the Hamptons. The follow-up question indicates that time spent at the beach is regarded as precious, perhaps vital:

Then there was the next out: How long are you out for?—and the competition had begun. The magic answer was Through Labor Day or The Whole Summer. Anything less was to signal misfortune. Out for a weekend at the start of the season, to open up the house, sweep cracks, that was okay. But only coming out for a month? A week? What was wrong, were you having financial difficulties? Everyone had financial difficulties, sure, but to let it interfere with Sag, your shit was seriously amiss. Out for a week, a month, and you were allowing yourself to be cheated by life. Ask, How long are you out for? and a cloud wiped the sun. The question trailed a whiff of autumn. All answers contemplated the end, the death of summer, at its very beginning. (p. 4)

Time in Sag Harbor is a crucial component of every year, balancing out the time spent in the mundane urban world of the City. Sag Harbor summers are seen as life-affirming, a celebration of vitality before the "death of summer" and the descent back into the humdrum world.

These summers have a profound effect on Ben. During his first intimate encounter with a young woman, in a deserted beach house belonging to his family, Ben realizes what is truly important to him:

This was my old house where all the good things still lived even though we had moved on. Everything as it was. Even the boy, the one who always seemed happy. He had to be here. This was where he lived. Haunting the place in his polyester pants and fucked-up Afro. Was that the same bottle of hydrogen peroxide sitting in the medicine cabinet? The grisly white foam. He was always running around and not looking where he was going. It all bubbled up. I saw it clearly. I thought it had been the kiss that the song revived, but it was this place. (p. 297)

The house, and by extension Sag Harbor, become a way back into a happier time. Ben recalls summers there through his early childhood with his siblings and parents, and arrives at the conclusion, "We were a family" (p. 303). An escape from his parents' rocky marriage and the difficulties of growing up, Sag Harbor is also a link to Ben's childhood.

7. How is the novel shaped by race and issues of race?

In exploring the life of a young, African-American man, Sag Harbor directly addresses many questions of race and identity. Ben's existence, and his presence in Sag Harbor, create some cultural tension. As he explains:

We were made to think of ourselves as odd birds, right? According to the world, we were the definition of a paradox: black boys with beach houses. A paradox to the outside, but it never occurred to us that there was anything strange about it. It was simply who we were. What kind of bourgie sell-out Negroes were we, with BMWs in the driveway (Black Man's Wagon, in case you didn't know) and private schools to teach us how to use a knife and fork, sort that from dat. What about keeping it real? What about the news, statistics, the great narrative of black pathology? (p. 71)

Fifteen year old Ben sees these apparent contradictions as his normal life. He admits, however, that this tension "could mess with your head sometimes, if you were the susceptible sort" (p. 72). The remedies involved embracing one of the more aggressive tropes of African-American cultural identity, becoming either a criminal or a political militant. Seemingly caught in the center, some people retreat to the extremes. The adult Ben, narrating the events of his youth, has an alternative: "Or you could embrace the contradiction, say, what you call paradox, I call myself. In theory. Those inclined to this remedy didn't have many obvious models" (p. 72). Norms of behavior, stereotyped in mainstream media and popular culture, are a difficult thing to deny.

There appears to be a generational divide at work as well. While some of the boys Ben's age adopt these exaggerated, aggressive approaches to life, such would be anathema to many of their parents. Ben's father is a case in point:

The Street in my father's mind was a vast, abstract plane of black pathology. He'd grown up poor, fighting his way home every day off Lenox Avenue, and any hint that he hadn't escaped, that all his suffering had been for naught, kindled his temper and his deep fear that aspiration was an illusion and the Street a labyrinth without exit, a mess of connecting alleys and avenues always leading back into itself. (p. 107)

The novel uses the term "black pathology" several times to good effect. Destructive patterns of behavior can emerge as a result of the tensions of African-American cultural identity, the divide between self-betterment and socially desirable behavior. Ben's father refuses to believe that "the Street" should dictate the ways in which young black men behave, and that nothing better can ever be obtained than that rough, violent existence.

If you liked **SAG HARBOR...**

Novelist suggested these titles:

Touré, **SOUL CITY** (2005)

An eccentric tale of urban life, Soul City blends African-American folklore and popular culture into a modern fable for adults. Cadillac Jackson, a writer, comes to Soul City in an attempt to capture on the page the spirit of the town with "more mojo than any city in the world." He finds a community and a culture composed of a unique mixture of history and myth, founded by escaped slaves and restrained only by the limits of imagination.

Richard Russo, **THAT OLD CAPE MAGIC** (2010)

On the tail end of middle age, Griffin returns to Cape Cod to celebrate the marriage of a family friend. Having spent his childhood on the Cape and later honeymooned there with his wife, Joy, Griffin finds himself drowning in the past as issues relating to his parent's marriage, his own beleaguered one, and his family's future all come to light. That Old Cape Magic offers a different vantage point on many of the questions presented in Sag Harbor.

Toni Morrison, **SULA** (1973)

Sula follows the lives of two black women, childhood friends, as they grow up in rural Ohio and then choose very different paths as adults. Morrison's use of language is extraordinary as she uses this bond to explore broader social issues of race and gender.

James Baldwin, **GO TELL IT ON THE MOUNTAIN** (1953)

Baldwin's classic novel portrays Harlem as Ben's father might have experienced it, offering a view of the contrast between the cultures that surround the two generations of Coopers.

Nina de Gramont, **GOSSIP OF THE STARLINGS** (2008)

Presenting a bleaker view of students at an elite prep school and their coming of age, this novel might appeal to readers who were intrigued by the prep school life Ben Cooper experiences when he's not at Sag Harbor.

Stephen L. Carter, **THE EMPEROR OF OCEAN PARK** (2002)

Written as a thriller, this character-centered novel depicts the African-American upper crust much as Ben Cooper experiences his social circle, though Carter's novel is darker in both tone and storyline.

Omar Tyree, **FLYY GIRL** (1993)

Like **SAG HARBOR**, **FLYY GIRL** is a coming of age story. The novel follows Tracy Ellison through her youth in a Philadelphia suburb, from her sixth birthday until the age of seventeen. Unfolding over the course of the 1980s, Tyree's story explores many of the same social and cultural themes as Sag Harbor.

These title suggestions and the second set of questions were developed by Michael Jenkins, a writer and graduate student in Wilmington, NC.

The Long Island Reads 2011 Committee

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Reader's Guide compiled by: *Lori Abbatepaolo & Loretta Piscatella*, Middle Country Public Library, and
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Special thanks to Carolyn Fostel and Astoria Federal Savings



**Contact your public library for more information about
Long Island Reads events during
National Library Week, April 10-16, 2011.**

Long Island Reads 2011 Evaluation

1. Have you read, or do you plan to read, *Sag Harbor*? Yes ___ No ___.
2. Have you visited the Long Island Reads website at www.longislandreads.org?
Yes ___ No ___

3. What Library do you belong to? _____

4. Please let us know what you thought about today's program. _____

5. Have you participated in any Long Island Reads events in the past? Yes _____
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6. Are you in a Book Club? Yes ___ No ___
If you are in a Book Club, please tell us a little about your club: (For example:
How often and where do you meet? How do you select the books? How many
members? What type of books do you read?)

7. If you would like to suggest an author or title for Long Island Reads 2012,
please do so below. Please tell us why you think this would be a good choice.

Your name (optional) _____

Are you a library employee? Yes ___ No ___

Do you reside in Nassau__ or Suffolk__

Please return this form to a member of the LI Reads committee here today or to:

Deborah Clark Cunningham
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Harborfields Public Library
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Greenlawn, NY 11741

Thank you for participating in Long Island Reads!