



READING GROUP GUIDE

THE SELFLESS ACT OF BREATHING

JJ BOLA



*This reading group guide for **THE SELFLESS ACT OF BREATHING** includes an introduction, discussion questions, ideas for enhancing your book club, and a Q&A with author **JJ BOLA**. The suggested questions are intended to help your reading group find new and interesting angles and topics for your discussion. We hope that these ideas will enrich your conversation and increase your enjoyment of the book.*

INTRODUCTION

Transcendent Kingdom meets *A Man Called Ove* in this heartwarming, page-turning novel about a Congolese British Londoner who travels to the United States on one last adventure, determined to end his life once his savings run out.

After suffering a devastating loss, Michael Kabongo, a charismatic young Congolese immigrant who works as a teacher in London, decides to embark on an American adventure.

In “the land of the free,” Michael travels from coast to coast, partying with new friends, sparking fleeting romances, and splurging on big adventures, with the intention of ending his life once his savings run out.

The Selfless Act of Breathing is the story of a young Londoner who strives to change the injustices he sees raging before him: in the lives of the students he works so hard to help rise above their circumstances, in the aftermath of his father’s tragic death, and in the violence and brutality that marginalizes young Black men around the world.

As he makes surprising new connections and faces old prejudices in odd but exciting new settings, Michael alone must decide if his life is worth living.

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TOPICS & QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What are your first impressions of Michael? How did his initial plan make you feel? Based on the first chapter, what do you think his reasonings could be for this plan?
2. Describe the structure of *The Selfless Act of Breathing*. Why do you think the author time-stamped the beginning of each chapter? As a reader, did you find it helpful to place the setting? How do the flashbacks to London help you to better understand Michael's decision to leave?
3. During Pastor Baptiste's sermon on p. 15, he mentions how he had fallen down the wrong path of "sex, drink, drugs, debt, violence." Looking back on Michael's journey, how do each of these come into play during his own "fallen" experience?
4. In chapter 6 we meet Jalil, who is dealing with cultural pressures to get married. How are both Jalil and Michael either fighting or adhering to the expectations society bestows upon young adult men? Discuss whether their priorities and choices are the same.
5. Michael meets Sara while in San Francisco, and they quickly travel to Los Angeles together. Why do you think Michael is still searching for human connection at this point? Discuss how he realizes he made a mistake in trying to connect with her.
6. Despite being surrounded by friends, coworkers, and family, Michael consistently feels alone or invisible. It is in small moments—like Mr. Black winking at him during basketball practice (p. 88)—that Michael feels seen. Up to this point, what are other moments that Michael has felt seen?
7. Discuss Duwayne as a character. Why is he important to Michael? What does he represent in the story?
8. In Chapter 22, Michael makes a decision not to call the cops after witnessing a mugging. Discuss why you think he made that choice. There are other interactions with the police throughout the novel. How did those interactions make you feel?
9. Although they have a flirtatious relationship, Michael and Sandra never act on their feelings for each other. Why do you think that is? Do you like Sandra? After receiving her email, Michael explains his rage toward "the growing weight of burdens accumulating in my life" (p. 210). Why do you think he sees these people who care for him as burdens?
10. Was Michael's relationship with Belle similar to what he first found with Sara? Why do you think he repeated this behavior throughout his trip?
11. Was the conclusion of the book surprising? Did you anticipate these endings for all of the characters?
12. Each city Michael visits on his physical journey seems to correspond to a new phase of his interior journey. Discuss what each city might mean to Michael. How did each setting make you feel as a reader?

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ENHANCE YOUR BOOK CLUB

1. Throughout *The Selfless Act of Breathing*, characters are constantly giving Michael advice, some good and some not so good. What is some of the best advice you've ever received? Talk about some not-so-good advice too!
2. Teaching plays a pivotal role in who Michael is and the story at large, with much of the novel taking place at a school. Additionally, Michael tries to be a positive influence for Duwayne, despite his inner turmoil. Did you have a teacher who changed the course of your own school experience? Discuss the importance teachers played in your formative years.
3. In the beginning of the novel (p. 30), Michael thinks, "I wanted to tell him about this growing feeling of isolation, despair, hopelessness; I was a burden to the world, to everyone around me." Although conversations around mental health are constantly evolving and becoming much less taboo, discussing depression, anxiety, and other mental health conditions continues to be difficult, especially for men. Discuss why you think that is and how society as a whole can continue to move forward toward a more inclusive and accepting attitude about mental health and the stigmas surrounding it.

A CONVERSATION WITH JJ BOLA

Q: Much of the book is set throughout the United States. Why did you choose the particular cities Michael visits in the story?

A: The overall arc of why I chose the United States was the idea of freedom, questioning what it means to be free and what it means to live freely, and what it means to live the "American Dream," even as an outsider. And the particular cities Michael visits are quite symbolic as he moves from West Coast to East Coast and in between, and eventually to where it ends; it's a cyclical/circular journey of returning back to oneself, finding a way back "home" but with a completely new perspective. I was also taken by how different each of the cities were, in both large and subtle ways, so wanted to place the protagonist in places that felt both familiar and alien.

Q: What was your original intention when you set out to write this novel? Did your goal for the book change throughout the writing process?

A: My original intention for this book was to capture the feeling of lonesomeness, of isolation and exclusion, and the anxiety and depression that can, in so many cases, lead to someone taking their own life or having thoughts of ending their life. I wanted readers to see what representations of what a mental health breakdown might look like, and also who might have those mental health breakdowns—young, Black, working class, refugee, educated, etc. But ultimately, my goal for this book was for it to reach someone, that one person, anyone, who might need to feel less alone, to be reminded that they have a place in this world, no matter how isolated and alone they might feel.

Q: You have done a lot of work with youth mental health programs. Why was it important to you to write a novel centered around mental health?

A: I have always been interested in psychology and mental health. I did a bachelor's degree in psychology; I've worked with a lot of vulnerable people, particularly young people; and currently I work for a community mental

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health team. For me, I was writing this story to reflect what I had seen around me: that there was a world where so many young men were vulnerable and afraid, and feeling isolated but seeking connection and not knowing where to go or how to process these conflicting feelings. And I feel that mental health is as important now as it's ever been, and if the pandemic has taught us anything (I hope that it has), it's that connection is vital to human existence. So, the more we can help broaden understanding around this in any way, and challenge what mental health might look like, the more impact we can have in terms of providing the right education around these issues.

Q: Which of your characters do you feel most connected to?

A: I really feel connected to all of the characters. Obviously, Michael, as the protagonist, but also some of the lesser characters who are not featured as prominently. This connection comes from seeing them all as human beings, beautiful yet flawed. However, as much as I am connected to all, I do have a particular soft spot for Mami. My heart melts for her, and I wish I had it in me to write a novel that centered around her—or to revisit this story from her perspective.

Q: Which do you feel more comfortable writing, poetry or long-form fiction?

A: Different forms evoke a different part of me. I guess it depends on what I am trying to express. Nonetheless, the boring answer is that I feel comfortable in both forms, but it wasn't easy getting there. At the start, poetry was hard, and I had to challenge myself, but then fiction carries a different kind of weight that is also challenging to carry. And that was hard too. There are days where both feel impossible and days where it feels effortless. Ultimately, I am just happy to be writing.

Q: If *The Selfless Act of Breathing* were to ever become a movie, do you have a dream cast in mind?

A: Firstly, for this book to become a movie would be an absolute dream come true. I can only imagine such an exhilarating feeling. Film is such a powerful medium of communication, particularly when it comes to fostering empathy for one another, and I really hope that it can do this.

In terms of an ideal cast, I'm not sure, because my brain doesn't really work like that. However, I would love to see actors who are also passionate about mental health, passionate about this subject, just put their all into the story, and carry the same kind of energy that I wrote into the book. The most important thing for me is how the story is told.

Q: There are a few references to basketball throughout the novel. Just for fun—favorite team? Player?

A: I am a huge fan of basketball, so I'm so happy for this question. My favorite player is LeBron James—I just think what he has been able to accomplish, on and off the court, is a feat that we are privileged to be able to witness. And I am a fan of the Lakers (again), mostly because of LeBron now (I followed him over from the Cavs)—being an international fan means that I am allowed to switch teams. We're not having a great start to the season, but there's still hope. I think we will come through during the playoffs.

Q: Do you have a next project in mind? And, if so, what is it?

A: A couple of things are in the pipeline: a historical fiction that is based on the life of a person who is central to Congolese history but not really spoken about. And, following this, I want to actually write a romance/love story. I love love, and feel like this is the least I could do for my readers after reading such heavy subjects from me all these years.