



A  
HOLLYWOOD  
RENAISSANCE  
NOVEL

# Reel

WALL STREET JOURNAL & USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

KENNEDY RYAN

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DISCUSSION GUIDE

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# THANK YOU



Thank you so much for taking this journey with Neevah, Canon, Dessi and me! It winds across decades and cities and countries. Through trials and joys. There are so many layers to this story. As I was writing, I realized just how complex and intricate parts of it are, especially the historical aspects. I hope it lingers in your mind and lays on your heart, so we've developed this guide to help peel away some of those layers and examine just what we can take with us when we walk away from this story. Whether it's you and your book club, you and a friend, or just you going through the questions on your own, we hope you enjoy this extension of the Reel experience.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Kennedy Ryan".

KENNEDY RYAN



# INTRODUCTION

"IT'S FRAGILE AND SWEET, THIS MOMENT, LIKE FLAKES OF SUGAR DISINTEGRATING ON YOUR TONGUE WHEN YOU'VE BARELY HAD TIME TO TASTE."

Reel follows a renowned director, Canon Holt, who stumbles upon the "lost" story of Dessi Blue, a blues/jazz singer from the 1930s who, like so many artists of color, never received the recognition or celebration she deserved. He casts a relatively unknown actress, Neevah Saint, to star in the large-scale biopic. Not only do Canon and Neevah discover the epic journey of Dessi, a fictionalized composite of performers like Bessie Smith, Ma Rainey, Billie Holiday, and Adelaide Hall, but they navigate love and explore acceptance while negotiating the pitfalls of the Hollywood spotlight.



# AUTHOR INTERVIEW

**What inspired you to write about both the Harlem Renaissance and the current Hollywood Renaissance?**

Reel is a love letter to creatives of color who brought us so much joy and high art under sometimes awful circumstances living in a country that saw their skin before their gift. I drew from the energy fueling projects like *The United States v. Billie Holiday* on Hulu, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* on Netflix and *Sylvie's Love* and *One Night In Miami* on Amazon. There is a burst of creativity and production among creatives of color we haven't seen at this level maybe since the Harlem Renaissance. It is accompanied by newfound creative agency and power, enabling us to tell our stories unfiltered, through our lens and with our voices. I see this story as a slice of what is happening in broader culture, and I'm excited to add my perspective through romance storytelling. I want to shine light on this movement and what it means, not just for communities of color, but for everyone.

**You weaved the story of Dessi Blue into Neevah and Canon's story. Was it difficult to craft this style of story within a story?**

I had never written a screenplay. I actually bought a copy of the script from *The Cotton Club* to see the format for a movie in the period in which I was writing. The most challenging parts were figuring out how much of Dessi's story to reveal before that thread would start to distract from the primary love story. And then how to fit that into the natural flow of the story. Meaning, in a way that organically intersected with the action occurring in the contemporary storyline. It was surgical and I adjusted both storylines as I went along to ensure that flow.

**What can we expect in future books in the series?**

Takira's story, *The Close-Up*, a novella, releases September 14, 2021. Monk and Verity will get a full-length novel early 2022 and Evan's story a little later. There may be one more novella in the series somewhere, but we'll have to see!

THE

# BOOK

*"I want her however she comes. She's worth all of the gambles with no guarantees."*

# Reel

"IF SHE WERE A ROOM,  
ALL THE WINDOWS  
AND DOORS WOULD BE  
FLUNG OPEN."

*One moment in the spotlight . . .*

For months I stood by, an understudy  
waiting in the wings,  
preparing for my time to shine.  
I never imagined he would watch in the  
audience that night.

Canon Holt.

Famous film director.

Fascinating. Talented. Fine  
Before I could catch my breath,  
everything changed.

I went from backstage Broadway to  
center stage Hollywood.

From being unknown, to my name,  
Neevah Saint, on everyone's lips.

Canon casts me in a star-studded  
Harlem Renaissance biopic,  
catapulting me into another  
stratosphere.

But stars shine brightest in the dead of  
night.

Forbidden attraction, scandal and  
circumstances beyond my control  
jeopardize my dream.

Could this one shot—the role of a  
lifetime, the love of a lifetime—cost me  
everything?



# DISCUSS

1. Kennedy Ryan crafted a unique structure for this book. How did you feel about the intertwining of the novel and the movie script? Past and present? How did this enhance or detract from the reading/listening experience?
2. What did you like most about the book? What did you like the least?
3. Were there any quotes (or passages) that stood out to you? Why?
4. Which character or moment prompted the strongest emotional reaction for you? Why?
5. Were there times you disagreed with Canon's or Neevah's actions? What would you have done differently?
6. Were there any plot twists that you loved? Disliked?
7. Neevah and her sister, Terry, have a complicated relationship. How did you feel about its evolution throughout the book?
8. Canon aims to amplify Black voices with his work. Take some time to have a look at real historical figures whose achievements have been miscredited or overlooked in the past ([website](#))
9. What specific themes does Kennedy Ryan explore throughout this novel?
10. How does Neevah Saint grow and change throughout the story? How is her personality and confidence impacted as the story evolves?
11. In what ways does this book hold a mirror to societal issues?
12. If you were to ask Kennedy Ryan a question about the book, what would it be?
13. Even though this book is classified as fiction, there is a lot that is grounded in reality. Did anything surprise you?

*"There is so much inside of you. I'm warning you now that I want it all."*

# APPLE COBBLER

"IT'S JUST COBBLER, RIGHT? I HAVE ENOUGH WILLPOWER TO EAT DESSERT AND GET OUT OF HERE WITHOUT ANYTHING HAPPENING. DON'T I?"

## FILLING:

6 MEDIUM TART BAKING APPLES (GRANNY SMITH, HONEY CRISP, GALA, ETC.), PEELED AND SLICED  
½ C BROWN SUGAR  
2 TSP CORNSTARCH  
1 LEMON  
½ TSP VANILLA EXTRACT  
1 TSP CINNAMON  
1 TSP GROUND NUTMEG  
PINCH OF SALT

## TOPPING:

1 C FLOUR  
2 TSP BAKING POWDER  
¼ TSP SALT  
½ C SUGAR  
¾ C MILK  
6 TBSP MELTED BUTTER  
2 TSP VANILLA EXTRACT

PREHEAT OVEN TO 350 DEGREES. GREASE 9X13 BAKING DISH AND SET ASIDE.

IN MIXING BOWL (LARGE), COMBINE APPLES, BROWN SUGAR, CORNSTARCH, JUICE FROM THE LEMON, VANILLA EXTRACT, CINNAMON, NUTMEG AND SALT. TOSS TOGETHER AND POUR INTO BAKING DISH.

IN MIXING BOWL (MEDIUM), WHISK DRY INGREDIENTS TOGETHER - FLOUR, BAKING POWDER, SALT AND SUGAR TOGETHER. ADD WET INGREDIENTS - MILK, MELTED BUTTER AND VANILLA EXTRACT. WHISK TO COMBINE AND POUR OVER THE FILLING.

BAKE FOR 40-45 MINUTES UNTIL CRUST IS GOLDEN BROWN. SERVE WARM.

# SELF-CARE

*"You look at me the way your mom looked at sunsets."*



## CUCUMBER & TEA FACE MASK

Steep cup of black tea for five minutes. Add 1 tbsp. honey. Stir until dissolved. Add cucumber slices and soak for ten minutes. Place cucumber slices on face. Let sit for ten to twenty minutes. Remove and rinse face with warm water.



## WHIPPED BODY BUTTER

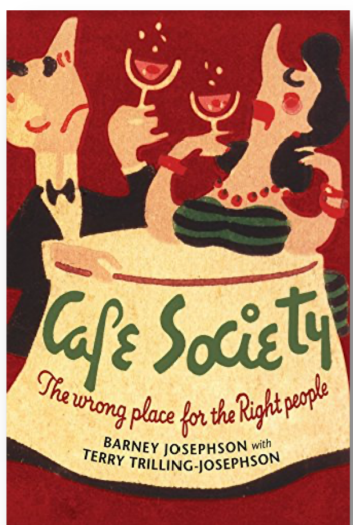
Melt  $\frac{3}{4}$  c cocoa butter and  $\frac{1}{4}$  c coconut oil in a double boiler. Place in freezer for 20 minutes until it solidifies again. Add to stand mixer bowl or use electric beater to blend for five minutes until fluffy. Store in clean container.



CONTINUE THE JOURNEY

# EXPLORE

IF YOU'RE INTERESTED IN EXPLORING A FEW OF THE BOOKS KENNEDY RYAN READ WHILE RESEARCHING HER NOVEL, HERE IS A LIST TO GET YOU STARTED:



## CAFE SOCIETY: THE WRONG PLACE FOR THE RIGHT PEOPLE

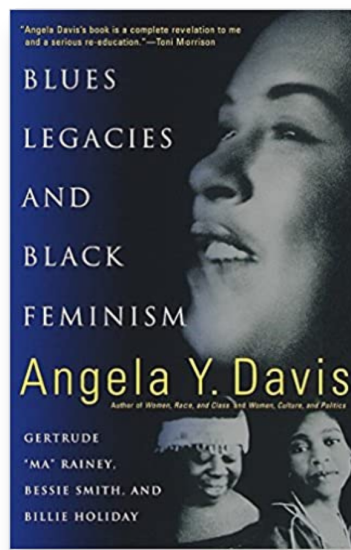
by Barney Johnson and Terry Trilling-Josephson

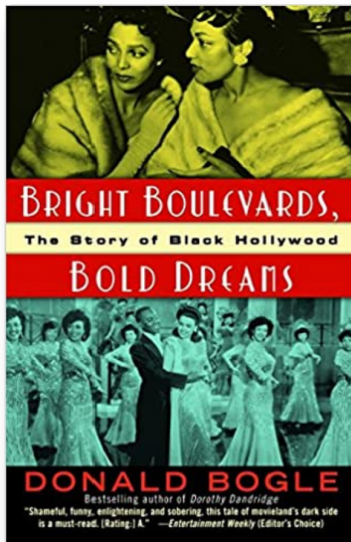
[LEARN MORE](#)

## BLUES LEGACIES AND BLACK FEMINISM: GERTRUDE MA RAINEY, BESSIE SMITH, AND BILLIE HOLIDAY

by Angela Y. Davis

[LEARN MORE](#)





## BRIGHT BOULEVARDS, BOLD DREAMS: THE STORY OF BLACK HOLLYWOOD

by Donald Bogle

[LEARN MORE](#)

## LADY SINGS THE BLUES: THE 50TH-ANNIVERSARY EDITION WITH A REVISED DISCOGRAPHY

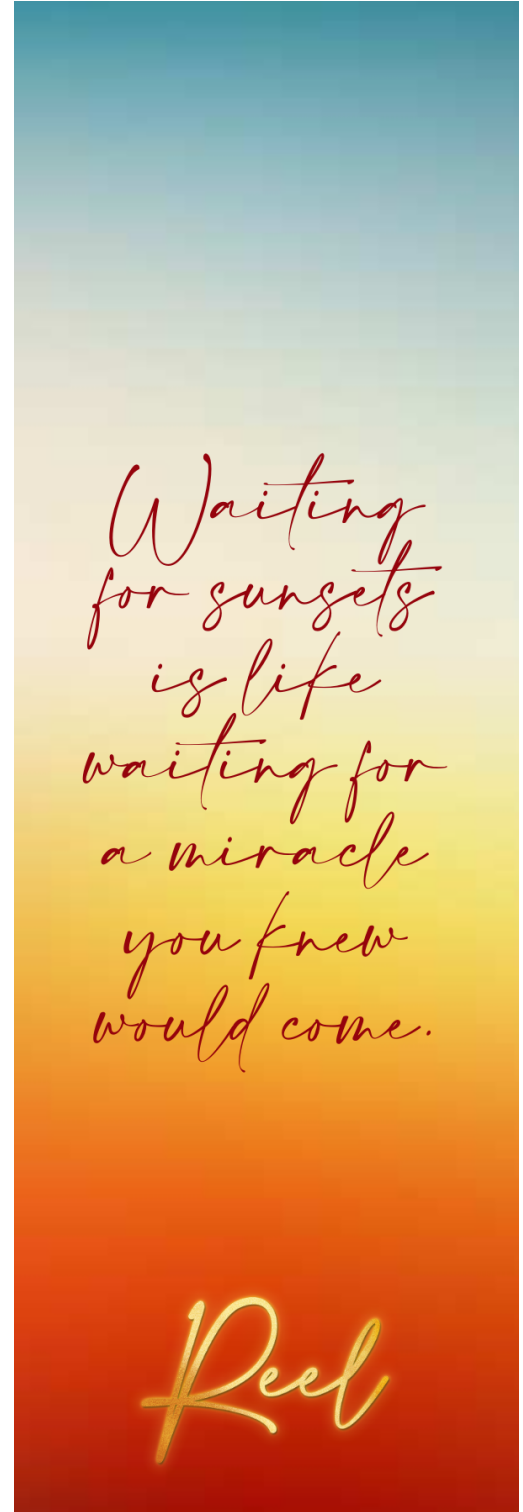
by Billie Holiday

[LEARN MORE](#)



We were not only the stars.  
We were the night—the  
dark sky without which no  
star can shine.

# PRINTABLE BOOKMARKS





# THE PLAYLIST

MUSIC IS AN INTEGRAL PART OF KENNEDY RYAN'S WRITING PROCESS. LISTEN TO THE SONGS THAT INSPIRED HER WHEN SHE CREATED THE HOLLYWOOD RENAISSANCE SERIES WORLD AND MUSIC THAT BECAME THE BACKDROP FOR MANY OF HER SCENES.

[LISTEN ON SPOTIFY](#)