The Portable Promised Land

by Touré



About the Book

Welcome to Soul City, the fictional American metropolis where magic is as natural as sunshine and where an array of flamboyant, wise, and joyful characters celebrate life's simple pleasures and draw strength from each other in hard times. With this inspired collection-in which irreverent humor and sharp-eyed social satire memorably collide-Touré emerges as one of the most talented and inventive young writers at work today.

Discussion Guide

1. The "Steviewondermobile" is a paean to Stevie Wonder, but could the story be centered around another artist? How would the story be different if it were a Ninasimonmobile? A Louiearmstrongmobile? A Franksinatramobile? A Beatlesmobile? A Jayzmobile?

2. Is the Right Reveren Daddy Love a sympathetic character or an unsympathetic character? Could he be both? What real-life person do you think most resembles him?

3. Is the author fair to both genders in "The Breakup Ceremony" or does one end up looking more foolish than the other?

4. Do all of the characters' names have special meaning? What is your favorite of all the characters' names in **The Portable Promised Land**, and what do you think it says about the character? How would you rename that character if you could? What would your name be if you lived in the world of these stories?

5. *Afrolexicology Today's* Biannual List doesn't define all the words given. How would you define those words? What words would you add to the list?

6. "My History" reimagines the past. Try it yourself: What historical events do you wish had happened differently or

hadn't happened at all? What do you think this story is saying about the events described? Do you think it's useful to reimagine history?

7. Is "We Words" a short story? An essay? A poem? Why does it belong in a collection of more conventionally told stories? Are there any words in the story you don't recognize? Are there any words in the story you think don't belong, or words that should be added? Would "We Words" be very different if it were written five years from now? Five years ago?

8. Do you think The Black Widow's album would be successful on today's charts? Would you buy the album?

9. What would you do if you woke up to discover your five-year-old had somehow transformed into a Little Black Sambo? Why does the author make Sambo's parents Black Panthers? What does their frustration with their son's new form say about Black pride? Do you think their reactions are appropriate?

10. Flying is one of the most important themes in the collection. Why? Where does flying play an important role? What does flying symbolize?

Author Bio

Touré is a novelist *first* and a tennis player *second.* (He keeps telling himself that.) He was born in Boston just before the release of *Shaft,* when Al Green first sang *"I'm so tired of bein alone,"* and Muhammad Ali was knocked out by Joe Frazier. He spent years in a New England prep school, (beloved Milton!), and then did time at an American university that doesn't deserve to be named. There he fell into protest poetry (if you come across it turn your head immediately!) Determined to expand the complexity of the discussion of Black people, he moved to New York City in 1992, just before the release of the classic Dr. Dre and Snoop Dogg album, *The Chronic,* just after the Clarence Thomas hearings and the L.A. Uprising, and began to write.

He was a lazy, chatty, *unpaid* intern at Rolling Stone and was fired one day, then given assignments to write record reviews the next. He is now a Contributing Editor there, the author of cover stories on Lauryn Hill, DMX, N' Sync, and Alicia Keys. He learned to write at *Rolling Stone,* and went on to write for the *New Yorker,* the *New York Times* Magazine, *Playboy,* the*Village Voice, Vibe,* and *Tennis* Magazine. In 1996 he went to Columbia University's graduate creative writing program for a year and, thanks to a class by Stephen Koch, began writing fiction. His first piece was the story of Sugar Lips Shinehot, a 1940s Harlem saxophonist who loses his ability to see white people. In the years following Columbia he appeared in *The Best American Essays of 1999* and *The Best American Sportswriting of 2001.* His first book is a collection of short stories called **The Portable Promised Land** being published by Little, Brown and Company.

He loves Didion, Morrison, Nabokov, Ellison, Rushdie, Joyce, Franzen, Moody, Greg Tate, Garcia Marquez, David Foster Wallace, and Zadie Smith. He also loves Sly Stone, Al Green, Jay-Z, Satchmo, D'Angelo, De La Soul, A Tribe Called Quest, OutKast, Eminem, Erykah Badu, Biggie, the Beatles, Prince, Nina Simone, Joni Mitchell, Macy Gray, Rakim, Raekwon, Radiohead, and, of course, Stevie Wonder. He's voted for a Clinton every chance he's had. He loves *"Almost Famous"* (it's frighteningly real).

Touré is his real name, the name his mother gave him when he was born, the name his parents consciously chose for him. The last name was something that came automatically, like fries with a burger, thus it wasn't something that really meant anything to him. And plus, Touré is a last name in Africa?they laughed at him there, *Silly American. Touré ain't no first name.* It's kinda like a Bostonian named Kennedy. But in the one-namedness there's a reference to the dislocation implicit in the African-American family name and a reach back to the unknown last names of Africa. His next book,**Soul City**, a novel that tells the full story of America's most miraculous metropolis, is nearly done. He lives in Fort Greene, Brooklyn.

Critical Praise

"Touré has given life in Soul City a comic edge, revealing the humor and absurdities behind the seriousness of race. ...Highly recommended."

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Publication Date: April 4, 2003
Paperback: 272 pages
Publisher: Back Bay Books
ISBN-10: 0316738360
ISBN-13: 9780316738361