

A Death in Harlem
by Karla FC Holloway

Readers' Guide and Questions for Reading Groups

1. This is a story about Harlem's women, but the main teller of the tale is Harlem's first colored policeman—Weldon Thomas. How effective and or important was it for his voice and presence to have a role in the narrative's evolution?
2. Discuss the women and their societies. How do the lives of élite women of Sugar Hill and the working class “regular folks down in Harlem” intertwine?
3. Why do you think the author offers glimpses into other Harlem deaths even though the novel's focus is on Olivia Frelon's death? What does it mean for the death of an élite, light-enough-to pass woman to carry the story even while other losses—like Maisie James'—are referenced?
(Some readers might consider parallels to Richard Wright's *Native Son* where Bessie's murder is displaced for the socially prominent (and white) Mary Dalton.
4. Holloway often has an enigmatic voice (is it Harlem's voice?) adding to the narration of the story. Why do you think she's added this dimension, and is it helpful to the novel's development of time and place?
5. Before you knew for sure, who did you think was responsible for Olivia Frelon's death? Why? Were you surprised when you learned how Frelon died?
6. What was notable about Hughes Wellington and how does the moment he leaves his childhood home resonate with gendered expectations of that era?
7. What point of view towards Black Greek letter societies does the narrative encourage? Are those references a fiction, or simply historical artifact? How do societies like the “Omada” have a contemporary parallel?
8. How does what you knew about “passing” compare with what the novel reveals about passing? How does the novel suggest that passing is a personal decision as well as a matter that involves families and communities?
9. How important is the role Holloway gives to libraries in this novel? In what ways were libraries important to your development as a reader?
10. Are there ways that you can glimpse Holloway's background as a literature and law professor playing out in the development of the story?