

HUBERT BIRD THOUGHT HE WAS ALONE IN THE WORLD.
UNTIL HE MET HIS NEIGHBORS.

ALL THE LONELY PEOPLE



INTERNATIONAL
BESTSELLING AUTHOR

MIKE GAYLE

BOOK CLUB KIT

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. For Hubert, it was the death of his daughter that led him to a life of loneliness. Who in your life inspires you to live life to the fullest?
2. Ashley makes a huge leap of faith by setting out on her own to raise her daughter. What kind of strength does it take to create the type of life you want while raising a child?
3. Hubert didn't allow the color of his skin to dictate who he loved or the life he wanted to live. Have you ever defied someone else's expectations or prejudices to pursue what makes you happy?
4. Discuss the moments of obvious/subtle racism Hubert had to overcome throughout the story. What can non-immigrants be aware of/do to help immigrants transition to life in a new country?
5. Gus's descent into loneliness took on a dramatically different form than Hubert's. While Hubert's home still provided him the comforts he needed, Gus's degraded and left him living in unhealthy conditions. Why do you think Gus found himself living like this?
6. Hubert grieves by keeping to himself. What are different ways of grieving and what kind of support do people need?

7. Hubert reluctantly left his loneliness behind to connect with his community and past friends. What have you reluctantly done that resulted in an unexpected joy?

8. Joyce stood up against racism to be with Hubert even though things in her life may have been easier without Hubert in it. What does that tell you about who Joyce is as a person and her values in life?

9. Hubert has a difficult relationship with his son. What caused David to turn to drugs and could Hubert have handled the situation differently? If yes, how?

10. Life is filled with joy, but also sadness. Discuss times when you felt like giving up, but your friends and family helped you find your joy again.

11. Hubert crafts an exciting lifestyle for himself in a notebook instead of going out and living it. Discuss why he does this even though he knows that it's not his daughter on the phone that he's telling these stories to.

12. To Hubert, his family was everything and he was willing to do anything for them. What does family mean to you?

13. If you could start a movement in your community, what would it be? And why?

A CONVERSATION WITH MIKE GAYLE

Your parents' immigrant story is the foundation of Hubert's story. What can you share with us about your parents' story?

Unlike Hubert, who arrived by boat from the West Indies in the late 1950s, my parents arrived a decade later by plane. Both Hubert's and my parents' generation came to the UK having been invited to do so by the government to help meet the labor shortage in the postwar years. Instead of being welcomed, however, they were met with racism and prejudice at every turn, some of it overt, some of it more subtle, but all of it a shocking reality check. The mother country that they had been taught about at school turned out not to be a very loving parent.

What made you want to write a story about a lonely person?

As Rose says in the book, "Loneliness is an epidemic," and I wanted to look at this phenomenon through a single character. One of the questions I was curious about was, how do lonely people become lonely people? Are they born or are they made? As we look across Hubert's life we see him leave his family in Jamaica, move countries, meet Joyce, start a new family, and then gradually, one by one, he loses his new family and his life empties out. There's nothing unusual about Hubert's story in a way, yet at the same time it's completely and utterly heartbreaking—the inherent tragedy of being a human being. So I suppose one of the central questions of the book is, do you resign yourself to the fact that one day your life might be empty or try to fill it up with new friends and "family"?

What does having a community of friends and family mean to you?

I think family and community is all about meeting that fundamental human need of belonging. On a family level it's about looking after the needs and concerns of your household and also spending time with each other. On a community level I think it's about having that wider connection outside the household, whether it's based on location, belief, or commonality. It's about looking out for one another and caring about what happens to other people.

The discussion of race in today's world is so important. What has changed since the time your parents emigrated from Jamaica and what progress still needs to be made?

There's no doubt that things have definitely improved, but that doesn't mean they're perfect. My mum used to talk about how when she first came to the country people would sometimes cross the road to avoid her. The fact that that kind of blatant racism is now no longer socially acceptable doesn't mean that racism no longer exists. Often it goes underground, becomes more subtle—more insidious. We need more diversity in power. My children need to see people who look like them in every single walk of life from the very top all the way down; they need to feel that they aren't going to be judged by the color of their skin or the way that they speak.

You wrote a beautiful cast of characters, each with a very distinct personality. Where do you draw inspiration from to help you breathe life into each character and make them jump off the page?

I've always been a bit of a people watcher. I love nothing more than spending a few hours in a café pretending to work but actually observing what's going on around me, and there are always so many characters to choose from! Loud people, quiet people, people who like to tell jokes, and people who are a little more reserved. That's one of the wonderful things about human beings—we're so diverse! Also I often read my work aloud as I'm writing, particularly with dialogue. That way I can check that it sounds natural, the way a real person might speak.

Is there a character you identify with the most in *All the Lonely People*? Why?

I think it's got to be Hubert. He reminds me partly of my father but also the elderly version of myself I fear awaits me in the future.

I like the fact that even though he's in his eighties Hubert is stylish and still takes pride in his appearance. Both my parents are very similar in this regard and so, I fear, am I!

What do you hope your readers will take away from reading *All the Lonely People*?

Primarily that ordinary people can do extraordinary things when they put their minds to it. I think all too often it's easy to feel powerless or to assume that the only change that can come about is from the top down. What *All the Lonely People* shows is that when we come together with a common cause, we can make a difference. I also love the idea of having a grand ambition. I think it's good to have unrealistic targets, to, in effect, shoot for the moon. Too often we limit ourselves to what we believe is possible, which has the potential to blind us to the real possibilities before us.

Was there any research you did to make sure the flashback chapters were historically accurate?

I did a great deal of research and there are some wonderful resources out there. YouTube has some wonderful old Pathé newsreels from the period, which helped me get a picture in my head of both the West Indies and the UK in the 1950s and beyond. Other resources that were helpful were:



- *Mother Country: Real Stories of the Windrush Children*, edited by Charlie Brinkhurst-Cuff (Headline)
- *Back in Time for Brixton* (BBC 2)
- *Black Nurses: The Women Who Saved the NHS* (BBC 4)

You wrote several books before *All the Lonely People*. Does your writing process change from book to book?

Absolutely. Although I wouldn't say it changes so much as it adapts! *All the Lonely People* is actually my seventeenth book and each book I write is a learning process. I'd like to say that it gets easier but I'd be lying! I treat each story I write as a fresh challenge. I hate the idea of just churning out the same thing book after book. My readers deserve more than this and I'd be bored to tears!

When did you realize that you wanted to become a writer?

I've always loved books right back to when I was very small and trips to the library were the highlight of my week. On one of those visits I remember picking up a book called *Just William* by Richmal Crompton. It was about a schoolboy called William who constantly found himself in all sorts of scrapes through "no fault" of his own. I enjoyed it so much that the very first thing I did after reading the last page was to borrow my dad's old typewriter and attempt to write my own version called *Just Michael*!

When you're not writing, what are your favorite hobbies or things to do?

After a morning spent writing I like to do anything that involves not staring at a screen! Usually the first thing I'll do is get outside and take my dog for a walk. He's a rescue greyhound and loves being outside, and so whether it's sunny, rainy, or snowing he makes me take him out. Normally I'll wear my headphones and listen to an audiobook, or sometimes I'll leave the headphones at home and instead listen to my thoughts! Other than that I enjoy reading (I usually have at least two or three books going on at once), going to the gym (mostly because it's a great place to listen to audiobooks or catch up on podcasts and still get fit!), and watching good drama on TV (recent favorites have included *The Good Fight*, *Ozark*, and *Line of Duty*).

What's one thing you want all your readers to know about you?

That I love being a writer and I care about what I do. Each book I write is a labor of love and takes a lot of time, blood, sweat, and tears, and I'm happy to do that because I really believe in the power of a good story. There's nothing better than being fully immersed in a good book and meeting fantastic characters you care about and for whom you want nothing more than the happy ending that's due to them.

Understanding History to Write a Modern-Day Novel

It used to be the case that whenever anyone asked me about the research I'd undertaken during the course of writing one of my novels I'd say something debonair like, "My life is my research!" I'd raise an eyebrow as if to make it clear what an incredibly interesting person I was, constantly having adventures and living life to the fullest. The truth of the matter, however, is that I'm actually quite boring, really, and even worse I prefer it that way. I like my drama to exist only inside the pages of the books I write. Real-life drama isn't my thing, at least if I can help it.

I'm telling you this as a preamble to what I'm going to say over the next few pages, which in short is this: *All the Lonely People* took a lot of research. When I first came up with the idea for this story, one of the things I knew I wanted to explore was a long life lived from beginning to end. In the past I've tended to write stories about particular key moments in a character's life: the weekend of a particularly tricky birthday, the months following the reintroduction of two old school friends after a long absence, two siblings coming together after having spent a lifetime apart. But in *All the Lonely People* I wanted to examine a character's story from beginning to end as a way of thinking about how people become lonely.

To start with I had an image in my mind of a home. At first that home only has one person in it, then that person falls in love with another and there are now two. From the love of those two people comes another person, and yet another, until finally there are four people in a house where once there was one. But the story doesn't stop there no matter how much we'd like it to, and so for Hubert (because of course it is Hubert I'm talking about) the home gradually begins to empty. First Rose leaves to go to university, then David follows to live his life, and then finally (and most heartbreakingly of all) Joyce leaves too until there is only Hubert left.

I knew this was the story I wanted to tell, the story of how someone's life fills and then empties again. But to tell that story would require me to dig deeper than I ever had before, to push myself far outside my comfort zone. I'd never written a historical novel before. The farthest I'd ever gone back to was the seventies, the decade in which I was born. To write this story I was going to have to travel back twenty years before my birth to a time I had no direct experience of. In short, I was going to have to do some research.

My first port of call was my parents. That said, getting any relevant information out of them wasn't the easiest of tasks. They were consistently vague about all manner of questions and it was quite hard to pin them down. They were good at the early days, telling me wonderful

stories of life in Jamaica, but they seemed to falter when it came to talking about life in England. At first I wondered whether it was a memory thing—after all, they’re both in their eighties now—but having spoken to friends whose parents are of the same age as mine and also immigrants, I’m beginning to think that something else might be at play. I get the feeling that this haziness simply comes down to the fact that from the moment they arrived they were so busy working, struggling to make ends meet, make a life, and survive in a strange and often hostile country that much of those early days is just a blur to them.

Thankfully, however, there were plenty of other rich resources available. *Mother Country* (edited by Charlie Brinkhurst-Cuff and published in the UK by Headline) was particularly helpful. Subtitled “Real Stories of the Windrush Children,” it’s a wonderful collection of first-person stories told by the children and grandchildren of those who came from the Caribbean to England in the forties, fifties, and sixties in answer to the call to help with England’s postwar labor shortfall. Other useful references for me were novels covering the period of Hubert’s arrival in the country. Particularly helpful was *The Lonely Londoners* by Trinidadian author Sam Selvon (1956), telling of the experiences of Moses Aloetta in postwar London, and Andrea Levy’s Orange Prize-winning tale *Small Island*, offering as it does a fascinating insight into the lives of people like Hubert.

If my children had informed me they were watching YouTube videos for “research” before I started writing *All the Lonely People* I would’ve been highly skeptical, but it turns out that the online platform is another superb resource for research. Where else would I have been able to find footage of rural Jamaica from the fifties, a blue beat dance, and newsreels about the *Empire Windrush*, the ship that carried the first Caribbean arrivals to “the mother country”? Pathé newsreels entitled *The Jamaica Problem* and *No Colour Bar Dance* are particularly eye-opening about the blatant racism faced by the newly arrived West Indians. The films are at once hilarious and depressing, which is no mean feat; take a look and you’ll see what I mean.

The four-part documentary series *Windrush*, produced and directed by David Upshal and originally broadcast on BBC2 in 1998 to mark the fiftieth anniversary of the arrival of the *Empire Windrush*, is essential viewing. Its scale and depth greatly informed the creation of Hubert and his environment and I urge you to track it down and watch it. It really is worth your time.

While the majority of my research shocked, saddened, and angered me, there was a lot that put a smile on my face too. Listening to the Windrush generation talk directly about their experiences in their own words, I couldn’t help but notice how, despite all the difficulties they faced, they never seemed to let things get them down; they always found a way to keep going. And it was this spirit, more than anything, that I wanted to capture in Hubert Hezekiah Bird. I wanted to create a character who, though he faces sorrow, pain, and problems, finds a way through it all and ultimately leaves the world a better place than he found it.

"All the Book Club People Should Drink..."



When I was growing up, Jamaican Carrot Juice/Punch was a regular Sunday lunchtime treat. Here's the recipe to make your own with or without alcohol.

Ingredients:

- 4 cups water
- 4 whole carrots, peeled and cut into 3-inch pieces
- $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon nutmeg
- 1- $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoons vanilla extract
- $\frac{1}{2}$ to 1 can (14 ounces) sweetened condensed milk
- 1 cup whole milk
- 1 bottle of stout (optional)

Boil carrots until soft and save the water they're boiled in. Allow the carrots to cool.

Place carrots and two cups of the cooking water into a blender and blend until there are no large chunks left.

Add nutmeg, vanilla extract, and milk and blend until smooth.

Mix in sweetened condensed milk to taste.

Serve over ice.

*For the alcoholic version: Stir in the stout and enjoy!

"All the Book Club People Should Listen To..."

Hubert Bird's playlist would be a mixture of bluebeat, calypso, reggae, and ska spanning the '50s and '60s.

"Jamaica Blues" – Azie Lawrence

"London Is the Place for Me" – Lord Kitchener

"Rock Steady" – Alton Ellis & The Flames

"I'm in the Mood for Love" – Lord Tanamo

"Short Little Shorts" – The Mighty Sparrow

"Baa Baa Black Sheep" — Cecil Byrd, Sir Dee's Group

"I'm Sorry" – Jimmy Cliff, Sir Cavaliers Combo

"Walking Down Kings Street" – Theo Beckford

"To Be Young, Gifted and Black" – Bob Andy, Marcia Griffiths

"People Get Ready" – Slim Smith & The Uniques

"To Sir With Love" – Lynn Taitt, The Jets

"The Loser" – Derrick Harriott

"Musical Communication" – The Skatalites

"Rudy, A Message to You" – Dandy Livingstone

"Baby What You Done Me Wrong" – Bobby Kingdom and the Blue Beats

"All the Book Club People Should Read..."

BOOKS

The Lonely Londoners by Sam Selvon

The Windrush Betrayal: Exposing the Hostile Environment by Amelia
Gentleman

This Lovely City by Louise Hare

Small Island by Andrea Levy

The Story of Windrush by K. N. Chimbiri

Mother Country: Real Stories of the Windrush Children by Charlie
Brinkhurst-Cuff (ed)

Windrush Songs by James Berry (poetry)

"All the Book Club People Should Watch..."

TV

Desmond's (Channel 4, 1989-94)

Nice (BFI National Archive, 1984)

Empire Road (BBC, 1978-1979)

Small Axe Anthology (2020) -- Steve McQueen, director

FILMS

Sitting in Limbo (2020) -- Stella Corradi, director

Jemima & Johnny (1966) -- Lionel Ngakane, director

Pressure (1976) -- Horace Ové, director

To Sir with Love (1967) -- James Clavell, director

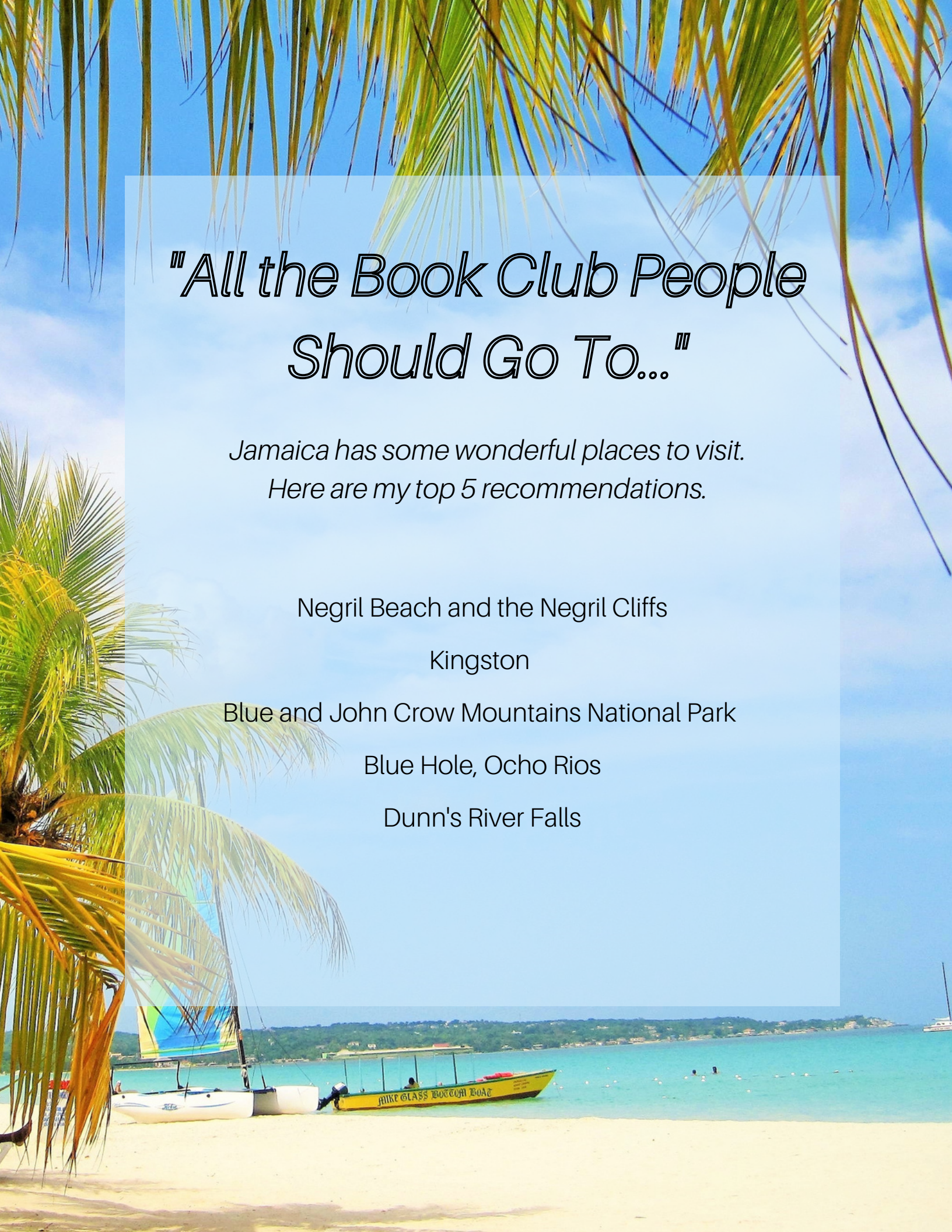
DOCUMENTARIES

Jamaicans Arriving (1950-1959), Pathé newsreel

The Unwanted: The Secret Windrush Files (2019) -- Tim Kirby, director

Conversations With Grandad (2019) -- Jamael Westman, director

Empire Road (40th Anniversary) – given the Classic TV Award in 2019 by the
American Black Film Festival Honors



"All the Book Club People Should Go To..."

*Jamaica has some wonderful places to visit.
Here are my top 5 recommendations.*

Negril Beach and the Negril Cliffs

Kingston

Blue and John Crow Mountains National Park

Blue Hole, Ocho Rios

Dunn's River Falls