

## The Final Revival of Opal & Nev: Discussion Questions

1. Sunny Shelton, after being named the editor-in-chief of Aural, is worried “that the reasons for my success would be questioned by even my most progressive white colleagues.” Explain why Sunny might feel anxious about her promotion as the first woman and first Black person in that role. In what ways do her anxieties turn out to be justified?
2. When Sunny interviews Nev Charles, she notices a tote that’s fallen on its side to reveal what Nev’s been reading: a copy of *The New Jim Crow*, a recent issue of *The Atlantic*, and a *New York Times* bestselling book of poetry. Sunny wonders if these were props chosen deliberately for her to see. What image or message might Nev be hoping to send? In what ways have books you’ve read affected your outlook on the world? And in the era of social media, to what degree do you think the books we share represent who we are?
3. Opal Jewel comes of age in Detroit, with the Vietnam War, the popular success of Motown, and resistance to police brutality as a backdrop. How do you think this shaped her personality, personal style, and life of protest? Compare and contrast Opal and Nev’s upbringings and how they influenced their actions later in life.
4. Bob Hize, who produced Opal and Nev’s first record, recalls that Nev “needed to be pushed, needed to be surrounded by fresh sorts of influences that would take him unfamiliar places.” Why do you think Opal was that “fresh sort of influence” Nev needed, and what unfamiliar places did she take him?
5. Nev writes a song he wants Opal to sing called “Black Coffee,” which causes some contention in their band. It is meant to be sung from the point of view of a poor, Black single mother, and Opal says she can’t stand the song. To her, Nev was “putting all these words in my mouth, literally, and they were so damn morose...musty and sad and old-school Negro.” What do you think Nev was trying to achieve by writing “Black Coffee?” How does this conflict reflect the debate about white artists telling others’ stories?
6. Chet Bond insists that the Bond Brothers’ display of the Confederate flag at the Rivington Showcase was not racist and they were not targeting Black people by displaying it. Discuss the usage of the Confederate flag throughout American history and what it has symbolized.
7. At the Showcase, Opal feels antagonized by the Bond Brothers’ display of the Confederate flag and doesn’t know if she should perform. On one side, her lover Jimmy suggests they don’t, but on the other, Nev urges her to carry on with the show. Opal’s decision to side with Nev is a turning point in her life. In what ways has a crucial decision affected the rest of your life?
8. What is symbolic of the legendary photo of Opal riding on Nev’s back out of the chaos of the Rivington Showcase? How does that photo resonate in modern times?
9. In an Editor’s Note, Sunny describes the visceral experience of hearing Opal and Nev’s records for the first time as a fourteen-year-old girl. Share your musical memories from a similar age. Which songs and albums left the deepest impressions on you, and why? Do you look at those artists and that music the same way now?
10. There is a question of exploitation as Opal and Nev achieve fame together. Sunny writes that “their art—in its thematic content and well-timed release, in the direct correlation

between its outrageousness and their upticking level of fame—had exploited Black pain.” Discuss which of their performances and songs were exploitative to Sunny’s point.

11. After a startling revelation in the middle of the narrative, the issue of complicity comes to the forefront. In what ways is the act of complicity demonstrated by Opal and Nev as individuals and as a pair?
12. Sunny shares an article about Opal written after the Showcase, which bears some similarities to the article written about Sunny later on in the novel. Compare and contrast how both women are portrayed in these two separate articles written decades apart.
13. After an exhausting tour with Nev, Opal travels to Paris and, for a while, considers living there permanently. What kind of respite do you think she finds, and why does she ultimately choose to return to the United States? Do you think she made the right decision? How have your travels to other places affected your perspective on home?
14. Compare and contrast the events of both the Rivington Showcase and Derringdo. In what ways are they similar even if decades apart? In your opinion, how has the act of resistance and protest evolved over the years?
15. How were Opal and Nev’s rises to fame different because of their races and genders? Why does Nev find more success later in his career than Opal?

*Discussion questions courtesy of Simon & Schuster*