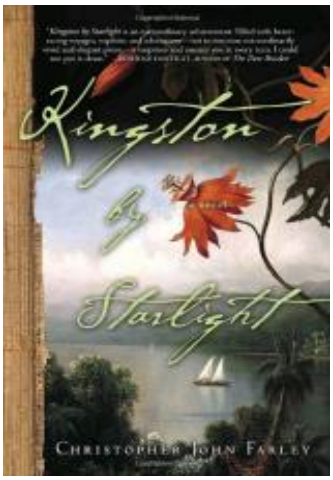
ReadingGroupGuides
The online community for reading groups

Kingston by Starlight: A Novel

by Christopher John Farley



About the Book

Irish-born Anne Bonny is only a teenager when she is left destitute by her mother's death. Abandoned by her father, she seems destined to be forgotten by the world. But Anne chooses to seek her fortune in the lush tropics of the colonial West Indies, where she passes herself off as a young man named Bonn. She finds work as a ship's hand, sailing under the command of Calico Jack Rackam, a notorious and charismatic pirate with a bounty on his head. Calico Jack has his heart set on raiding the Madrid Galleon, the richest ship in the Caribbean, which sails from Kingston laden with Cuban gold and Jamaican rum.

Bonn is entranced by the sea and by the ship's violent crew, which includes a mysterious swordfighter named Read, who, it turns out, has a secret life of his own. Calico Jack soon discovers Bonn's and Read's true identities, but it is only when the three pirates are captured that their darkest secrets begin to surface. In the shadow of the gallows, a strange twist of fate reveals a shocking betrayal that may save Bonn from death, while permanently changing everything she has known about her past and the world around her.

Gorgeously written and full of mystery, intrigue, and startling revelations about gender, race, history, and the human heart, **Kingston by Starlight** is a once-in-a-lifetime read.

Discussion Guide

1. The narrator notes that though real names are rarely if ever used on the **William**, the assumed names by which her crewmates are known are more expressive of their various characters. She herself changes the name she uses for the captain throughout the book; at times he is "the captain," at others Calico, Rackam, or John. What does this say about the character of their relationship at these times? The name "Anne Bonny" is only revealed near the end of the book. Do you think this is the narrator's real name?

2. It is clear that much of society disapproves of Anne's father's marriage, her mother's position, and her own appearance and background. How does Anne herself feel about these things?

3. How does Anne's experience on the slave ship affect her? When her father rejects her, does she fully understand why?

4. Anne's reluctance to enter into prostitution to earn a living is understandable--but she doesn't appear to regard murder as a similar breach of "virtue." Why do you think this is? When faced with a choice essentially between piracy and prostitution, what is it about piracy that appeals to her?

5. What role does spirituality play in the story? Discuss Bishop's biblical "quotes," Zayd's prayerful meditation, the "Praying Mantises" on the slave ship, and Read's growing superstition as examples of the role of faith in the characters. What opinion does the narrator have of religion?

6. From time to time, the storyteller seems to interact in a very real way with her audience--in requesting and then sharing refreshment, for example--but at the end of the book it is less clear that her audience is a living person. To whom is she relating her narrative?

7. Is Read and Bonn's relationship more like the friendship of two women or of two men? Their mutual affection is largely a result of the extraordinary experience they have in common, but how much do they actually share--in terms of character, experience, and gender identity? By the end of the novel, have their personalities become more alike or more unalike?

8. Discuss Anne's relationship with Calico Jack Rackam. What attracts her to him, and vice versa? What do you think of her reaction to the story of his alleged affair with the Governor's daughter? Is her lack of jealousy a sign of faltering affection, or merely a world-wise acceptance? How long do you think their relationship might have endured if they had lived peacefully in their new home instead of setting out again?

9. What is the nature of Anne's passion for men? Does it have at its root a search for a father figure? Or is it merely the romantic feelings of a young woman? What else do you think might be at work in her desire not only to learn about men, but to live as a man among men?

10. Is the revelation that Zed is Anne's true father a surprising one? Others have clearly known or suspected all along--has Anne truly been blind to the fact that she has African blood? How does her experience contrast with the much-repeated story about the pirate De Graff and Zayd's revelation of De Graff's true identity?

11. What does the narrator learn through the course of her story? Is she wise at the end of it, or merely experienced?

Author Bio

Christopher John Farley holds one of American journalism's most sought-after jobs as *Time* magazine's pop-music critic. Farley's post gives him ready access to some of the biggest celebrities in the entertainment industry, and he has used that influence to pen biographies of Halle Berry and Aaliyah. Farley is also a novelist, having made his debut with a satirical novel, *My Favorite War*, in 1996. In 2005 his second novel, *Kingston by Starlight*, was published by Crown.

Born in 1966 in Kingston, Jamaica, Farley's parents moved to the United States and he grew up in Brockport, a small town in upstate New York whose largest neighbor is the city of Rochester. Brockport is also home to a State University of New York campus, where both of his parents spent their careers. His father, Rawle, was a professor of economics, while his mother Ena taught African-American studies. Though he later became one of the most-widely read music critics in America, Farley had few ambitions for a musical career himself. He had some piano lessons and, as he said in an interview on the *JournalismJobs* Web site, "I also played trumpet, baritone, and clarinet in high school, and I was terrible at all of them."

Critical Praise

"**Kingston by Starlight** is an extraordinary achievement. Filled with heart-racing voyages, exploits, and adventures --- not to mention extraordinarily vivid and elegant prose --- it surprises and amazes you at every turn. I could not put it down."

Kingston by Starlight: A Novel

by Christopher John Farley

Publication Date: June 28, 2005

Paperback: 336 pages

Publisher: Three Rivers Press

ISBN-10: 1400082455

ISBN-13: 9781400082452