With *Perfect Peace*, Black delivers a smoldering masterpiece about the cost of self-hatred and unhealed childhood wounds. Returning to rural Swamp Creek, Arkansas for its setting, this novel opens in the 1940s as Gus and Emma Jean Peace prepare for the arrival of their seventh child. Emma Jean wants nothing more desperately than a daughter—after having birthed six boys—in order to love and nurture a girl the way she once dreamed of being adored. When her seventh son slivers from her womb, she decides to force God’s hand and to rear the child as the daughter she always wanted. Because of Emma Jean’s cunning and stealth, she is able to perpetuate the charade—until the child’s biology promises to expose her scheme. She then makes a fatal decision, in an attempt to right the wrong she’s done, but her error is far too egregious to correct. The child spends his adolescent years battling social constructions of gender which make it practically impossible for him to forge a viable identity and a healthy self-esteem. Yet he survives, despite the abuse he endures both from his family and the larger community, and, in the end, it’s Emma Jean who pays for attempting to use her child’s life for her own personal healing.

**Discussion Questions**

1. Emma Jean’s decision seems to be unjustifiable. However, is it possible to understand why Emma Jean does what she does? Who is really to blame? Without having healed from her own childhood abuse, can she really be held responsible for her current psychological well-being?

2. How does Gus’s emotional fragility contribute unto his abuse of Paul? How is he contradictory in this respect?

3. How do Perfect’s brothers both help and hinder her transformation into malehood/masculinity?

4. What is the role Sugar Baby plays in Paul’s spiritual evolution? Although they speak infrequently, Sugar Baby’s impact on Perfect/Paul is indelible. Why?

5. What are the places in the novel where Emma Jean’s love for her children is made obvious? Cite examples of her being a dedicated, nurturing mother.

6. What role does the church play in the social construction of gender in Swamp Creek? How does the church/church rhetoric “enslave” its members around issues of gender/sexuality?

7. Most readers are surprised by the revelation of Mister’s sexuality. Why do you think readers don’t suspect him?

8. Eva Mae loves Perfect Paul, regardless of his gender identification. Why isn’t Paul attracted to her, especially with all she’s done to love and protect him?

9. The Jordan River is personified, such that it assumes a life of its own. How does the Jordan assist Swamp Creek residents in dealing with their communal and personal issues? Is it a “kind” character or a “mean, wrathful” one?

10. When Emma Jean begins to hear The Voice, it sounds like her own conscience at one point and, at other times, it sounds like her mother, and at other times it sounds like something Omniscient. What is the role of The Voice and how does it lead to Emma Jean’s ultimate cleansing?

**How *Perfect Peace* was written**

I conceived this book one day, in 2005, when I saw a child and couldn’t determine its gender. Was it a boy or girl? Then I wondered why it mattered at all. I knew the child was human; that wasn’t up for question. But my desire to know lingered. I began to imagine the price the child was paying as the world sorted out its gender, or created one. My imagination ran free. I situated the story in the rural, segregated south in order to explore the specific ways in which southern black folk grapple with issues of gender, and I wanted to examine just how far a community is willing to go to “right” what they feel is wrong in one of its members. I also wanted to examine the ways in which patriarchy and homophobia have shaped the black community’s constructs of God and salvation, leading its members to denounce and demean all in the name of something holy.
Perfect Peace was extremely difficult to write for three reasons: (1) appropriating the language and perception of black people at the time with regards to social dimensions of gender and sexuality, (2) trying to imagine how a child would cope with such an extraordinary identity crisis in the midst of people who aren’t sympathetic to such a dilemma, and (3) trying to figure out how such a kaleidoscope of events could be survived BEFORE the age of therapy and counseling, at least in the black community. But this was important because many who were different DID survive. Perfect Peace is one telling/imagining of that great survival.

This novel is dear to me and close to my heart because it speaks for those who have been silenced. It validates their existence and suggests to the world that they are not only human, but very possibly divine. More specifically, it forces readers to look at their very narrow ideas of gender and sexuality in hopes of freeing them to love and respect those whom they’ve traditionally abused and rejected. This book is my Word from God. It announces, partly, why I walk the planet at all: to teach the world that every person is a flower in God’s bouquet—precious, rare, sweet, fragile—and should be honored thusly. Only then will God reveal God’s self to the world, and we’ll see that we all were made in the image. With each word I write, I hope to move humanity toward the day when we’ll see that image face to face and we’ll know, finally, that God was nothing but all of us combined.

Praise for Perfect Peace

“Daniel Black understands the racial psychology and culture of the South so well that he can show, not tell, and his characters’ actions always ring true. This novel is a powerful exploration of a small group of individuals who hold each other in high regard. The love among members of this family is severely challenged, but the challenge is triumphantly met. Each child grows to manhood and achieves success according to his gifts. Through their lives we experience disappointment and sorrow, but also fulfillment and joy. Perfect Peace is an intense and satisfying read.” --Greg Iles, New York Times bestselling author of The Devil's Punchbowl

“Perfect Peace is a wonderful story filled with richly drawn characters who negotiate their complex relationships with passion and clarity. Daniel Black writes of growing up in a small town with humor, grace and forgiveness.” --Adriana Trigiani, New York Times bestselling author of Very Valentine and the Big Stone Gap Series

“Craft is not the word for this joyfully inscribed novel. The proper word is art. The book is a brave and complicated story perfectly told. Mr. Black offers a cultural gift to be welcomed.” --Houston A. Baker, Jr., author of the American Book Award winning Betrayal: How Black Intellectuals have abandoned the Ideals of the Civil Rights Era.

"Perfect Peace is a morality tale of the consequences of letting our selfish needs trap the ones we love into roles they weren't born to play. The characters here are as flawed, their sins numerous, as any living human being held under the lens, but the author brings a compassion and understanding to their plights." - -Mat Johnson, award-winning author of Incognegro, Drop, and Hunting in Harlem

"Daniel Black has pried open the isolated lives of rural southerners, allowing us to peek inside. To understand the complexities of the southern experience, read Perfect Peace.” --Dr. Karyn Lacy, professor of Sociology, University of Michigan, author of Blue Chip Black: Race, Class, and Status in the New Black Middle Class

"Mr. Black’s novel nudges our sense of awareness and accountability. His narrative eloquently poses difficult questions with disarming kindness: ‘Do you know who you are? Do you know what you do? Do you know that there is never an excuse?’ The relevance of this work with regard to all we are and all we do far exceeds his adroitly simple telling of the tale.” --Keith Hamilton Cobb, actor

“Part cautionary tale, part folk tale, part fable, Daniel Black's Perfect Peace is a complete triumph. It bursts with emotions as intense as opera. Perfect Peace will bring you to tears and laughter. You will recognize characters from your own life, and perhaps even recognize yourself. In Emma Jean Peace, a mid-20th-Century rural Southern black woman who wants a daughter so desperately that she raises her infant son as a girl, Dr. Black has created a character as complex, equivocal and unforgettable as Scarlett O'Hara.” -- Larry Duplechan, author of Blackbird, Captain Swing, and the Lambda Literary Award-winning Got 'Til It's Gone