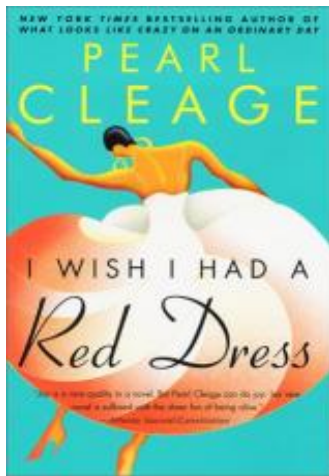


I Wish I Had a Red Dress

by Pearl Cleage



About the Book

Returning to Idlewild, Michigan and some of the characters who captured readers' hearts in her bestseller, **What Looks Like Crazy on an Ordinary Day**, Pearl Cleage writes a beautifully realized work about modern times, second chances, and making a difference in other people's lives. Joyce Mitchell, widowed too young, has a full life as a social worker, one filled with purpose and good friends. But she's begun thinking about putting aside the black clothes she's found so easy to wear for so long and getting a red dress. She is also realizing that she needs something more in her life. When her best friend, Sister, fixes her up with the tallest, sexiest man she's ever met, she sees all sorts of possibilities -- and too many reasons why it's the wrong time to fall in love.

And Joyce has to quickly figure out what to do with the Sewing Circus, the all-girl group she founded to provide day care services and counseling to local girls, many of whom are single mothers. For many of these young women, the Sewing Circus is a lifeline amid drug problems and abusive relationships. But the government has decided not to fund her program, and Joyce is desperately looking for alternatives...while one of the Sewing Circus members finds herself fighting for her life in this provocative and blazingly frank look at contemporary African American issues and universal matters of the heart.

Discussion Guide

1. One of the characters, Sister, makes up a list of questions for discussing movies at the Sewing Circus's film festival. She begins with: "Do I believe this character exists in the real world? Do I like her?" Apply this question to the novel's protagonist, Joyce.
2. What does Joyce's "red dress" symbolize?
3. Joyce feels that movies can provide life lessons for the girls in the Sewing Circus: "My hope is that if they can

recognize preventable foolishness on the screen, the lessons they learn will carry over into their real lives." (p. 77). Do you agree with Joyce? What are other benefits, or dangers, of exposing young people to art, whether it's literature, painting, or the performing arts?

4. "That the problem with black women" says Bill. He adds, "The essence of true love is surrender. All the great poets agree on that. And if there is one thing a black woman will not do, it's surrender! No wonder nobody can stay together for longer than twenty minutes at a time." (p. 239). Do you agree this is the problem with black women in relationships?

5. Love relationships are a major theme in this novel. Can you identify three "prototypes" or different kinds of heterosexual intimate relationships depicted through the book? Are any exclusive to the African-American community?

6. Black men are working to "get their act together" in this book. Bill's workshop comes up with a list of "For Men Only" goals. If you could add your "two cents," what list would you create for them?

Author Bio

Pearl Cleage is the author of *MAD AT MILES: A Black Woman's Guide to Truth and Deals with the Devil and Other Reasons to Riot*. An accomplished Playwright, she teaches playwriting at Spelman College, is a cofounder of the literary magazine *Catalyst* and writes a column for the *Atlanta Tribune*. Her first novel, *WHAT LOOKS LIKE CRAZY ON AN ORDINARY DAY*, was Oprah book of the month. Ms. Cleage lives in Atlanta with her husband.

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