



FENTON JOHNSON

# Scissors, Paper, Rock



## Discussion Guide



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# Kentucky Reads

**K**entucky Humanities has selected Fenton Johnson's *Scissors, Paper, Rock* for its 2024 Kentucky Reads. The novel will serve as a focal point for community-wide book discussions that promote a shared literary experience and celebrate the diverse voices and stories that shape Kentucky's rich cultural landscape.

Published by the University Press of Kentucky, *Scissors, Paper, Rock* delves into the complexities of human relationships, identity, and the search for self-discovery and contrasts the families we inherit, our blood ties, with the families we choose, our partners in love and our friends. Fenton Johnson, an accomplished author, and native Kentuckian, brings his

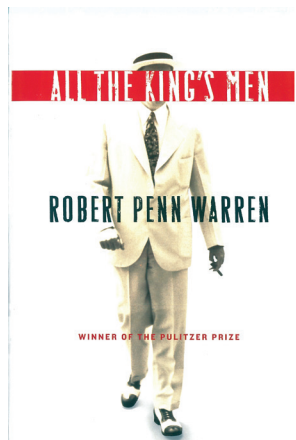
unique storytelling prowess to illuminate the intricacies of life and connections that bind us together.

Praise for Fenton Johnson's *Scissors, Paper, Rock*:

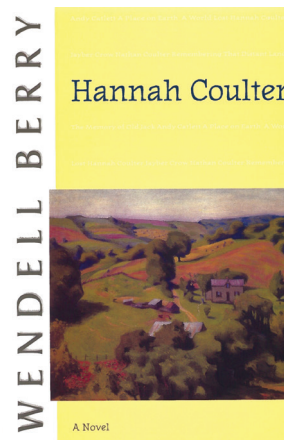
*Read the eleven brief pieces of this brilliant novel and you'll never again hear its title phrase without feeling chills. . . . Emotional jolts lurk on every page. . . . Every few pages you'll pause, realizing you've just read one of the best paragraphs you've ever come across. Yes, the book's about dying, but in the same way that birthday parties are about growing old.*

—*Entertainment Weekly*

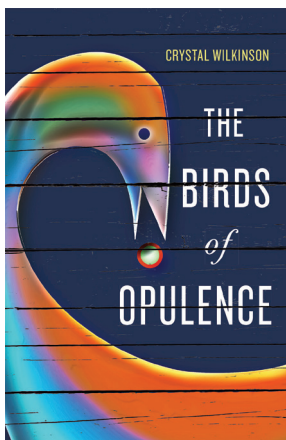
## Previous Kentucky Reads Selections



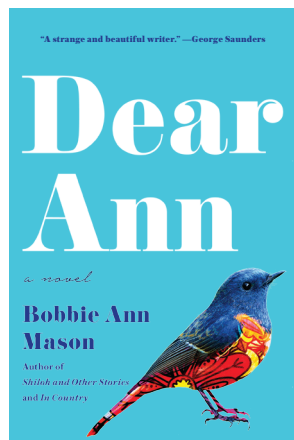
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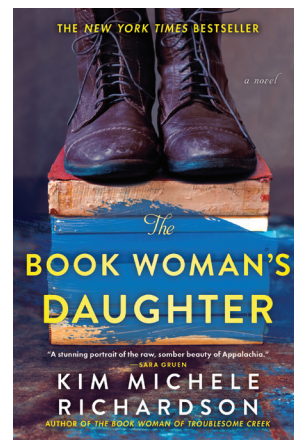
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# Meet Fenton Johnson



By Willie Carver

**N**o spiritual leader speaks to me with such slow-building wisdom as RuPaul Charles. After years of watching him, I am quick to notice those who share his characteristics. RuPaul likes cowboys, so much so that he married one, a Wyoming rancher. Likewise, Fenton Johnson, as Pam Houston points out in her foreword to the newest edition of *Scissors, Paper, Rock*, has a weakness for cowboys. I trust not only Fenton Johnson's taste in men (as I too love a good cowboy), but also his courageous whimsy to make a fun and light-hearted joke connected to Houston's beautiful collection of stories in their first moments together.

This gets me to the second quality, playfulness, which is the purpose and crux of all good drag.

In a conversation with Claire Giangravé at *Religion News*, Johnson said this of creativity, "For anyone who sits down by themselves for the first time, the first thing that happens is boredom . . . After a while, there is really difficult, challenging boredom. Then, if you're persistent long enough, you get to a place that I call transcendent boredom, which is when the mind starts getting creative."

In getting us to chuckle at the idea of transcendent boredom, Johnson opens a door so that we might feel safe to consider his holy concept, that being alone allows us the freedom and potential to unlock those sacred creative forces from which we might otherwise distract ourselves. This door is so serious to him that he has written an entire book, *At the Center of All Beauty: The Dignity and Challenge of Solitude*, on the topic.

Johnson's fiction exists in worlds created in the dignity and the challenge of such solitude.

In an interview with Connecticut Poet Laureate Margaret Gibson, Johnson, in his usual way of answering questions as if he had prepared for them, says "[writing is] a moment of stillness, . . . a place where demons can arise . . . sitting alone in silence with a blank page in front of you, you are inviting the demons to arise, but once . . . you're doing something . . . consciously alone . . . the demons are incarnated . . . and once they become enflashed . . . you realize that they're actually not as big as when you were allowing them to haunt your imagination." The concept is a spiritual practice that Johnson does to help readers deal with similar demons through his work.

Johnson's solitude allows for the embodiment, and facing, of demons, while also giving him space for serious treatment of characters, characters into which he breathes as much soul as texts allow. He notes, in the afterward of *Scissors, Paper, Rock*, when quoting one of his characters, "It is important to note that I am quoting not Fenton Johnson but Joe Ray Hardin [a character], who like all children are of their parents even as they have lives and memories of their own."

The final relative clause may as well have been spoken by Rose Ella, the mother character of *Scissors, Paper, Rock*; that we are "of" someone else

while being our own person is a central theme in Johnson's fiction. We are independent souls of some sort, but we cannot exist, at least in this plane, without the meaning afforded us by our interaction with others.

Fenton Johnson would know all too well the sort of interactions from others that give us meaning, no matter his lifelong commitment to solitude. He is the ninth of nine children in a family that made whiskey and stories, so the connection we have to one another is a part of his tradition emerging in his childhood.

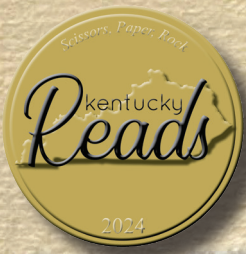
Johnson's commitment to others has meant, to use his own words, "playing a role in one of the 20th century's great human rights struggles" and "creating a classroom, many times over, where students transformed knowledge into wisdom . . . creating a space for the voiceless to be heard." A worker of good in human rights and creator of space, Johnson's life demonstrates the palpable energy and inhabitable room for expansion formed by the creative work of solitude.

That work has been vast and greatly lauded. His novels have marked the literary landscape, showing Johnson an introspective, detailed, and thoughtful worker of fiction. His nonfiction, *Keeping Faith: A Skeptic's Journey*, received the 2004 KY Literary Award for Nonfiction and the 2004 Lambda Literary Award. His *Geography of the Heart* garnered a Lambda Literary Award and the American Library Association Award. Johnson has equally won awards from the Wallace Stegner and James Michener Fellowships and National Endowment for the Arts Fellowships, an American Library Association's Stonewall Book Award, and a 2007 fellowship from the Guggenheim Foundation.

His career demonstrates his commitment to words, which reflect a commitment to finding the creative spark at the end of silence, a work of love embarked upon so others may answer questions alongside him. Despite many harrowing moments in life, he finds beauty beyond (or perhaps through) the demons and offers it to those ready to read it; in other words, he creates beauty where he sits rather than chasing it down and capturing it.

I know a similar feeling. RuPaul repeats frequently, "Happiness is wanting what you already have." To the unready ear, that might read as, "Get what you want, and you will be happy." Of course, the idea can't be understood in terms of acquisition; it is born of those who know acceptance. Happiness is already there, or at least an appreciation of life can be. Johnson knows acceptance. He says in "Going it Alone," his essay in *Harpers*, "I seek to live not in anticipation but in embrace of the life I have been given." A man from rural Kentucky with a rich life that has held moments of beauty and tragedy, Johnson uses all of what he has been given to give back through his writing. He embraces, pulls into himself, what already is, and stands there ready to create.

The beauty of that, for the reader, is that in many ways he makes our starting point those lessons he manifests for us, as long as we're quiet enough, brave enough, and ready to hear them.



# Scissors, Paper, Rock

By Willie Carver

## Saying the Unsayable and Telling the Story: Fenton Johnson's *Scissors, Paper, Rock*

**M**y cousin Jamie Carroll was ten years older than me. Like me, he was an effeminate, gay, Appalachian man with a flair for the dramatic. Like me, he hailed from the holler along Beaver Creek in the Appalachian Mountains of eastern Kentucky. Like me, the reality of his existence could not be spoken with words during his childhood in our rural Appalachian holler. Fourteen years ago, Jamie was murdered, sealed into a storage container, and then buried in the basement of an expensive home in Louisville. The two men who left his body were later arrested.

The loss of family was hard enough, but the words of Josh Schneider, the assistant Kentucky Commonwealth attorney, in explaining why he thought the murder suspects had chosen Jamie for their crime, were a sharp and stabbing echo in the minds of his rural mountain kin who had loved him: “Jamie Carroll was the kind of guy no one would miss.”

We know what he means, of course: no one with money, no one with power, no one with connections would miss him. Jamie’s family, like mine, lacked those things.

Jamie was, and is, terribly missed. In her grief, Jamie’s mother Ellen Jean was quoted in multiple outlets as saying these words: “Oh, my baby, what did I do to lose you?”

Jamie’s story is hardly unique, nor is Ellen Jean’s grief. In *Scissors, Paper, Rock*, Fenton Johnson expertly insists on laying bare the meanings that our connections with each other carry as well as the weight of the unsaid or unsayable in navigating those meanings.

In the title story of the collection, Rose Ella, upon finally hearing from her son Rafael, who has spent the last decade in San Francisco and has come home with HIV, is panged by her past silence and her feelings about her duty to her son’s prior self. Seated in a chair under the stars and accompanied by the calls of whippoorwills and sounds of frogs, she speaks to him honestly, in a searching grief, “Would it have made a difference if you could have told somebody, talked to somebody, back then?” (183). Her words, written two decades before Ellen Jean would cry hers out in pain, echo the feeling, the human ability

to look back and see our failures to speak what our society or our roles, chosen or given, deem unspeakable.

Surely tens of thousands of rural Southern and Appalachian women have uttered similar words when faced with the reality of their queer child’s pain or circumstance.

Unlike Ellen Jean, the universe grants Rose Ella a response from her son, still alive, seated across from her and hearing those same frogs and whippoorwills, who speaks truth with such clarity that it has the instant effect of grace: “What words could I have used? I’d never heard them. You’d never heard them. And even if I’d had the words—who would I have talked to?” (183).

While Ellen Jean will never hear a response from her son, a son who left eastern Kentucky for Louisville for many of the same reasons as Rafael in his leaving for San Francisco—in search of freedom that bears a cost of separation from family—I like to imagine, or rather I hope, that Ellen Jean has felt this response in her heart. This is what Jamie would have said to her if given the chance.

That I know this is part of the long-lasting magic of Johnson’s *Scissors, Paper, Rock*. This collection’s greatest strength originates in his conjuring of characters who are so real that we can feel their pulse—in anger, in grief, in passion—beating across the paper and into our own hands: we know these people. We have felt them before in our lives, fleeting shadows of color and skin and choices that we have been and have touched.

In “Back Where She Came From,” two high school sweethearts introduce what will become a long-threaded question about the past, to what extent it can or should be resurrected. It is a harbinger of the many stories that question the past’s effect on the present as well as the present’s effect on the past, a melody brought to its crescendo in the title story and poignantly answered in “Miss Camilla Speaks,” when the future and love are brought in as lights capable of guiding our present actions and understanding of the past. In “Little Deaths,” a respectable country woman makes a choice to create her own life despite the narrative laid out for her. In “Guilt,” a father wrestles with

his culpability and the power of family and love to, if not solve it, then to give it a large enough landscape in which to exist without immediately undoing him. The ontological truth of these characters in their experiences is self-evident to a reader who has had the messy luck of knowing humans. This building of real people on the page speaks particularly truthfully in its awkwardness in “Cowboys,” in some ways a travel story in which Rafael meets a wayward German tourist in search of a cowboy. However, in other ways, it is a story of imperfect people speaking imperfect truths based upon imperfect understandings not only of others but of themselves. These truths, however imperfect, create new worlds, new inhabitable narrative possibilities, for Rafael and his traveling companion.

Rafael’s travel story, though presented in the form of a short story, emphasizes larger themes in *Scissors, Paper, Rock* about what we are willing to say aloud. The collection brings to the forefront characters breaking from narratives that have been laid out for them, about how story begets story, how it creates larger, fractalizing universes spiraling from new choices. Those choices may often seem to free us from others, but those same choices simultaneously bind us to them all the more tightly. This binding freedom plays out in many ways throughout

the collection, but nowhere more breathtakingly than in “All Fall Down,” when Tom and Rose Ella’s grief is a reminder that the past can be a gravity that pulls us, and keeps us, together.

A similar gravity pulls together these seemingly disparate short stories into a novel. In *Scissors, Paper, Rock*, Johnson expertly chooses a collection of otherwise self-contained texts, which emphasizes a truth about the human condition: we are in some light self-contained stories, but we are also not fully readable, speakable, without the context of other humans. Others’ stories, as the reader learns from Rafael’s experience in California, give us freedom to write our own, and others’ stories, as we learn in his return to Kentucky, can also give meaning, gravity, and weight to the parts we don’t choose, that are foisted upon us by chance.

In reading *Scissors, Paper, Rock*, a book in many ways centered around another rural queer Kentuckian, I am reminded that we can only say that people like Rafael or Jamie are those “no one would miss” if their stories go untold. Johnson writes in defiance of the truth-value of that narrative, choosing to tell Rafael’s story all the same. In doing so, in writing this collection, he invites his readers to say the unsayable, to find the words, to create the narrative that deserves to be told.

## Willie Edward Taylor Carver Jr. Discussion Guide Author



Willie Edward Taylor Carver Jr. is an advocate, Kentucky Teacher of the Year, and the author of a bestselling collection of narrative poetry about his childhood growing up queer in Appalachia. His book, *Gay Poems for Red States* (University Press of Kentucky), was named a Book Riot Best Book of 2023, a Top Ten Best Book of Appalachia by Read Appalachia, and an IndieBound and American Bookseller’s Association’s must-have book for poetry lovers. His work exists at the intersection of queer identity, Appalachian identity, and the politics of innocence.

Willie is a candidate for an MFA in poetry at the University of Kentucky. He publishes and presents on the subjects of education, marginalization, and identity, and his story has been featured on ABC, CBS, PBS, NPR, and in *The Washington Post*, *Le Monde*, and *Good Morning America*. His advocacy has led him to engage President Biden and to testify before the United States Congressional Committee on Civil Rights and Civil Liberties. His creative work has been published in *100 Days in Appalachia*, *2RulesofWriting*, *Another Chicago Magazine*, *Largehearted Boy Blog*, *Smoky Blue Literary Magazine*, *Miracle Monocle*, and *Good River Review*.



# Discussion Questions

## “High Bridge”

Tom Hardin and Rafael can't speak in part due to “no speakable words” existing to name elements in their lives. On the one hand, having words for concepts like gay, gender nonbinary, gaslighting, or even mansplaining helps us recognize them. On the other hand, they might also cause us to label complex things without thinking them through. How important are labels, and what are the dangers and benefits to them?

Miss Camilla says of Rafael, “What he has to say is important. Otherwise, he would bring himself to speak.” Is this always true; does silence suggest importance? What about people who speak up a great deal?

## “Back Where She Came From”

Elizabeth maintains the edge in “Back Where She Came From,” set in 1991, by totally ignoring Dennis's sexual advances and pretending she doesn't see them. Yet she is the one who buys condoms. Do women and men still use these dynamics in sexual relationships? What might have changed? What is lost or gained in the changes seen today?

A common late 20th-century critique of heteronormativity (in the US) is that people “peak” in high school and move into social roles that make them so unhappy that they long for the “glory days,” whereas the relative “open narrative” of queerness allows for more freedom. What do Elizabeth and Dennis' stories have to say about this idea? How do they add to that conversation? Does Johnson touch on some universal truth about the why of seeking glory days in this story?

## “Little Deaths”

Rose Ella had her choice of any man in the country, being beautiful and a Perlite. Despite being in a relationship with Junior Camp and her mother's pleading, she chooses Tom Hardin. Why does she do this? Is this a character strength, flaw, or something else?

Rose Ella chooses to shoot the dog rather than work to save it. Where is the line between compassion and cruelty in making difficult decisions?

## “All Fall Down”

Clark Hardin prays a prayer not to “come back crippled” and he never comes back at all. How do other characters in *Scissors, Paper, Rock* seem not to know what they truly want? Have you had moments in your life in which what you thought you truly wanted wasn't what you actually wanted? How do time and saying the unsayable tie into this idea?

Tom swears, after the death of Clark, that he will do a better job of entering the lives of his “remaining sons.” How do you think he does at this goal?

After Tom strikes her and he tries to find a way to apologize, Rose Ella kisses and makes love to him. She says that she is “the one who forgives” and that this is “the source of [her] pain and power.” What do you think of this? Is this power or something else? Have you seen people with this power?

The narrator declares of Tom and Ella's grief over Clark that it is “one more binding thing—even as it belonged to them separately . . . it held them together.” How can it belong to them separately and also bring them together? In your experience, does grief work like this? What about joy?

## “The Way Things Will Always Be”

Clark stares at the wrinkled and overworked faces of Gaspard and Leola and asks, “What would bring faces to look like these?” It is clear to the reader that they have both had extremely difficult lives. Why is this not visible to Clark?

Tom tells Leola and Gaspard that “one of my boys will always bring you dog, as long as you're here to drink it.” He seems to see his boys as an extension of himself. How does this expectation come back throughout the novel in the stories we are presented (through Clark, Joe Ray, and Rafael)?

As Clark drives a drunken Leo home, he thinks, “There are . . . things he will never be able to understand but can only accept.” How does this thought tie to this story and to larger themes in the novel itself?

## “Cowboys”

Why does it matter to Rafael that he sees the words “homosexual tendencies” written out on a government form? What does this suggest about the power of words? What implications does it have for young LGBTQ youth today?

Why do you think Rafael is so angry with Willy throughout this story?

When Rafael feels sexually attracted to the cowboy, he “closes his eyes, trying for the last time to conjure a vision of the woman, any woman, who must be waiting in California” (106). He is attempting a technique now thoroughly written about in queer studies, in which



young gay people try to force their sexual feelings onto members of the opposite sex in an attempt to “convert” themselves. What does this moment teach us about how young people interact with the stories they receive?

Willy appears to have an instructive role in Rafael’s life. What do you think he is there to teach?

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### “Guilt”

Joe Ray worked hard and dreamed big, but he ultimately fails in his ambition to own Woolett and Parks or become important in the fashion world. How does this aspect of his story fit into the story of America? What themes does it share with other characters’ stories?

Joe Ray thinks that he doesn’t know which would be worse, if Michael was “dead or disabled”—a similar sentiment to Clark’s prayer. What does this book, with its many sick, injured, and dying characters, suggest about this question?

Joe Ray finds women illogical and emotional, yet he spends the bulk of his story lying to himself and even punches Flora MacKenzie. What does his story add to the conversation about the (supposed) difference between logic and emotions?

Flora suggests that every man should, “go out in serious drag at least once in his life” because “[s]ociety would transform itself overnight.” The story ends with Joe Ray, otherwise nude, putting on her hat in the middle of the night to have a drink. Is this an act of drag? Is he transformed? What do you think?

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### “Scissors, Paper, Rock”

This story begins with Rose Ella noting that Rafael has returned home, for the first time, partnerless. She doesn’t say anything and thinks that Rafael “seems to like it that way.” Whose job is it to first say the unsayable? Should the person who is marginalized initiate conversations, or should the non-marginalized person in the situation signal safety?

Rafael notes that in the South, “places laid claim to people and not the other way around.” Is this true or not? How does this novel place itself in that question?

How does the silence in the face of racism (both with Leona and Gaspard earlier in the novel and with the monk and the little boy) work in this novel? What is the collection wanting to say about silence and relationships?

Nick and Rafael have a moment of intimacy. How does this moment add to what this novel is saying about love, relationships, isolation, and the unsayable?

As he cries in the church, Rafael thinks that had he and his lover, “been allowed love—had they had the courage to seize love—might his lover still be alive?” A major queer criticism of our culture is that the shame foisted upon gay men and their love was the primary cause for the spread of HIV. How does this story suggest the same? How does this question tie to the themes of connection and saying the unsayable in this collection?

Pondering after learning of Rafael’s condition, Rose Ella, wonders, “How could grief, joy, love, or desire be spoken of, when they weren’t comprehended by the words themselves?” In other words, it is necessary to say the unsayable, but words can never truly get at the depth of what the word means to stand for. What does *Scissors, Paper, Rock*, as a collection, have to say about this question?

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### “Some Kind of Family”

Upon seeing her brother’s death and funeral, Elizabeth declares that she will live more mindfully. Based upon your experience in life and your experience with her, what do you think? Will she be or not? Why or why not?

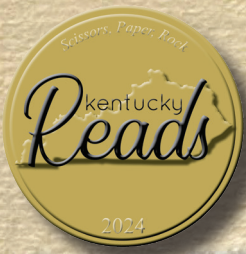
Elizabeth talks about the difference between choice families and blood families, an important concept in LGBTQ culture, where many people are abandoned by or who flee their blood families. What lessons, if any, does Johnson provide in the importance of each in this collection?

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### “Miss Camilla Speaks”

Miss Camilla introduces (or concludes, really) a contention in the story: the past as it was, the past as we want it to be, and the deeper reality that is more important than either. How does her family history and her decision about the photographs help us understand the way this contention fits into our lives as individuals?

Miss Camilla is the only character in the story who is not a blood member of the Hardin Family, yet she seems, in many ways, the best character to help us understand them. Why do you think she is included, and what does her inclusion have to say about the themes of saying the unsayable and the importance we have in each other’s stories?



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