



# BOOK CLUB KIT





# QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- 1** The protagonist of this novel is a ninety-nine-year-old woman at the end of her life. Why do you think the author chose an elder as her main character? What spaces does that choice illuminate and what does it close off? Does Miss Pauline challenge our impressions of old age?
- 2** The title of this book is reminiscent of V.S. Naipaul's classic, *A House for Mr. Biswas*, which was originally published in 1961. If you have read Naipaul's book, do you think this was intentional? In what ways is *A House for Miss Pauline* in conversation with Naipaul's book?
- 3** The writer uses a metaphorical field with many references to how buildings are constructed, especially those made of stone. For example, '... arousing guilt that clung like mortar.' (pg 4) Miss Pauline thinks of herself as '... cracked, like carelessly excavated stone.' (pg 110) How does this convey the universality of the desire for a safe shelter? What significance does stone hold in the story?
- 4** *A House for Miss Pauline* describes many types of buildings, including the places Miss Pauline herself has lived. They range from her father's shack which returns to the earth after his death, though the structures in the village of Mason Hall over time, to the stone plantation ruin. What do the different types of construction reveal about the place itself or the characters?
- 5** How much of Miss Pauline's desire for her own house and land is driven by her experience of hurricanes? Does the novel ask questions about how much the threat of hurricanes, and other natural hazards like earthquakes, shapes Caribbean culture and nationhood?
- 6** In the novel, black or brown skins are not described, although white skins are described. Do you think this was an intentional choice? What does this convey to a reader?
- 7** Miss Pauline sometimes speaks in patwa and other times in standard English, though she mostly thinks in patwa. What does this demonstrate?
- 8** As Miss Pauline tries to decide who owns the land on which she has settled, she wonders why a modern-day young Jamaican man, Lamont, does not have as much right to the land as she herself as occupier, or anyone with legal title. 'Why evrybaddy in Mason Hall not a relative? Evrybaddy here 'cause of that house, evrybaddy here share some drop of the same blood that bring the white people an the Black people to this place back when. And what 'bout the people who dead here? The ones that did quarry the stone—they pickney an granpickney? What is to mark them life? Them death?' (Pg 227) Are the different ways in which people come to own land more or less important? More or less ethical? Explain.
- 9** *A House for Miss Pauline* delves into the question of rootedness. How does this come about? Is it by birth, or connections each person constructs throughout their life—both to places and people? How important is legal title to land in developing feelings of rootedness?
- 10** Connections to the land are often felt by Jamaicans who have migrated and live in other countries, but not always. Do you think Miss Pauline's granddaughter, Justine, still feels connected to Jamaica, although she lives in New York? What examples from the book brought you to your answer?
- 11** What do you think should happen to the remnants of plantation houses, whether in Jamaica or elsewhere? Should they be sites of memorial and atonement? Or as some are used now, tourist attractions? Or should they be allowed to return to the land from which they were excavated and forgotten?