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Blues Dancing

by Diane McKinney-Whetstone



About the Book

For the last twenty years, slim, dazzling beautiful Verdi Mae has composed a quiet life for herself with her former professor, Rowe. He makes her feel so good, even as stifles her with his care--until, walking home from her cousin Kitt's, Verdi smells butter in the foggy evening air. It is the fragrance of the future beckoning. It is the scent of falling in love. It is also the harbinger of change. Verdi's first love has returned to town: Johnson, the boy from the back streets of Philadelphia who captured Verdi's heart when the two of them were in college. Their relationship was unalloyed sweetness until Johnson taught Verdi to love heroin.

With Johnson's reappearance, questions about the choices Verdi has made and the person she's become rise inexorably to the surface. As the ground beneath her shifts, Verdi must discover the one person who can save her--herself. In vivid, incandescent prose, Diane McKinney-Whetstone offers an unforgettable tour de force about love, betrayal, and faith.

Discussion Guide

1. Johnson and Verdi "watched their blues dancing like they wished that they could." Why do you think McKinney-Whetstone chose this as a title for her book

2. "Even though Rowe fell in love with the restored version of her, he'd never really let go of the impending-doom anxiety that Verdi might leave him" (p. 13). Although Rowe is purportedly the protector, he lives in constant fear. What is he afraid of losing? Why does he feel such animosity toward Kitt?

3. Posie apologies to Johnson for overburdening him with expectation. To what extent is her expectation tied to race and class?

4. Throughout her life, Verdi seeks a balance between security and freedom. How do Rowe, Johnson, Kitt, Posie,

Hortense, Leroy, and Sage navigate between these two extremes? To whom do they look for guidance? What are obstacles in their paths?

5. Kitt lives in doubt of Leroy's love for her mother. Posie never suspects that her niece is a junkie. It takes Verdi over twenty years to suspect that Johnson told Rowe where to find Verdi the night Johnson left. What is it that keeps them from seeing the truth?

6. Blues Dancing is alive with scent, sound, sight, taste, touch--each of the senses abound in Diane McKinney-Whetstone's prose. Choose an example you find particularly evocative and discuss why.

7. How do you think Verdi, Rowe, and Johnson changed over twenty years? How do you imagine each of them will continue to change?

8. Leroy tells Verdi of two roads, "a slick superhighway, sure to get the man to his destination with unparalleled swiftness" and a road on which "the destination is not assured?but what a journey" (p. 290). For Leroy, where was this destination? For Verdi? Do you agree with Verdi that sometimes the "highway" is the better path?

9. Posie plunges into romance after romance, but her daughter is more careful, more restrained. What is it that finally liberates Kitt, enabling her to take a risk, to open herself to loving Bruce, and to see what happens? What was she waiting for?

10. Because Sage cannot speak, she experiences the world in colors. How do these colors infuse the prose? How does Sage's silence function in the novel? What is holding her back? What are the other incarnations of voicelessness in this story?

11. Discuss McKinney-Whetstone's use of food and eating throughout the novel.

12. Near the end of the novel, Verdi tells Johnson, "'No more giving up power that's not even mine to give up, nor yours to take,'" (p. 306). Whose power is it? What is the nature of that power? How do you think Verdi has come to this realization?

Author Bio

Diane McKinney-Whetstone is the author of the national bestseller**Tumbling**. A native of Philadelphia whose father served two terms as a Pennsylvania stare senator, she grew up in a close-knit family with five sisters and one brother, attending public schools and graduating from the University of Pennsylvania in 1975 with a bachelor's degree in English. She is a regular contributor to *Philadelphia Magazine* and her work has appeared in *Essence* and the *Sunday Philadelphia Inquirer Magazine;* She has received numerous awards, including a Pennsylvania Council on the Arts grant, Discipline Winner in the Pew Fellowship on the Arts, the Zora Neale flurston Society Award for creative contribution to litera-ture, a Citation from the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania for her portrayal of urban family life as presented in **Tumbling**, Author of the Year Award from the national Go On Girl Book Club, and more. She has participated regularly in the intensive Rittenhouse Writer's Workshops and reaches fiction writing at her alma mater, the

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