



# AUDRE LORDE

## The Black Unicorn

How to run your  
own book club,

a collaboration between  
The Feminist Bookshop  
and Brighton CCA

# How to run your own book club

## Part of COMMUNAL Online: Passages of Time

'The Black Unicorn' by Audre Lorde  
Notes by Ruth, founder of The Feminist Bookshop  
14 April 2020

### Background

Audre Lorde (1934 –1992) was an American writer, feminist, librarian and civil rights activist. She described herself as “black, lesbian, mother, warrior, poet,” and dedicated her life to confronting the injustices faced by marginalized people. Lorde was born in New York City to Caribbean immigrant parents. As a child, she is said to have struggled with communication, and to have recognised the power of poetry as a form of expression, saying that she would “speak in poetry”. She published her first poem in Seventeen magazine while still in high school. She went on to become a librarian in New York in the 1960s and a teacher, writer and academic. From 1991 until her death, she was the New York State Poet laureate.

We chose her writing for the second book club because Audre Lorde’s work informs so much of the present discourse around intersectional feminism. Her work promoted the concept of intersectionality years before the term was coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989. She wrote about the importance of finding common ground in our lived experiences, but also facing difference directly, and using it as a source of strength rather than alienation.

The Black Unicorn, first published in 1978, is one of her most acclaimed poetry collections. In these poems she writes “refusing to be circumscribed by any simple identity”, drawing on African history and mythology, to express herself in words which “blaze and pulse on the page, beneath the reader’s eye” (Adrienne Rich).

### General Impressions

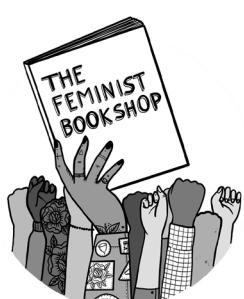
- What did you think of Audre Lorde’s poetry collection? Did you enjoy reading it?
- How would you describe the collection in three words?
- Which poem(s) did you find to be the most powerful? How did you feel when reading them?
- Why do you think the poetry collection is split into four parts?
- Thinking back, what struck you as some of the key themes running through the collection?

### Themes

Here are some of the themes that came up for us on our reading: sexuality and ‘the erotic’,

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spiritualism, race, womanhood, and protest. Feel free to explore whichever of these you are drawn to, along with any others that come up for you.

#### Sexuality and ‘The Erotic’

“I promise to leave you again / full of amazement and our illuminations / dealt through the short tongues of colour / or the taste of each other’s skin” (Meet, Part II)

- Lorde published ‘The Erotic as Power’, at the same time as these poems. This essay describes the erotic as a profound source of feminine power, that has been vilified in patriarchal society.
- How do you feel about her portrayal of the erotic in this poetry collection? Do you find it empowering, inspiring or alienating, confronting? Why do you think this is?

#### Nature and Spirituality

The poems in this collection make frequent reference to the natural world: seasons, sun and moon, harvest, rainfall; and to spirituality, particularly gods and goddesses in ancient African cultures.

- How does Lorde use these references to communicate her message? Do you find them effective?
- The dedication in the book states “The Face Has Many Seasons”. Why do you think Lorde introduces the collection with this statement, and what do you think she means by this?

#### Race

“I am woman and not white” (Woman, part I)

- Reflecting on Lorde’s poems how would you describe your own identity? Does race feature in that description?
- What do you think Lorde’s title poem ‘The Black Unicorn’ is saying about race and racism in society?

#### Womanhood

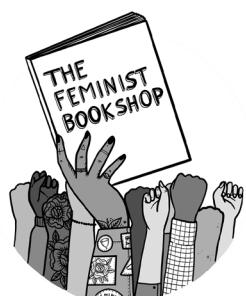
“The Coniagui women wear their flesh like war” (Coniagui women, part I)

- What did you think of Lorde’s portrayal of womanhood throughout the collection?
- Did you relate to the women she describes? Why/why not?

#### Protest

“it is better to speak remembering we were never meant to survive” (Litany for Survival, part II)

- ‘Your Silence Will Not Protect You’ is another famed statement in Lorde’s prose. What message do you think this poetry collection conveys to the reader about speaking out against oppression?



## Activity

Turn back to the poem ‘Coping’ (part II). Think back to the last few weeks. What images, feelings, interactions come to mind when you think about experiences of ‘coping’? Write down as many as you can think of in one minute. Pick one that stands out to you as especially powerful, emotive or visceral.

Try writing a short poem about this experience. It can be in any style you like. For example, you could try the stream of consciousness technique from the last book club activity, writing the first thing that comes to mind as quickly as you can for a couple of minutes. Or, you could choose a more formal structure, whatever you like!

Have a look at your poem alongside Audre Lorde’s ‘Coping’ what do you notice about the two poems, are there many similarities, any major points of difference? How does each poem make you feel?

## Conclusions

- Would you recommend Lorde’s poetry to a young woman today? Why/why not?
- What, if any, messages would you take from Lorde’s writing to your own life?

## Suggested Further Reading

- Also by Audre Lorde: Sister Outsider; A Burst of Light and Other Essays; Your Silence Will Not Protect You; Zami: A New Spelling of My Name
- By her contemporaries: Diving into the Wreck – Adrienne Rich; The Color Purple – Alice Walker.

The Feminist Bookshop is an independent bookshop based in central Brighton, currently online and delivering. The shop opened in November 2019 following a successful crowdfunding campaign. The bookshop stocks a range of books written by and about women, hosts events celebrating female artists and provides space for dialogue, discussion and debate.

Visit the online shop on their website [thefeministbookshop.com](http://thefeministbookshop.com) and follow them @thefeministbookshop

COMMUNAL Online: Passages of Time is a three-part programme examining alternative understandings of our social narratives and the models of organisation which reflect them. The book club discussion notes follow the online programme structure: the first part considers the historical roots of our discourse, the second how these are manifested in the present and the third how we can effect change.

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