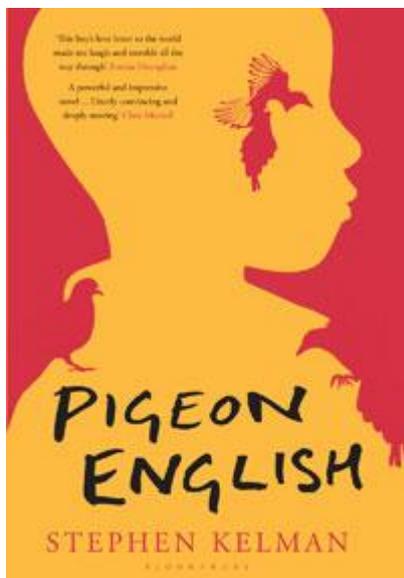


B L O O M S B U R Y

Reading Guide for *Pigeon English* by Stephen Kelman



In Brief

Deeply funny, moving, idiosyncratic and unforgettable, *Pigeon English* introduces a major new literary talent

In Detail

Newly arrived from Ghana with his mother and older sister, eleven-year-old Harrison Opoku lives on the ninth floor of a block of flats on an inner-city housing estate. The second best runner in the whole of Year 7, Harri races through his new life in his personalised trainers – the Adidas stripes drawn on with marker pen – blissfully unaware of the very real threat all around him.

With equal fascination for the local gang – the Dell Farm Crew – and the pigeon who visits his balcony, Harri absorbs the many strange elements of his new life in England: watching, listening, and learning the tricks of inner-city

survival.

But when a boy is knifed to death on the high street and a police appeal for witnesses draws only silence, Harri decides to start a murder investigation of his own. In doing so, he unwittingly endangers the fragile web his mother has spun around her family to try and keep them safe.

A story of innocence and experience, hope and harsh reality, *Pigeon English* is a spellbinding portrayal of a boy balancing on the edge of manhood and of the forces around him that try to shape the way he falls

About the Author

Stephen Kelman was born in Luton in 1976. After finishing his degree he worked variously as a warehouse operative, a careworker, and in marketing and local government administration. He decided to pursue his writing seriously in 2005, and has completed several feature screenplays since then.

Pigeon English is his first novel.

Discussion

1. *Pigeon English* is written from an eleven-year-old boy's point of view but is not a children's novel. How do 'adult' issues appear? Discuss particular scenes and characters.
2. What is the significance of the pigeon?

3. Harri's father and sister Agnes still live in Ghana, and we hear their story through a phone line. Why do you think Stephen Kelman chooses to separate the family in this way?
4. Discuss the social forces at work on Lydia, Harri's older sister. How does she compare to her friend Miquita?
5. Stephen Kelman was inspired by true events in writing this novel. Does this make a difference to the way you read it?
6. Harri is new to the UK. How do you think this informs his perspective on his neighbourhood? How are his attitudes and beliefs different from those of his peers? How are they the same?
7. Harri makes lists and diagrams to explain what he has learnt about his new life in the UK. What effect do his explanations have on you as a reader?
8. How old would you say the members of the Dell Farm Crew are? How do the way they are described and the names they go by affect the way you perceive them?
9. Discuss Harri and his friends' attitude to violence. Is it surprising?
10. How present are male role models in this story?
11. How well do you think Harri and Lydia's mother has protected them from the danger in their neighbourhood? Is there anything else she could do? What would you do in her situation?
12. Discuss the importance of the characters' physical environment on their behaviour and attitudes.
13. Discuss the ending of the novel.
14. Has the novel in any way changed the way you think about youth gangs, knife crime or urban poverty?

Further Reading

Paddy Clarke Ha Ha Ha by Roddy Doyle
The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao by Junot Diaz
Vernon God Little by DBC Pierre
The Catcher in the Rye by JD Salinger
Lord of the Flies by William Golding