

Guide for Book Club and Classroom Discussion

Blood Moon Burning

A novel by Beth Houston

Reading a good book is one of life's great pleasures. Closely analyzing the book via group discussion opens up new levels of quality and meaning that enhance the pleasurable experience. And of course, discussion can be a pleasure in its own right, especially if refreshments are served.

Being both a literary and a double-genre novel (mystery suspense-thriller and romance), *Blood Moon Burning* lends itself to more discussion topics and questions than most book clubs and classrooms would need. While some of the numbered selections below lean toward the academic, others are more informal. After reading through the entire list, pick and choose, in any order, whatever topics and questions suit your needs.

1. Plot is structure—a series of events, consisting mainly of interactions between characters, that are arranged according to their causal connections and that unfold into a complex yet unified whole “event.”

A logline is a one or two sentence *TV Guide*-like summary of the plot that includes the main character's central dilemma. What might be a logline for *Blood Moon Burning*?

2. What is it about the novel's opening that “hooks” the reader into the story?

3. What is the catalyst, or inciting incident, that establishes the situation and sets the story in motion?

4. Besides providing the catalyst, a novel's exposition typically introduces the reader to the main character and often suggests major events or conflicts to come. The opening scene establishes Nikki as the protagonist—the main, central, focal, or pivotal character—at the center of the story.

What do readers learn about Nikki and her family in the Chapter 1? What is her relationship to her parents? To her husband Richard? To her two coworkers, Barb and Miguel? What else do we learn about those characters and about Nikki herself by the end of the chapter? Do any other characters seem likely to appear later in the book? What future events or conflicts are foreshadowed in Chapter 1?

5. A novel's plot engages the main characters in one or more conflicts, moving from exposition (the beginning) through a series of complications to a climax (the middle) and finally to a resolution, the dénouement, literally “untying of a knot” (the end).

Stephen Spielberg once said that in the best stories, someone loses control of his/her life and must regain it. In Chapter 1, what hints are there to ways Nikki has, or is about to, lose control of her neat, self-organized life? How is that loss of control reinforced by the author's choice to later allow Lane to share the leading role of protagonist, and then to shift that leading role to Lane?

6. Even when the role of protagonist shifts from Nikki to Lane, Nikki remains the hub around which the wheel of action revolves. Or is Lane really the hub? Is Lane the core focus for any other character or characters? Who? Why? How does that focus on Lane drive the plot? What thematic statement does the author make by creating two separate hubs that superimposed become one? By allowing Lane to assume the role of protagonist? By allowing Nikki and Lane to share the status of protagonist? What does this added level of complexity contribute to the novel's theme?

7. In Greek tragedy, the protagonist recognizes himself to be a victim ruined by the hand of Fate—a personification or vehicle of the gods. For the humanist playwrights of the Renaissance, who celebrated the individual and embraced free will, the protagonist's downfall was caused by hamartia, a tragic flaw or weakness, usually hubris (pride). The antagonist served as a contrasting, often contrary foil of the protagonist's better angels that eventually fall from grace. During the Enlightenment, naturalist writers applied Darwinian scientific principles to fictional characters, and forces of heredity and environment beyond the individual's control, much like the Greeks' Fate, overwhelmed the main character. Freudian psychology pointed to unconscious, often instinctual motivations for a character's breakdown, be it psychological, moral, or otherwise, and the main character was often cast as a weak antihero. Today writers experiment with various iterations and combinations of these models, but nearly all literary novels, plays, and screenplays focus on character motivation and development (or lack thereof).

Describe the main characters, including their psychological and moral attributes. Do the same for important minor characters. Discuss ways that those major and minor characters are victims of external forces or/and are driven by internal motivations and free will.

8. Round characters, as opposed to flat characters, are well developed and involved in the novel's action. All the main characters are round. Which of the minor characters are round? How do those minor characters serve to advance the plot? To enhance themes? To stand as foils to other characters?

9. Dynamic characters grow and change over the course of a story; static characters don't. The character arc—the way a dynamic character changes as a person from the beginning to the end of the story—is sometimes subtle, sometimes dramatic. Often the change involves an epiphany, an important moment of illumination when something hidden or not understood suddenly becomes clear. Discuss the character arcs of the two protagonists, Nikki and Lane. Discuss their epiphanies. How do those epiphanies propel the plot? How do they contribute to the character arcs?

10. Relationships could be said to have their own arcs. Discuss how the novel's relationship arcs contribute to plot, characterization, and theme.

11. With the exception of romance, which is character driven, most genre fiction today is plot driven. *Blood Moon Burning* incorporates the elements of plot-driven mystery suspense-thriller and character-driven lesbian romance into an organically integrated whole.

How are the balanced elements of plot and character in this novel dependent upon each other? Is there a thematic message in that union of genres? How is plot driven by character, and character driven by plot?

12. Why did the author choose third-person narration? What might be a reason why this story could not be told in first person? The novel's point of view is omniscient in that the narrative voice is "above" any one character's consciousness. But it is usually closer to limited omniscient in sticking close to the consciousness of the main character or characters within a scene, usually Nikki and/or Lane, one or both of whom are in nearly every scene. An opaque narrative draws attention to itself as a voice written (by the author) or spoken (by a character), while a transparent voice steps aside to let the reader enter the characters' world. Would you call *Blood Moon Burning* opaque, transparent, or a mix of both? How does the voice add to the novel's overall quality?

13. According to Aristotle, an important building block of a work's structure is reversal—peripeteia—when the expectations and hopes of the characters rise and fall. What are the novel's most significant reversals? Discuss the impact of moments when characters are startled by something unexpected, or shaken by something shocking.

14. How are Nikki and Lane most alike? How are they most different? How do their similarities and differences contribute to their character arcs? To what extent does their yin/yang create or add sexual tension?

15. Compare and contrast the various forms and uses of sex—the good, the bad, the ugly—represented throughout the book.

16. Discuss the various permutations of love represented throughout the book.

17. Which of the characters have the most "personality"? What are their most striking personality traits?

18. How do characters' outer physical traits compare and/or contrast with their emotional, intellectual, moral, spiritual, and other traits that comprise their personalities?

19. Are the characters believable? What makes them believable?

20. Describe different ways the characters interact with one another.

21. What motivates the characters?

22. Do any characters display hubris? Does hubris lead to downfall or epiphany for any of those characters?

23. The Greek word protagonist literally means "first debater." Though the hero of ancient Greek drama couldn't avert his fate, he could argue that he was the victim of unjust punishment or arbitrary torment. A story's conflict often arises as a kind of "debate" or argument between the protagonist and the antagonist, which could be another character, a force, nature, God, or differing (or bickering) aspects, impulses, or motivations within the protagonist herself.

Blood Moon Burning contains many debates—intellectual, emotional, psychological, moral, and spiritual, among others. Some of these debates are subtle, some overt. Identify and characterize the novel's most important debates. How do these debates contribute to the story's tension and suspense? To character arcs? To theme?

24. What other types of conflicts occur in the book? How do those conflicts drive the plot?
25. Discuss Nikki's conflicts with other characters. With herself. With her stance toward the law. With her stance toward marriage. Which of those conflicts are resolved? How so? Which of those conflicts are resolved due to her own efforts, and which are settled due to the efforts of others?
26. Not all complications are external events; some are internal events that lead to personal struggles and choices that could be emotional, intellectual, moral, or spiritual. Which external complications are most significant, and how do they impact characters and/or plot? Which internal complications?
27. A symbol is a person, place, object, condition, or event that delivers a complex meaning or meanings in addition to its literal meaning. What elements of the novel are symbolic, and in what ways are they symbolic? Do any of those symbols contribute to the novel's theme/themes? If yes, how so?
28. What does Nikki's trek to the scene of the crime in Chapter 1 symbolize? What is the significance of the "primordial soup"? What does the description of South Florida and the Everglades at night symbolize?
29. Setting includes the geographical locale where the story takes place, as well as descriptive details about a particular place within that locale, usually at a specific time of day and year. Setting might include how the weather feels, how the air smells, how bumpy a road is, how forest shadows move under a full moon—anything pertaining specifically to the place and time of the novel as a whole and to its various scenes. Discuss ways that setting functions in *Blood Moon Burning*.
30. Discuss the symbolism of the title. What does the title encapsulate in terms of plot; characters; theme? What is the significance of the Blood Moon Burning festival? Why did the author choose to associate the festival with the Native Americans?
31. Which of the character's names—first or last names—are symbolic?
32. Literary critic Northrop Frye described a literary archetype as "a symbol, usually an image, which recurs often enough in literature to be recognizable as an element of one's literary experience as a whole." As the world shrinks thanks to quick travel and instant TV and internet access, more images will assume universal meanings. Among the historically well-established archetypes are the Mother, Holy Mother, Evil Step-Mother, Witch, Christ figure, Hero/Heroine, Devil, Old Man, Wise Sage, and Grim Reaper. Perennial archetypes include the love triangle, quest, pilgrimage, rite of passage (initiation, coming of age), redemption, transformation, rebirth, self-sacrifice, revenge, and justice served. What archetypes appear in *Blood Moon Burning*?
33. Archetypal setting elements include the storm, night, jungle, mountaintop, cave, desert, change of seasons, pastoral countryside, wrong side of the tracks, and cityscape. Discuss the archetypal aspects of the "primordial soup," the swamps of South Florida, both at night and during the day. In what ways do the novel's other settings carry their own archetypal charge?

34. Where do references to black cats occur throughout the novel? How is each example symbolic? Does the symbolism of the different black cat examples, individually or taken together, reinforce any theme/themes? How so?
35. How is the poem “Blackberries” ironic, given that it immediately follows Nikki’s interrogation of Reverend Burgult? That the poem was tucked away in Nikki’s college lit book? That it was written by Lane to Nikki at Nikki’s request? That it was actually a published poem written by the author of *Blood Moon Burning*? What is the meaning of the poem itself? What does it symbolize in itself as a poem and in the context of that exact moment in the novel? What does the poem add to readers’ understanding of the novel’s theme? How does the poem serve to bridge Nikki and Lane’s past relationship to the present? What is Lane saying to Nikki in the poem? What is Nikki saying to Lane in reading the poem (again) to Lane?
36. What is the function of the interlude on lightning (Chapter 27)? What does lightning symbolize here? What characters are most closely associated with the lightning’s connotations? How does the symbolism of this chapter reinforce the symbolic meaning of lightning throughout the book? Besides being symbolic, what other function does lightning serve throughout the novel?
37. In Chapter 22, how does Lane’s stance toward the law differ from Nikki’s? Which stance do you most agree with, and why? How do their different perspectives motivate actions that propel the story forward? Does either character’s stance shift by the end of the story? How so? When? Why?
38. How are varying stances toward religion represented via specific characters? How do those stances advance the plot? Which of the book’s themes are reinforced by characters’ religious stances? What is the connection between misogyny and religion?
39. Does the novel have a central theme? If so, how is that theme expressed throughout the work? What elements of the story develop the central theme? How do character, plot, setting, point of view, and symbols reinforce the central theme? How does the title of the story contribute to readers’ understanding of the central theme? What other themes are explored?
40. Discuss Nikki’s relationship with her mother. How do their similarities and differences cause and resolve their conflicts with each other? What do Kate’s encounters with Lane contribute to readers’ understanding of the characters? To the theme? Do any of those encounters advance the plot? If so, in what ways? How is Nikki’s relationship with her mother different from that with her dad?
41. How is Nikki’s relationship with Richard different from her relationship with Lane? How is it similar?
42. There are plenty of bad guys in the book. Which of them is the book’s bona fide villain? How do you know that? What does he represent symbolically? What does his fate at the end represent? In what way does he serve as Lane’s antagonist and foil? How does he contribute to Lane’s character arc?

43. Which scenes are most suspenseful? What contributes to the suspense?
44. A plot without sensory detail is barely more than cold abstraction. Imagery moves the story from general to particular, from abstract to tangible. Vivid images breathe life into a story, and it's that life that draws in the reader.
Imagery engages all the senses—sight, hearing, taste, touch, smell, and motion. Specific, concrete imagery—particular nouns, active verbs, descriptive adjectives and adverbs—serve many functions in *Blood Moon Burning*. What are examples of scenes or passages where description creates atmosphere? Reveals character? Advances plot? Provides a strong sense of place? Reinforces theme?
45. A literary work can evoke a wide range of emotions. What emotions are evoked throughout the book? How are they evoked?
46. Some characters tell stories to other characters. What do these stories-within-the-story contribute to readers' understanding of the characters? What do they contribute to the overall texture of the novel?
47. What role does humor play in the novel? Does it add to the quality of the book? If so, in what way?
48. Besides providing a little comedy, what other functions do Nikki's kids serve?
49. What is the author's purpose in presenting accurate researched statistics on child abduction and human trafficking? Does human trafficking represent a broader problem in society?
50. What themes and details make this novel a decidedly feminist work? How does the work overtly and/or covertly examine patriarchal assumptions and transgress masculine attitudes that dominate culture and literature? How might the feminist stance affect a woman's reading of the text as opposed to a man's? Does the difference make the work stronger or weaker? (Does the answer depend on whether or not the reader is a woman?)
51. In what way is the author's writing of *Blood Moon Burning* a political gesture? What aspects of the subject and/or style of the book make it political?
52. Does the story have a moral or didactic purpose? What is the message, idea, or principle the story seeks to convey?
53. Characters are rarely all good or all bad, the exception being (sometimes) the villain. Create a scale of the characters based on their morals. Who is at the top—the most good? Who is at the bottom? What criteria did you use to determine where each character belonged on the scale?
54. Which characters do you like the most (as characters), and why?
55. Compare and contrast the speech styles and levels of particular characters. How does a character's way of speaking contribute to his/her characterization?
56. What aspects of the novel place it in the tradition of Southern gothic?

57. A writer's style refers to the way she uses language in a particular story or in her entire life's oeuvre. A close evaluation of a novel's style includes the author's choice and treatment of subject matter, handling of description and imagery, balance of narration and dialogue, plot pacing, and any number of other elements. Voltaire said, "All styles are good except the tiresome kind." Of course, some good styles are better than others. And even among discerning readers, to some extent "good" style is a matter of personal taste. Style includes diction, sentence structure, and punctuation, as well as violations of basic rules. Style includes tone of voice. The author's style, or the style of a particular work, could be formal or informal, plain or elaborate; its texture might be minimalist and direct, or lush and poetical. The novel's overall style might display a repertoire of styles, and even genres, depending on the context.

How would you characterize the overall style of *Blood Moon Burning*? Discuss scenes that display distinctive styles that differ from the main style of the novel. Which aspects of this novel's style do you most like? Which do you most appreciate in terms of quality? How does the mix of realism and lyricism impact the plot, the character arc, and the theme?

58. What aspects of the book do you like the most (plot, characters, description, themes...)?

59. What aspects most contribute to the novel's overall quality?

60. What scenes and/or passages do you especially like?

61. What are the pivotal plot points (complications) that propel the story forward from beginning to end?

62. At the core of most novels (certainly most genre novels) is a central character with a goal, often triggered by a big event, pitted against an oppositional character who tries to stop the central character from achieving the goal. In most novels, the middle section—the rising action, or rising conflict—is complicated by subplots that intertwine with the main plot. The pinch is a major event occurring somewhere in the middle section that triggers in the central character a more intense need to achieve the goal. From there the action is falling.

Where does the mystery/suspense-thriller pinch occur in *Blood Moon Burning*? Discuss the importance of the pinch to the plot and characters. Where does the romance pinch occur? Discuss the importance of that pinch to the plot and characters.

63. A novel's crisis is the moment when the main character makes a crucial decision, then the worst thing that could happen happens and all seems lost. Discuss the novel's crisis point—which may not be a single moment but a quick series of events.

64. Following the crisis is the climax or showdown. Which characters are involved in the showdown? How does the showdown play out? Why did the author decide to have the main characters need help in the end? Who rescues them, and why?

65. The book's dénouement is open. That is, though the story ends with the restoration of (relative) stability to the main characters' world, and readers get a glimpse of what their future holds, the author left a few things unresolved. Of those loose threads, which do you most hope will be treated in the next book? Which major characters do you hope to see again? Which minor characters?