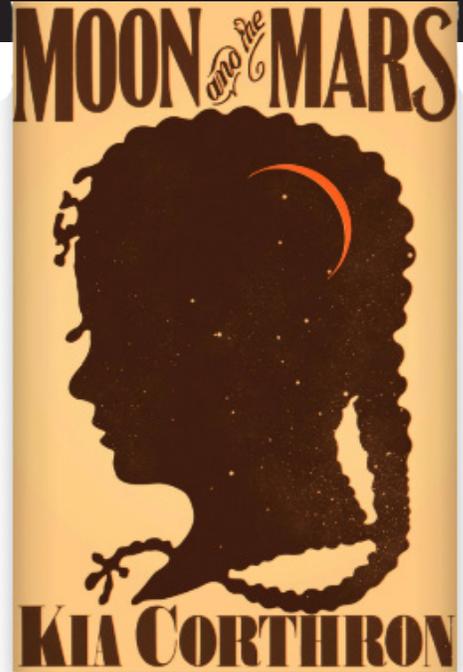


Moon and the Mars

by Kia Corthron



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1. Theo is an orphan, but she is rich in family. Who were your favorite members of her extended family, and why? Did you find Theo’s upbringing in the poverty-stricken Five Points neighborhood in New York a childhood primarily of joy, of pathos, or of something in between?
2. How did your understanding of New York’s “melting pot” change after reading *Moon and the Mars*? What did you know or learn about the interactions of the Irish and Black communities in Five Points? How does Theo’s New York match up to your impressions of the city? Do you have personal history that you can trace back to lower Manhattan?
3. How are class differences represented in the book? For example, compare the grand procession ushering in the nuptials of Lavinia Warren and Charles Stratton (Tom Thumb) with the wedding of Maryam in Grammy Brook’s tenement apartment, the bride wearing her patchwork dress designed by Cathleen. Also consider the white women, most of them liberals of their time, sitting around the table for their philanthropist tea versus their servers, including Theo and her cousin Maureen. And how does this white women’s gathering compare and contrast with the black Ladies Cultural Forum founded by Eunice?
4. Many people consider New York City’s Lower East Side to be the seat of Eastern European immigration and the birth of workers’ rights, invoking images of early twentieth century destitute refugees and the catastrophic Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire. How does this compare with the mid-nineteenth century workers’ economy of Five Points as imparted in *Moon and the Mars*? For example, consider Grammy Cahill’s used wares table, Grammy Brook’s washerwoman duties, the newsboys, Theo collecting newspapers and other scraps to sell, Siobhan’s tavern, the sex workers Miss Fiona and Miss Sally, Ciaran’s Central Park construction work, Mr. Freeman’s barber shop, or Hen’s cigar factory.
5. Theo, the child of a black father and a white Irish mother, often wonders how she is perceived racially. How else does skin color come into play in the story? For example,

Theo's "passing" in order to be admitted into Barnum's Museum, and her sense of shame when exiting and glimpsing the darker black children longing to gain entrance. How do Maryam's reasons for using lightening cream differ from those of other black women who have applied such topical bleaches? What do you think the author is telling us about identity, self-perception, and self-preservation in these scenes?

6. How was the storytelling aided by the novel's peculiar narrative devices: newsboy calls, newspaper clippings, songs, letters?
7. How did settings bring the mid-nineteenth century to life? Were there particularly vivid places for you? The tenement apartments? The cigar factory? Siobhan's tavern? Barnum's Museum? Seneca Village before its destruction? Haughwout's store elevator?
8. Were there any special events that you found especially compelling? Pinkster? St. Patrick's Day? Theo's first communion? The Weeping Time mass slave auction (as discussed by the characters)? The comet? The 1860 presidential election? Watch Night?
9. In what ways did the minor characters serve in the storytelling? Some examples: Sukie, the slave child that Theo meets at the hotel; Ciaran's cousin Aedan; Friedrich, the German-American boy; Mary Bree, the child street cleaner who is adopted by people in the West.
10. The Draft Riots were seminal in the Civil War era. Did the author's rendering of this event change your understanding of the war? If you already knew about the Draft Riots, did you experience them differently through this fictional interpretation? How do you think the riots and protests of that time (longshoremen's, draft) impacted race relations in the city? Are there echoes to the present day?
11. Are there other themes in the book that resonate into the twenty-first century? Maryam's fears as a refugee who illegally crossed a border? The polarization of political parties, dividing poor blacks from poor whites? The narrative journey of Hen?
12. How does historical fiction compare with historical nonfiction in recounting a historical moment? Which books have you read that you believe have done it best?
13. When you finished the novel, how did you feel? Devastated by the climax and/or heartened by the heroes of the Draft Riots and by the tender human interactions throughout the book? Were you depressed to think of the outrages committed in the decades that followed the book's conclusion, or buoyed when you considered the social progress made since 1878, or both? Or were you experiencing the end of the novel from a twenty-first century perspective, inspiring feelings for our own future? Despondency or hope?