

## Week 2 Discussion

*edited minimally, for style and flow*

### On Birds, Freedom, and Death

**Oakley:** Something I connected to in these first few chapters is Horace's connection to birds. Horace mentions that he wants to live, "not as a tortured human, but as a bird free to swoop and dive, to dip and swerve over the cornfields and tobacco patches he slaved in for what already seemed decades to his sixteen years. No longer would he be bound by human laws and human rules that he had constantly tripped over and frowned at" (12). Being a bird would give him the opportunity to separate himself from the frivolous laws, rules, and expectations of a human being. He is expected to act a certain way and is told by a preacher that liking men is wrong and he shouldn't give into those feelings. By becoming a bird, I believe, he thinks he will have the ability to get away from a life no one in his town approves of. He can fly away and go wherever he wants.

[**Professor Ingram:** Birds are also creatures believed to be able to pass through different realms, that they can travel between earth and heaven and hell.]

**May:** A scene that stood out to me was when Horace was leaving the back yard after trying to perform magic to be turned into a bird. I immediately understood that the voice Horace heard was the devil and how things would not end well for him if he continued to follow that voice.

**Oakley:** There was a moment when the devil spoke to Horace and says, "you are worthless" (81). I think this could be his subconscious telling him things that he thinks about himself. In his community there are very few people he can talk to about what he is feeling because his sexuality is so looked down upon. This devil voice that he hears is the only voice that he can listen to and follow.

**Kyrsten:** Expanding on this idea of birds and Shelley's comment above about how birds were/are believed to travel between realms, it has gotten me thinking about the concept of liminality. Birds, I think, both literally and perhaps fantastically exist in this liminal space

## **Week 2 Discussion**

between land and sky. So, perhaps it was the liminality that Horace was drawn to. Birds create a break between the concept that life solely exists on land/sea, as they soar high above our own world. He wants to exist on the border of his old life and the new life he hopes to inhabit.

### **Family and Identity**

**Oakley:** When reading about Jimmy's relationship with his mother, I found myself drawn to this quote, "I did not know this woman. I had thought perhaps I would have been overcome with a recognition, a primeval, instinctual knowledge" (120). He found that his feelings of a mother figure were not directed toward his birth mother but to the woman who raised him. I think this is an important theme that Kenan includes in his novel, which is that family doesn't have to be people in your immediate family. This makes me think of what I've learned about Kenan's life and this connection he had with so many people and notice that family can be anyone you choose to include.

**Cade:** This also somewhat touches on a theme common in queer communities: the idea of the "chosen family." Oftentimes, queer people are not accepted by their biological families, or even their friends upon coming out, and the idea of a chosen family becomes a huge comfort. I like to think the exploration of these themes in his books brought a lot of comfort and familiarity to LGBTQ+ readers.

**Elizabeth:** It makes me so sad that some families push away their loved ones simply because of who they love. I do love that he has a "chosen family." It really does mirror Kenan's own life, but also touches on the experience of so many queer people, which seems to be Kenan's signature in his writing.

**Kyrsten:** This too stood out to me. I really like this idea and theme of found family. Sometimes it is still people who are biologically related to you (like Kenan), but sometimes it can be the people you choose to surround yourself with. Like Jimmy at the beginning of the second section we start to learn about some of the "extended" family he creates through seminary school as well as his partner, Anne. While he finds people to help inspire and drive him, there is a pull to his

## Week 2 Discussion

biological family, siblings and cousins alike. I think with this we begin to see a nice blending of this idea of what it means to be a part of someone's family.

### Difference and Genre

**Kyrsten:** I want to point to the second section where we are introduced to Horace. What stood out to me, aside from the obvious occult aspects that he describes in this section, is his love for and obsession with all things nerdy. Noticing the references to Marvel comics, *Lord of the Rings*, possibly *Dungeons & Dragons*, *Star Wars/Trek*, *Stargate*, is something that shouldn't be overlooked. The fantasy and sci fi community, both in the '80s and still today, has major white gatekeeping. The backlash of introducing black characters in *Star Wars* and the new *LOTR* series has been wild. So, I think it is interesting that a queer black teen is absolutely obsessed with these things. I think it makes perfect sense in terms of how speculative fiction can create that space of safety for marginalized people, but it is also inherently a space that actively tries to push out POC and queer characters from what cis, hetero, white "fans" think it should be. I think this blends right in with all of the ways in which Horace feels like an outcast and would rather be free as a bird than remain within his body and headspace.

**Tanner:** The horrible backlash, especially in recent years, to introducing new characters that are not straight, white, or both has been disgusting. Cheylon mentioned that "Horace is a tribute to those that find their way." He was not able to find the success of his own adventure. It is as if Kenan created a version of himself that lives in a harsh, alternate reality.

### Ghosts and Trauma

**Cheylon:** "But the Ghosts of those times are stubborn" (10). Thinking about the impact trauma can have on people and communities, how it impacts growth, both communally and personally, thinking about the continual impact of the plantation system on the economy and rural communities to this day, the idea that "ghosts of those times are stubborn" is clearly true, especially in Louisiana. We are still economically dependent on the land, even though there are many other industries that we could benefit from. Thinking about how trauma impacts people

## Week 2 Discussion

personally, this seems to be most visualized through Horace, who is trying to escape his physical self through magic.

**Oakley:** I mentioned this quote in the group chat as well. Sometimes the ghosts of our past go away, sometimes they are so submerged that we can no longer remember them, and sometimes they follow us like a shadow. I think that Horace's ghosts follow him around like a shadow and eventually develop into a demon attempting to possess him. He is trying to escape his own life and does so by trying to turn into a bird, to fly away from the problems surrounding him.

**Elizabeth:** Yes! Trauma scars one's body, and their mind will try to find ways to escape in all ways but physical. I believe in the concept of generational trauma because unaddressed trauma truly does get passed down with each new generation. The only way to break the cycle is to address it, which is much easier said than done.

**Kyrsten:** I think this connection of ghosts and demons to trauma is extremely important. My small understanding of ghosts and demons in folklore, as well as within the fantasy genre, usually represents trauma in some way. A ghost might be sticking around as a ghost because of some deep trauma associated with their life and possibly the way they died. And now going off of that, I see this generational trauma manifesting itself with Horace. Not only does he have to face the trauma of his ancestor's past, but he has to face the trauma of being a Black man in America, and then he gets the additional trauma of being a queer Black man. I see his whole being as one connected to all the facets of trauma, and it is no wonder that he wants to escape this almost purgatory of a life to live with the freedom of a bird.

**Cheyron:** I think Horace is a deeper personification than just Kenan. Thinking about the articles from last week, Kenan came to age during a very specific time that made him an outlier in many communities, but he was never the "only one." Remembering the letter from the writer he went to college with, Kenan had the opportunity to find his place in the world in a way that many alt-Black and Black queer people don't. The scene in the church where Horace describes the other mothering he experienced from his grandmother and aunts functioned as a grounding point, a

## Week 2 Discussion

point of everlasting love even when his known community could never love who he *really* was. I think Horace is a tribute to those who couldn't find their real place.

**Cade:** Something I was really struck by in the reading was the distortion of the world upon Horace's episode. After the ritual, as he wanders naked through the town to the church, it feels like the toxicity of his environment finally overwhelms him. Though he seemed to be an imaginative and hopeful boy, upon finding that he cannot free himself through the fantasies which inspired him for so long, he is then confronted with the madness of his world, and those very things which gave him hope come to haunt him. The creatures and the dark voices, they all come from the same place as the beautiful image of becoming a majestic bird, but they are now cursed by the knowledge that the blessings of that world are unattainable, and only the relatable parts of those stories (conflict, monsters, etc.) are available in reality.

**Elizabeth:** It's like his reality was negative distortion. I was struck as well.

**Tanner:** I love the scenscape that Kenan has created with words. Horace was hoping to be free from judgment that has bounded him to a constant state of anxiety. Instead, like you said, he is confronted with the madness of his world. The community that has practically raised him, haunts him.