



NEW YORK
TIMES
BESTSELLER

BLOOD at the ROOT

LADARRION WILLIAMS

DISCUSSION GUIDE

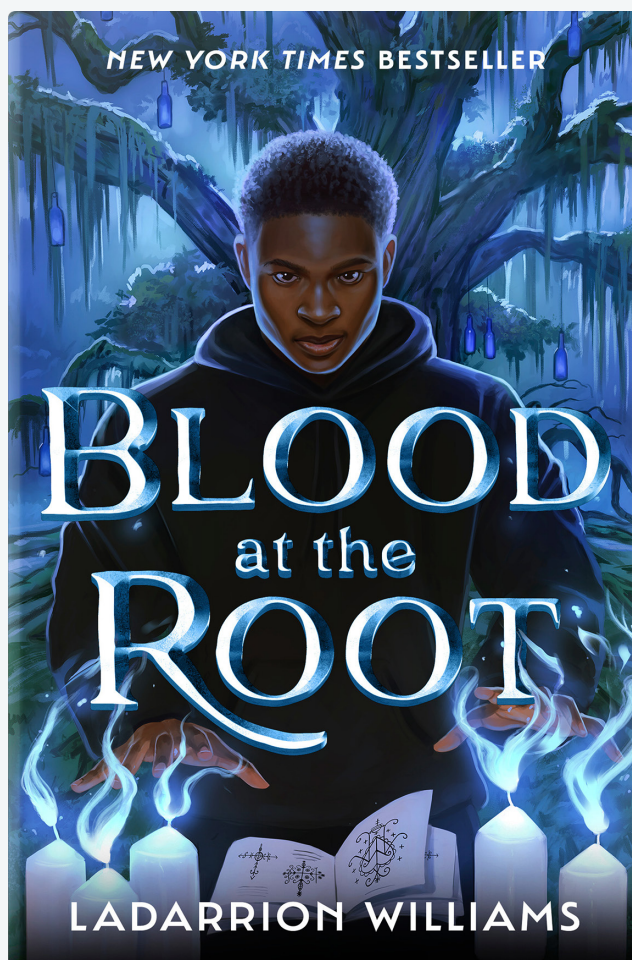
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About the Book

Ten years ago, Malik's life changed forever the night his mother mysteriously vanished and he discovered he had uncontrollable powers. Since then, **he has kept his abilities hidden**, looking out for himself and his younger foster brother, Taye. Now, at seventeen, Malik is finally ready to start a new life, far from the trauma of his past. However, a daring act to rescue Taye reveals an unexpected connection with **his long-lost grandmother: a legendary conjurer** with ties to a hidden magical university that Malik's mother attended.

At **Caiman University**, Malik discovers a future he never imagined, which includes the return of his first love, Alexis. As he seeks answers about his heritage, powers, and mother's disappearance, he uncovers cracks in the magical community, which is facing **a resurfaced ancient evil** that dates back to the Haitian Revolution. With Alexis by his side, Malik delves into the truths hidden at Caiman: **warring covens, magical politics, forbidden knowledge, and buried mysteries**.

In a wholly unique saga of family, history, and community, **Malik must embrace his legacy to save what's left of his old family and his new one**. Exploring the roots and secrets that connect us in an unforgettable contemporary setting, this heart-pounding fantasy series opener is a rich tapestry of atmosphere, intrigue, and emotion.



Themes: Fantasy, Family & Relationships

Tropes: The Chosen One,
Orphan Hero, Found Family,
Coming-of-Age, Magical Systems

About the Author



Photo credit: Photos By Jamaal

LaDarrion Williams is a Los Angeles based playwright, filmmaker, author, and screenwriter whose goal is to cultivate a new era of Black fantasy, providing space and agency for Black characters and stories in a new, fresh, and fantastical way. He is currently a resident playwright at and co-creator of The Black Creators Collective, where his play *UMOJA* made its West Coast premiere in January 2022. He also produced North Hollywood's first Black playwrights' festival at the

Waco Theater Center. *Blood at the Root* is his first novel. His viral and award-winning short film based on the same concept, is currently on YouTube and Amazon Prime. Find him on Instagram at [@ItsLaDarrion](https://www.instagram.com/ItsLaDarrion).

Pre-Reading Discussion Questions

1. Consider the title. What clues can the words *blood* and *root* give you about the theme of the book? What can blood symbolize?
2. What is the history behind HBCUs? What are some of the HBCUs still operating today?
3. When did the Haitian Revolution occur? Research the conflict. Why did Haitian immigrants tend to settle in New Orleans?
4. Make a list of the things that you think you know or have heard about Voodoo and then a list of questions you have about it. Using reputable sources, research the answers.
5. How do you define *magic*? What young adult stories or novels do you know in which magic features prominently?



6. Can you name any polytheistic religions? What are the powers of the gods and goddesses in those religions?
7. Malik attending Caiman University makes this novel a school story. What other school stories have you read, and why is this type of story so popular for young adults?
8. What were the most common places for people of the African Diaspora to relocate or settle?
9. What percentage of girls who go missing in the United States are Black and Brown?



Discussion Questions and Prompts

1. *Blood at the Root* is about power, but it is also about grief and trauma. How does the trauma surrounding Malik's mother's death affect his relationship to his powers? Name three instances in which the reader sees how grief directly affects Malik in his daily life.
2. One of the most formative experiences of Malik's childhood is his time in foster care. How is the foster system depicted in the novel, and how does his time within it affect his ability to form connections with people?
3. Community is a big part of this novel. How does Malik relate to Liberty Heights and the community at Mama Aya's as the novel progresses? Find instances that illustrate how he feels about those communities.
4. Family is a key component in shaping Malik as a person. How does Malik's concept of family grow and change over the course of the novel? Which characters are most instrumental in helping him define family for himself?
5. Malik looks at the land around Mama Aya's home and notes that "It's so secretive and beautiful even though it was built on pain. Pain builds everything in this world, and pain is all that is left when everything's been stolen from you." (p. 77) What has been stolen from Malik, and is he correct in his assertion about pain? Why or why not?
6. What are the definitions of *colorism* and *classism*? In what ways do colorism and classism affect and define the relationships among students and faculty and staff at Caiman University?
7. Given Malik's difficult childhood, should he still be considered a nepo-baby at Caiman University, as Savon says? (p. 129) Can Malik be considered a child of privilege?
8. While discussing the history of their ancestors, Alexis says to Malik that "It's just like Kumale said: Magic always comes with a price." (p. 135) What price do Malik and other major characters pay for using their magic, and is that price worth it?

9. When she tells Malik her age and backstory, Mama Aya begins to sing:

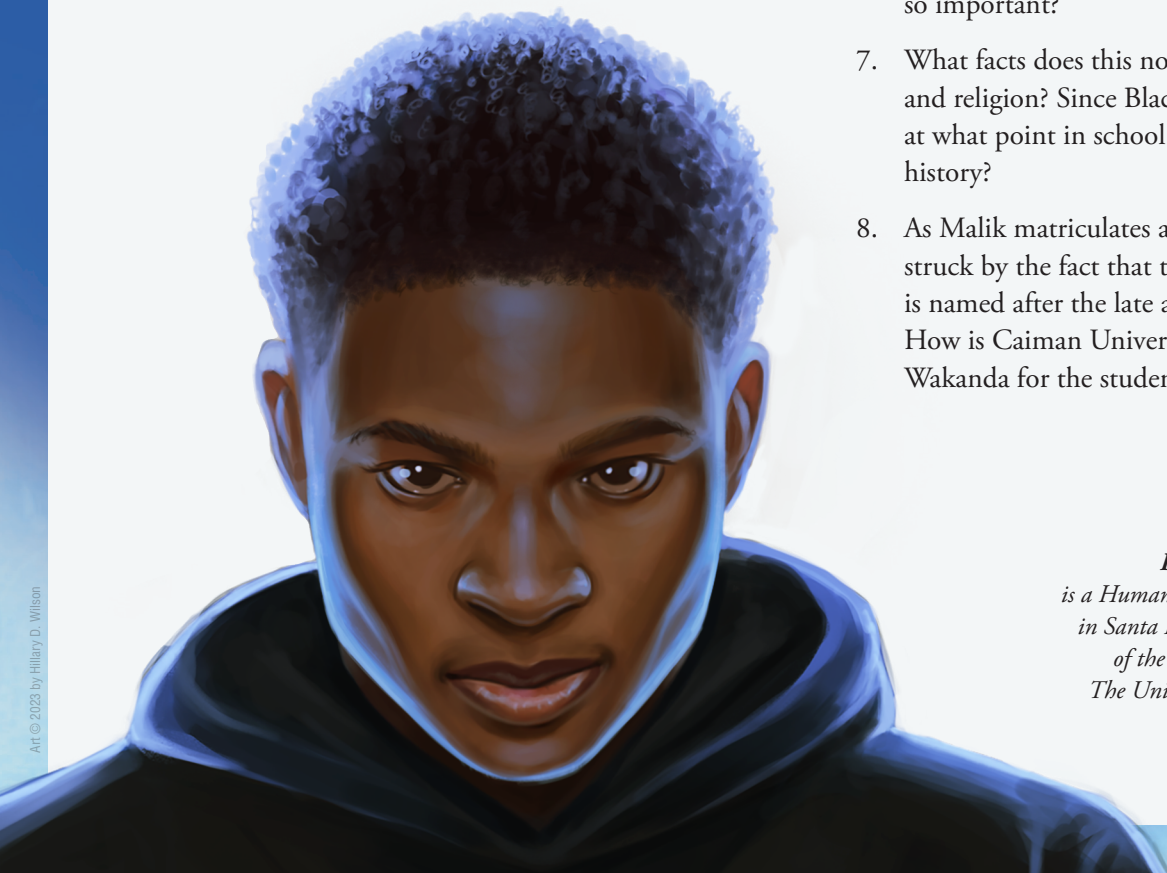
“Way down yonder in de middle of the fiel’
Angel workin’ at the chariot wheel
Not so partic’lar about workin at de wheel
But I jes’ wan-a see how de chariot feel.” (p. 142)

What is the meaning behind the lyrics and how does the song connect to Mama Aya’s history as a descendent of enslaved people?



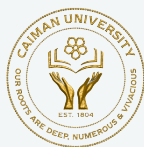
Post-Reading Discussion Questions

1. Malik makes frequent comments about race relations and class in the South. At one point, he talks about the subdivision Plantation South, commenting that “Just like the rest of the South, they try to hold on to things they should’ve let go of a long time ago.” (p. 13) What parts of the American South and its history does he mean? Do you agree?
2. How does Malik’s journey in the novel help him further understand his own Blackness? Write about an experience that you have had that helped you better understand your own identity.
3. In *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Joseph Campbell outlines a theory of the hero’s journey in which all epic stories follow a similar structure. Malik comes to accept that Black boys like him do have powers, and he joins a pantheon of literary heroes. Look up the hero’s journey and determine to what extent Malik’s story fits into it.
4. In his author’s note, LaDarrion Williams says that he wrote this novel so that Black boys could see themselves represented as magical. Have you read any of the works he lists? Which contain minority characters, and how are those characters depicted within those novels?
5. When readers first find out about the history between the Bokors and the Kwasan tribe, Savan comments that “Black-on-Black crime even making its way into the magical community.” (p. 132) How is *Black-on-Black crime* defined? Research how prevalent this type of crime is in the United States. Do you think the history between the Bokors and the Kwasan tribe counts as Black-on-Black crime?
6. Malik learns about societies within Caiman University, such as the Divine Ten (p. 133) that are directly inspired by real entities at HBCUs. What is the history behind the Divine Nine, and why are they so important?
7. What facts does this novel teach about Haitian history and religion? Since Black history is American history, at what point in school should students learn this history?
8. As Malik matriculates at Caiman University, he is struck by the fact that the School of Performing Arts is named after the late actor Chadwick Boseman. How is Caiman University a more modern version of Wakanda for the students who attend it?



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CAIMAN ADMISSIONS

Wassup, *BATR* fam!

Yes, that's gonna be our group name from now on!

Picture it: The world of *Blood at the Root*—or *BATR*, as I like to call it—came to me in early 2020. It had bothered me for years, but it didn't fully reveal itself until the entire world had to shut down due to COVID-19. For the first time in a long time, I had to sit around and think. Dream. Revel in my anger, because this was when George Floyd was murdered for all the world to see. In that fit of righteous rage, Malik Baron finally revealed himself to me and told me to write his story.

This beautiful Black boy has been with me since I was dreaming in my childhood home in Helena, Alabama. He told me to go against the grain and tell his story that will not be in death but in glory.

Far too often, we are shown the death of Black people and not their life. In plays. Films. On social media. And even in books. I came up and was in high school during the big YA boom in films and television. *Twilight*, *The Hunger Games*, *Maze Runner*, *Divergent*. *Percy Jackson & the Olympians: The Lightning Thief*, *The Vampire Diaries*, to name a few.

However, those characters sounded different from my friends. They didn't speak with that Southern twang. I didn't see my mama, my grandmama, or my cousins and 'em in those stories. Though I loved them, I felt distant from the stories and characters. And if we did appear, we were often relegated to a side character used to propel and humanize the white main character.

I'd always heard that Black boys don't read. Maybe that's why sports are pushed so hard on Black males or why so many educators push them through the system without proper accommodations. Maybe that's why publishers don't feel the need to create content geared toward them. But I must pose a question: Is it that Black boys don't read, or that Black boys are just not interested in reading whatever is being put in front of them? If you have young Black men constantly reading about white main characters—specifically white privileged male characters—who don't reflect their identity or who they simply don't relate to, it's going to make them reluctant to read.

The late, great Toni Morrison once said, "If you find a book you really want to read but it hasn't been written yet, then you must write it." I carry those words with me everywhere I go.

Black boys surely deserve stories filled with magic, wonder, and warm summer rain.

Black boys deserve origin stories.

Black boys deserve to have the fullness of their power revered.

They need to remember that they are magic—that Blackness is magic.

It's in the soil of the South. Beyond the Louisiana bayou, resting with the bones of our ancestors who triumphed over the Middle Passage. Where whitewashed Voodoo was called by its sweeter, true name and where werewolves were not diminished to lowly dogs. Where regal kings of the jungles and vampires wore their original, melanated faces, that is where the magic is. The magic lingers at the harbor docks in Charleston, South Carolina, and in the bolls of cotton in Georgia, and it blooms in Alabama, a forgotten epicenter of magical Blackness.

Let Black boys hear the cicadas sing their songs to the Alabama sky. Let them feel that syrupy sweat sticking their clothes to their body. Let their stories be filled with the smell of the sweet corn bread and collard greens from their grandma's kitchen. Let the words on the page reveal our young Black boys, who sit at the feet of their grandparents and meet God.

Let them spin magic from their fingers.

Let them hold stars in their hair.

Let Black boys be the alchemists in their stories.

Let Black boys be seen.

Let them be colored softly.

Let them fall in love.

Let them have adventures.

And let Black boys be the heroes of their own stories.

More than having magical powers, I want Black boys to find themselves by establishing their roots. I want them to make mistakes and I want them to feel seen—something I so desperately hoped for when I was a youth in Alabama. I want them to unlock a world that tells them they can choose who they want to be. A world that tells them they deserve to be centered and loved, whether they decide to wield a magical sword, astral-project to another dimension, or find love in a whirlwind romance. When Black boys find magic, they find themselves.

Stay Blackgical, *BATR* fam!

Sincerely,

LaDarrion Williams

LaDarrion Williams



Praise for
BLOOD
at the
ROOT



★ “A novel **long overdue.**”

—*School Library Journal*, starred review

“Extensive worldbuilding **incorporates**
West African, Caribbean, and Black American history and cultures
to explain a magical reality hidden from view.”

—*Kirkus Reviews*

“A high-intensity **celebration of Black culture, history, and power.**”

—*Publishers Weekly*

“**Impressive worldbuilding** blends African and Black American history and cultures
with a secret society of influential hoodoo and vodun practitioners.”

—*Booklist*

“**Readers will eagerly anticipate what comes next.**”

—*The Bulletin*

“*Blood at the Root* is **a story of community and legacy**
that’s clearly aiming to do something very different in this genre space.”

—*Paste Magazine*



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