Another Country Book Two Discussion Prompts

Character-focused Questions (Page numbers refer to Vintage International Edition):

Eric:

- Consider Eric’s relationship with Yves, especially the location of their love affair (pg. 183). Will their love survive in America?
- Eric, like Leona, is from the South. What do we know about Eric’s childhood (pp. 193-206)?
- Some scholars have thought of Eric as a healing influence in the novel, partly because of his self-knowledge and comfort with himself. But what about his relationship with Rufus, which was characterized by power struggles and insecurities?
- Reflect on Eric’s comment to Vivaldo: (p. 336)

“I mean, I think you’ve got to be truthful about the life you have. Otherwise, there’s no possibility of achieving the life you want.”

Cass:

- In Book One, Cass appeared contented and seemed to be a dedicated wife to Richard. Consider the following passages in Book Two:

“Great men’s wives, indeed! . . . How I’d love to explode that literary myth” (p. 235).

“I sit in that house like—like a housekeeper. I take care of the kids and make meals and scrub toilet bowls and answer the phone and he just—doesn’t see me. He’s always working” (p. 274).

- What happens to instigate this change in Cass—or was this always there? Also, consider Cass’s reflection on love (p. 363).

“Terrifying, that the loss of intimacy with one person results in the freezing over of the world, and the loss of oneself! And terrifying that the terms of love are so rigorous, its checks and liberties so tightly bound together.”

- Also, consider the following passage, when Cass tells Richard about her affair with Eric: (p. 374)

“It’s not true. I don’t believe you. Why Eric? Why did you go with him?’
“He has something—something I needed very badly.”

“What is that, Cass?”

“A sense of himself.”

Ida:

- Does Vivaldo see Ida as an extension of his relationship with Rufus? How so?

- Ida loves her brother dearly and tells Vivaldo that he could never really know Rufus—as a black man. But does Ida truly accept and know Rufus? Consider this passage, when she is talking about Eric’s relationship with Rufus to Vivaldo: (p. 323)

  “He wanted a roll in the hay with my brother, too,” she said. “He wanted to make him as sick as he is.”

- Consider this following passage (when Ida is talking with Cass): (p. 350)

  “But, Cass, ask yourself, look out and ask yourself – wouldn’t you hate all white people if they kept you in prison here?” They were rolling up startling Seventh Avenue. The entire population seemed to be in the streets, draped, almost, from lamp-posts, stoops, and hydrants, and walking through the traffic as though it were not there. ‘Kept you here, and stunted you and starved you, and made you watch your mother and father and sister and lover and brother and son and daughter die or go mad or go under, before your very eyes? And not in a hurry, like from one day to the next, but, every day, every day, for years, for generations? Shit. They keep you here because you’re black, while they go around jerking themselves off with all the jazz about the land of the free and the home of the brave. And they want you to jerk yourself off with the same music, too, only keep your distance. Some days, honey, I wish I could turn myself into one big fist and grind this miserable country to powder. Some days, I don’t believe it has a right to exist. Now, you’ve never felt like that, and Vivaldo’s never felt like that. Vivaldo didn’t want to know my brother was dying because he doesn’t want to know that my brother would still be alive if he hadn’t been born black.”

- In talking about Another Country, James Baldwin said that “The principle action was the journey of Ida and Vivaldo toward some kind of coherence.” (David Leeming’s James Baldwin: A Biography, p. 203). What are your thoughts on that, and what do you think Ida’s motivation is in regards to her relationship with Vivaldo?
Thematic Questions (Page numbers refer to Vintage International Edition):

1. Especially now, as the police murder of George Floyd is calling the entire country to confront American racism in all its facets, we continue to learn from James Baldwin.

   • How does Baldwin represent the police—outside the Greenwich Village bar where Ida has her singing debut (248), in the conversation between Eric and Cas about the treatment of street boys by the French police (290)?

   • To what extent does racism permeate the language of Richard, Jane, Vivaldo, Ida, and Rufus—even Eric and Cas? Are there significant distinctions between how American racism manifests itself in the attitudes of these characters?

2. To what extent are the relationships between men and women in *Another Country* tainted by men insecure of their own masculinity and/or women trapped in webs of white/male power?

3. Do traditional values like fidelity and commitment have any meaning in the lives of Baldwin’s characters? Does the novel suggest a view of love that reimagines these traditional values?

4. Rufus, Ida, Richard, Vivaldo, Jane, and Eric are all artists. How does their struggle to “make it” impact their sense of self and their intimate relationships with others?

5. Ida repeatedly talks about the necessity of “paying your dues.” What does this phrase mean to Ida and in the lives of other characters?

6. As we saw in Book 1, Baldwin’s title *Another Country* is enigmatic and multivalent. How does Book 2 further our understanding of the multiple significations of this title?