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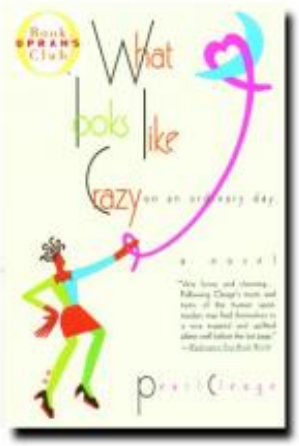
What Looks Like Crazy on an Ordinary Day

by Pearl Cleage



About the Book

After a decade of living it up in Atlanta, getting it on with lots of men, ending up with HIV and a whopping case of remorse, Ava Johnson has decided there's at least one thing left worth doing, and doing well-telling the truth. So does Pearl Cleage in her award-winning first novel which puts a witty, wise spin on contemporary women's issues, hard choices, harder good-byes, and brave new beginnings.

Ava Johnson is returning home to Idlewild, Michigan on her way to someplace better, like San Francisco. Her overt reason for the trip is to spend some bonding time with her sister Joyce. In the bad luck department, Joyce has been given her share of no refund, no return items. But if Ava is thinking gloom and doom on her arrival, she has another think coming...when Joyce sends wild Eddie Jefferson, a handsome Rastafarian brother with a head full of beautiful dreadlocks, to pick her up at the airport. And what is waiting in Idlewild is a small town filled with big-city problems, a life-lesson in becoming a "free woman," and an unexpected miracle called love.

Discussion Guide

1. Both Ava and Joyce are at crisis points in their lives. Compare the two women. How does each cope with her heartaches? What works...and what doesn't.

2. Ava and Joyce aren't the only women facing tough challenges in this novel. Joyce says of the girls in the Sewing Circus, "These girls haven't got a chance. There aren't jobs and there aren't going to be any. They're stuck up here in the middle of the damn woods, watching talk shows, smoking crack, collecting welfare, and having babies. What kind of life is that?" (p. 39) Ava's answer is "City life." Do you agree that the same problems confront urban and rural young women? What do you think are the greatest ones? Whose responsibility is it to help young people overcome them?

3. In the chapter called "August," Joyce makes up a list of "Ten Things Every Free Woman Should Know." First define

"free woman" -- then make up your own list.

4. The church in this novel shows both its sides: the good it can do; the harm it can do. How do you feel about the church's handling of the Reverend's sexual abuse? What do you feel should be the response of a church organization-whether a black church or the Roman Catholic Church-to this problem?

5. At the center of this novel, however, is the tragedy of HIV. Discuss the community's reaction to Ava. Then discuss her own response to a new relationship. How would you interpret her dream in Chapter 18...and the very last line of the book?

Author Bio

Pearl Cleage is the author of MAD AT MILES: A Black Woman's Guide to Truth and Deals with the Devil and Other Reasons to Riot. An accomplished Playwright, she teaches playwriting at Spelman College, is a cofounder of the literary magazine *Catalyst* and writes a column for the *Atlanta Tribune.* Her first novel, WHAT LOOKS LIKE CRAZY ON AN ORDINARY DAY, was Oprah book of the month. Ms. Cleage lives in Atlanta with her husband.

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