

Temptation Rag

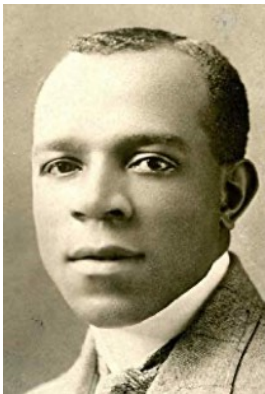
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READING GROUP GUIDE



Reading Group Guide

1. The four acts of *Temptation Rag* each begin with a chapter told from the point of view of Ben Harney's sideman, Strap Hill. What is the purpose of Strap Hill's character in the thematic context of the novel, and why is his point of view important?
2. As a young woman, May Convery is determined to have a life very different from her mother's, but are there any traits she shares with Isabelle Convery?
3. Is May's plan to elope with Mike Bernard justified by the prospect of an arranged marriage?
4. Why do you think the author chose to make Jessie Boyce a point-of-view character? Why not her husband, Ben Harney, who plays a more significant role in the story?
5. At several points in the novel, there is the hint that Mike Bernard and Ben Harney might face off in a ragtime piano contest, but ultimately the playoff never materializes, perhaps leaving the reader to wonder who would have come out the winner. Besides an adherence to historical accuracy (there is no record of a contest ever occurring between Bernard and Harney), what other purpose might the author have in leaving unresolved the question of who is the better player?



J. Rosamond Johnson, composer

6. The close relationship that develops between May and Rosamond Johnson would be highly unusual for a white woman and a black man living in the early 1900s. What in May's character and background might explain her openness to a deep spiritual and emotional connection with Mr. Johnson?
7. Jessie tells Lucinda Brown, "There's not a woman alive more independent than I am, dear." Is Jessie really as independent as she claims to be? Why, or why not?



8. Mike continually fails to establish emotionally satisfying relationships. At one point in the story, he wonders whether “there was something missing, some basic component of a human being that he was born without. Or maybe it was simply that there could be no room in his life for any love but music, an explanation he found far easier to accept.” Do you accept Mike’s overwhelming passion for his music as sufficient explanation for his emotional isolation? What other reasons might there be?

9. What is the significance of the book’s title?

10. What did you learn from this novel about the history of ragtime music in America? How do you feel about Ben Harney’s claim to be the originator of ragtime? Does the turn-of-the-century controversy over ragtime’s origins resonate in some way with modern-day concerns regarding the ethics of “cultural appropriation”?

11. In what ways are Mike and Ben alike? How are they different?

12. What is the symbolism of the gold lion’s-head ring? To Ben? To Mike? To the story?

13. Mike is clearly a deeply flawed character, but does he have any redeeming qualities? By the end of the story, has he learned anything from his mistakes? If so, what? If not, does this inspire the reader to feel more sympathetic toward him, or less?

14. How does May feel about motherhood? Is she a “good” mother? Are the decisions she makes concerning her children, especially Melvin, the right ones? Do you think May eventually tells Melvin that Mike Bernard is his father, does Mike tell him, or does Melvin discover it for himself?

15. At the end of the novel, May seems to have found love, self-acceptance, and an ability to overcome the bitterness that has plagued her throughout her adult life. Which of the other major characters, if any, similarly come to peace with themselves? What reasons might the author have for leaving certain conflicts or situations without a clear resolution? Under what circumstances can ambiguity be an effective literary device?



*Classically trained Mike Bernard, 1900
Ragtime King of the World*

