

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Although Darktown is set in 1948, many reviewers have praised it for being more relevant than ever. Why do you think readers are finding Darktown so timely? Did you? Which scenes resonated with you?
2. BOLO Books commended Darktown for being an example of “how crime fiction can elucidate the topic [of race] with pinpoint accuracy,” stating, “this novel should be required reading for both police forces nationwide and the citizens they seek to protect.” What might both police and the communities they are policing learn from Darktown? Was there anything you found particularly surprising about the way that the police interacted with the citizens of Atlanta in Darktown? If so, what?
3. Explain the significance of the title of the book. Why do you think Mullen used it? Did your interpretation of the title change as you read? How?
4. What were your initial impressions of Denny Rakestraw? When first introduced, Mullen writes, “Officer Denny Rakestraw was dividing himself in two again” (page 9). Why is Rakestraw conflicted in his role? Compare his style of policing with that of his partner, Lionel Dunlow. Which method do you think is more effective?
5. Boggs and Smith are from different worlds. How does this influence their partnership? Do their different backgrounds affect the way they approach their duties as officers? In what ways?
6. After Tommy Smith’s dispute with Zo at Ruffin’s Royal Hideaway, the owner of the bar grips his arm and says, “There is a lot riding on you, son. And I expect you to bear that in mind day and night” (page 157). How do you feel the pressure from the community of having to be “perfect” benefited the eight black officers? How did it negatively impact them? How do you feel Boggs and Smith lived up to the task?
7. After James James Jameson’s funeral service, members of the community are furious with Boggs, saying, “I thought you were supposed to do something about this” (page 85). How well do you feel Boggs and Smith balanced the needs of their community with the obligations of the job? What, if anything, would you have done differently?
8. On page 216, Uncle Percy says to Boggs, “The evil is so garishly on display here, there’s no mystery to it. It is sunning itself before us, and will strike if you dare approach it.” When Boggs claims he has built immunity to it, Percy says, “You need to bleed those antibodies from your veins, Lucius. Understand me? Bleed them from your veins.” What do you feel Percy meant by this statement? (Consider page 324, when Boggs later thinks, “But maybe he was wrong, and Uncle Percy was right. Maybe he was allowing himself to be fooled here...”) Do you agree with Uncle Percy? Why or why not?



9. On page 184, when Mama Dove is questioned by Officer Rakestraw about Lily's death, she says, "The only thing I am fazed by right now is the fact that a cop is here bothering with her. Why? What was so special about this girl?" Consider this statement. How do you feel Mama Dove's surprise is indicative of the role women are expected to play in this society, if at all? How does each female character – such as Mama Dove, Julie Cannon, and Mrs. Prescott – fulfill and/or reject this role?

10. Boggs struggles greatly with the death of Lily's father, Otis Ellsworth, saying, "Every time he'd tried to help that family, he cursed it" (page 292). Do you agree? How would you have handled the case differently?

11. After Boggs's final encounter with Dunlow (page 340), he provides Roland Dooley with two choices: keep silent or turn Boggs in to the police. Consider the consequences of each option for Dooley. How might either option positively or negatively impact society as a whole? If you were in his shoes, what would you have done?

12. In praising *Darktown*, author Attica Locke said, "There is nothing I love more in a book than hope." Did you find causes for hope in *Darktown*? What were they?

13. Pundits often comment on how today's politics are more polarized and partisan than ever. But as *Darktown* shows, people have always been fiercely divided – even in years, like 1948, that don't show up in many history books. Did any of the various conflicts in the book – between white and black, police and civilian, wealthy and working class, urban and rural – cause you to think differently about some of the debates in our time? (Questions provided by the publisher)

