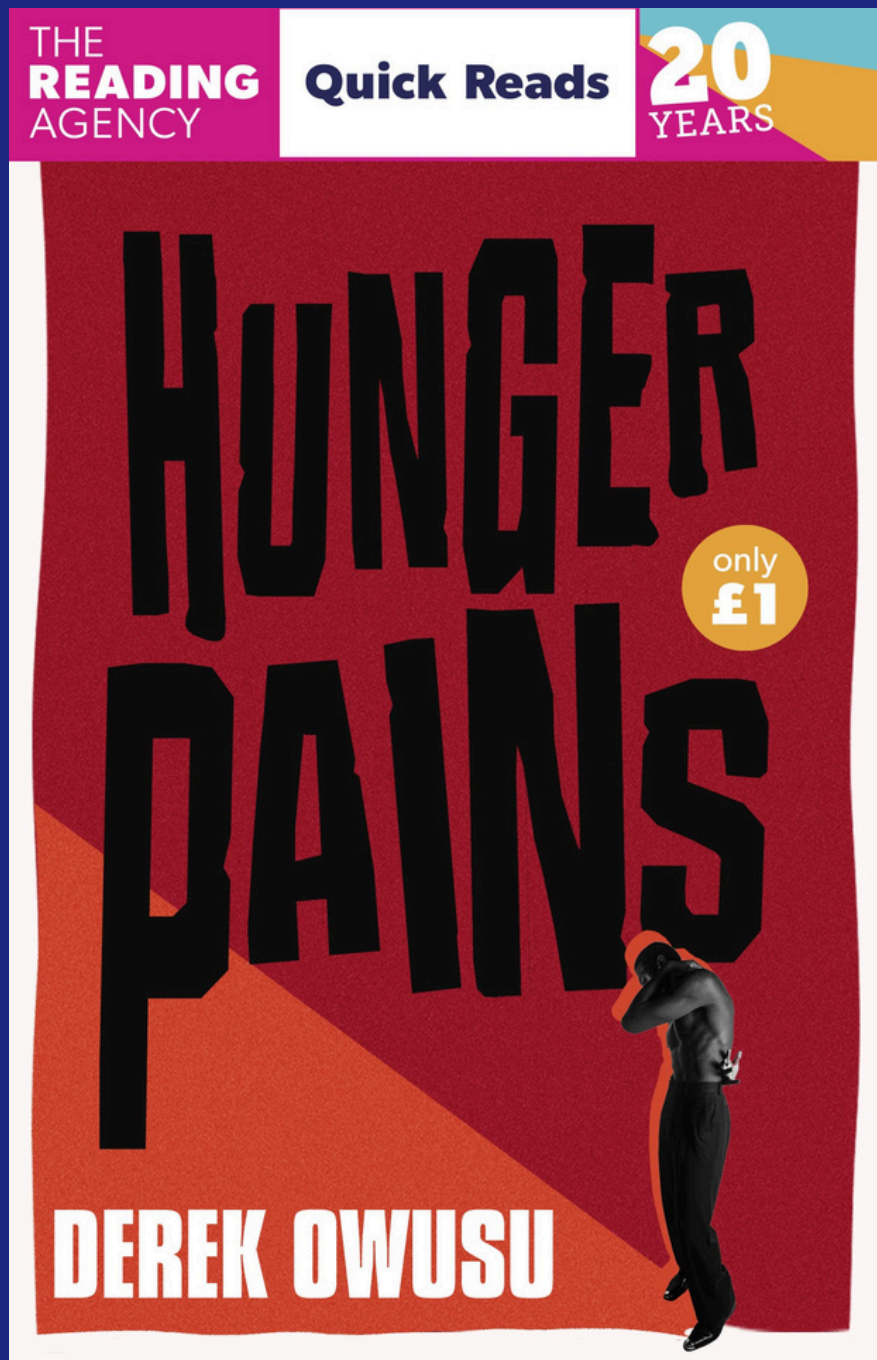


# Discussion Guide



## About the author

Derek Owusu is an award-winning writer and poet from North London. He has written for the BBC, ITV, Granta, Esquire, GQ and Tate Britain. In 2019, Owusu collated, edited and contributed to *SAFE: On Black British Men Reclaiming Space*, an anthology exploring the experiences of Black men in Britain. His first novel, *That Reminds Me*, and the first work of fiction to be published by Stormzy's Merky Books imprint, won the Desmond Elliott Prize for best debut novel published in the UK and Ireland. His second novel, *Losing the Plot*, was published in 2022 and was Longlisted for the Dylan Thomas Prize and Jhalak Prize. In 2023 he was selected as one of Granta's Best of Young British Novelists.



## Discussion Questions

### PART 1: Chapter 1

1. Why do you think the chapter opens with Ray breaking his tooth, and what does this moment suggest about his physical and mental state?

**How does pain, blood, and discomfort link to the way he's thinking and behaving at the party?**

2. What do we learn about Ray's personality, priorities and insecurities through his thoughts about the gym, dieting and his body?

**How does his focus on control, discipline, and "no distractions" shape our first impression of him?**

3. How does the party setting highlight the contrast between Ray and the people around him?

**Why does he seem slightly detached, irritated, or out of sync with the mood of everyone else?**

4. What does Ray's interaction with Jeremy reveal about his mindset and emotional state?

**Why does he become defensive so quickly?**

5. Why is the meeting with Temi at the end of the chapter important?

**How does this moment hint at future conflict or change?**

### Chapter 2

1. How does the dance-floor scene change the mood and energy compared to the previous chapter?

**What does Ray's movement, the music, and the crowd reveal about how he is feeling?**

2. Why does Ray become so focused on the girl again, even though he told himself he wanted "no distractions"?

**What does this suggest about the gap between what he plans to do and what he actually does?**

3. How is tension created in the way Ray describes the dancing and the silent interaction between them?

**Why does the author focus so much on looking, distance, smell, and anticipation rather than talking?**

4. What do Ray's thoughts about his body and the gym during this moment reveal about his relationship with control, discipline, and anxiety?

**Why does he use thoughts of training as a way to manage the situation?**

5. What might Ray's stomach pain symbolise in this chapter?

**How could it represent nerves, desire, stress, or something deeper going on inside him?**

### Chapter 3

1. How does the detailed description of the gym environment reflect Ray's mindset and priorities?

**What do the smells, routines, and strict systems suggest about how he views order in his life?**

2. What does Ray's obsession with protein timing, supplements and routines reveal about his relationship with his body?

**How might this suggest anxiety, fear of failure or a need to control outcomes?**

3. How does the contrast between Ray and Ross highlight different attitudes toward masculinity, knowledge, and confidence?

**Why might Ray both respect Ross and feel separate from him?**

4. Why is Ray's failure on the dumbbell press so emotionally important to him?

**What does this moment reveal about his pride, his self-image and his fear of weakness?**

5. How does Ray's reaction to finally completing the lift connect to the way he thinks about desire, power and achievement?

**Why does success in the gym immediately spill over into how he views himself and other people?**

### Chapter 4

1. How does the shift from dancing to going upstairs change the tone of the chapter?

**What does this movement from public space to private space suggest about escalation, risk and impulse?**

2. Why does Ray feel both excited and uneasy about how fast things are moving?

**What does this reveal about his boundaries, his need for control, and his fear of losing control?**

3. How is Ray's anxiety shown through his focus on his body, his stomach, and small details like taste and smell?

**Why does the author keep linking physical sensation with emotional tension?**

4. What does Temi's confidence and directness represent to Ray?

**Why does he find her certainty and decisiveness attractive?**

5. Why does Ray decide to stop before things go further, even though he wants her?

**What does this choice reveal about how he thinks about the difference between desire and connection?**

## Chapter 5

1. How does the opening with Ray's hangover and weighing himself set the tone for this chapter?

**What does it reveal about his relationship with his body, control, and self-discipline?**

2. Why does Ray react so strongly to the number on the scale, even though he knows it's just water weight?

**What does this suggest about anxiety, obsession, and how much power numbers have over his mood?**

3. How does the long section about food, diet, and health fears deepen our understanding of Ray's mindset?

**What does it show about how fear, control, and survival shape the way he lives?**

4. Why does Temi keep returning to Ray's thoughts during his walk to work?

**What does this suggest about how emotionally significant she already is to him?**

5. How does Temi's explanation of her work with obituaries and grief contrast with Ray's world of gyms, diets, and routines?

**What might this difference suggest about what each of them is trying to make sense of in life?**

## Chapter 6

1. What does Ray's relationship with Ruby reveal about him and about the kind of workplace this hotel is?

**How does their warm way of talking show trust, familiarity, and mutual support?**

2. Why does Ray keep thinking he might be "in love" but also keeps linking his feelings to nausea, hunger, and exhaustion?

**What does this suggest about how he understands (or struggles with) his own emotions?**

3. How does the hotel environment (the smells, dirt, routines, and checks) mirror Ray's mental and physical state?

**Why does the author focus so much on sensory details like smell and taste here?**

4. What do Ray's thoughts about food, disgust, and his stomach at the end of the chapter suggest about his deeper relationship with eating and his body?

**How might this connect to the patterns we've already seen in earlier chapters?**

5. As a reader, what are your thoughts on the character of Ray, so far?

**Think about what you have learned about him over the previous 6 chapters.**

## Chapter 7

1. Why does the chapter spend time describing dirty rooms, vomit, smells and cleaning?

**What does this focus on mess and bodily waste suggest about how Ray feels being in it?**

2. What does Huda's stress and the hotel being understaffed reveal about the working conditions and pressures in this job?

**How does Ray's decision to help clean show something important about his character?**

3. How does Ray's relationship with Ruby continue to develop in this chapter?

**What do their jokes, arguments, and routines show about respect and unspoken loyalty between them?**

4. Why does Ray start talking so much about Temi to Omar, even though he knows Omar doesn't really care?

**What does saying it out loud do for Ray, and how does it help him understand his own feelings?**

5. How does Ray's comparison between Temi and his weakness for Butterkist popcorn deepen the theme of hunger in the book?

**In what ways does this chapter link food, desire, pleasure, and losing control?**

## Chapter 8

1. Why does Ray notice Carli's appearance but immediately start thinking about Temi instead?

**What does this show about how his feelings are changing and how seriously he's starting to take Temi?**

2. How does Ross react to Ray saying he's in love and why is he so sceptical?

**What does their conversation reveal about their different attitudes to women and commitment?**

3. Why does Ray get so irritated about Ross touching him during the pull-ups and training?

**How does this connect to his need for control, independence, and doing things his own way?**

4. What does the argument about body fat, strength, and Ray's new training plan reveal about his mindset?

**How might his obsession with becoming leaner and "pure muscle" link to deeper fears about his body?**

5. How is Temi's appearance at the end of the chapter described almost like a dramatic or unreal moment?

**What does this tell us about how Ray is starting to see her, and how important she has become to him?**

## Chapter 9

1. Why does Ray describe this day as needing "confirmation in real life" for his feelings?

**What does this suggest about how he understands love?**

2. How does Ray behave differently because he is trying to "lead" the gym session with Temi?

**What does this reveal about his need for control, confidence, and how he wants to be seen by her?**

3. Why is Ray so focused on food, eating, and watching people eat during their conversation?

**How does this link to his anxiety, his body image, and his relationship with control and appetite?**

4. What does the disagreement about training, plans, and discipline reveal about the differences between Ray and Temi?

**How do their attitudes to routine, goals, and the body clash or complement each other?**

5. What does the Descartes conversation show about power, insecurity, and misunderstanding between them?

**What does this moment suggest about future tensions?**

## Chapter 10

1. Why does Temi call Ray's hotel a "dive," and how does Ray react to this?

**What does this moment reveal about class, pride, and how Ray feels about his job and his life?**

2. Why does Ray feel uncomfortable about people at work seeing him with Temi?

**What does this suggest about his sense of privacy, insecurity, or fear of being judged?**

3. How do Ray and Temi's views on books, stories, and creativity differ in this chapter?

**What does Ray's view about the point of novels reveal about his way of thinking compared to Temi's?**

4. What does Ray's explanation of how love "comes and goes" tell us about his emotional maturity and self-awareness?

**How does this description challenge the idea of love as something constant and simple?**

5. Why does Ray link love to things like respect, fascination, and hope rather than just strong feelings?

**What does this suggest about how his relationship with Temi is starting to change and deepen?**

## Chapter 11

1. Why is Temi so drawn to "dive" hotels, and why does Ray see their flaws differently?

**What does this contrast reveal about their personalities?**

2. Why is Ray so eager, both emotionally and physically, especially in the basketball-court hotel scene?

**What does this moment show about his vulnerability, excitement, and need for connection?**

3. Why does Ray feel uncomfortable with certain details in the hotels, like the carpets and the "artifacts" from his childhood?

**What do these reactions suggest about his relationship with his past and where he comes from?**

4. Why does Ray give his meal to the man outside the hotel and feel uncomfortable being thanked for it?

**What does this moment reveal about his values and how he sees kindness and charity?**

5. Why is Ray so anxious about food, his body, and control even during relaxed, intimate moments with Temi?

**How does this chapter show the tension between his discipline, his desires, and his fear of losing control?**

## PART 2: Chapter 1

1. Why does Ray describe weight loss as exhausting, expensive, and mentally draining?

**What does this tell us about how much of this journey is happening in his head as well as in his body?**

2. Why does forgetting to eat breakfast affect Ray's vision, mood, and sense of reality so strongly?

**What does this moment suggest about how close to the edge his body and mind are being pushed?**

3. Why does Ray refuse to eat his prepared food once he realises he's missed breakfast, even though he feels terrible?

**What does this show about his need for control?**

4. Why is Ray still obsessed with the small piece of fat on his stomach even after losing so much weight?

**What does this reveal about his relationship with his body and his idea of what “enough” looks like?**

5. Why does Ross’s sudden appearance at work irritate Ray so much, and why does their conversation feel tense?

**How does this chapter show the growing distance between who Ray is becoming and who he used to be?**

## Chapter 2

1. Why does Ray feel irritated and defensive as soon as Ross brings Kofi to train with them?

**What does this reaction tell us about how fragile Ray feels at this point in his weight loss?**

2. Why does Ross’s attitude towards women and “inspiration” bother Ray so much, even though he admits Ross once helped him train harder?

**What does this suggest about how Ray’s values are changing?**

3. Why does the conversation about Temi almost turn into a confrontation, and why does Ray feel strangely detached because of his fatigue?

**How does the chapter show exhaustion changing the way he experiences conflict?**

4. Why is Temi’s reaction to the book Ross gave Ray such a big moment in their relationship?

**What does it reveal about the differences in how Ray and Temi think about ideas, reading, and influence?**

5. Why does Ray connect more easily with Kofi than with Ross, even though he barely knows him?

**What does Kofi represent in terms of the kind of man Ray is becoming?**

## Chapter 3

1. Why does Ray describe this period of his life as “hazy” and dreamlike?

**How do exhaustion, hunger, and lack of sleep change the way he experiences reality?**

2. Why is hitting 130lbs both a victory and a new source of anxiety for Ray?

**What does this reveal about how his goals keep shifting and never quite feel finished?**

3. Why does Ray feel so stressed about going to Temi’s dinner party, especially about the food?

**What does this show about how his diet has started to control his social life and decisions?**

4. What is revealed about Ray through his conversations with Daniel and the other writers at the table?

**How does he see himself in relation to Temi’s world, and why does he feel so out of place?**

5. Why does the scene with Temi trying to feed him become so tense and almost humiliating?

**What does this moment show about the growing gap between Ray’s discipline and Temi’s way of loving?**

## Chapter 4

1. Why does Ray become so frustrated when his weight goes up even after all his effort?

**What does this show about how much control he feels he needs over his body and progress?**

2. How does Ray describe fasting, and why does he connect it to peace and clarity?

**What might this suggest about the way hunger and deprivation are starting to feel meaningful to him?**

3. Why does Ray begin to talk about food as if it's "trying to irritate" him?

**What does this personification of food reveal about his mindset and growing obsession?**

4. What is the significance of Ray deciding that only nutrients matter, not the act of eating itself?

**How does this shift change his relationship with food and his body?**

5. Why is the final method he describes (forcing food out of his body) so disturbing, even though he presents it casually?

**What does this moment suggest about the blurred line between discipline and self-harm?**

## Chapter 5

1. Why does Ray listen to Kofi's ideas about suffering and women now, when he says he wouldn't have before?

**What has changed in his life or emotional state that makes these ideas feel more convincing?**

2. How does Ray's physical pain (his stomach, the bloating, needing to stop) connect to the emotional situation with Temi?

**In what ways do the two kinds of suffering start to blend together in this chapter?**

3. What do you make of Kofi calling philosophers "thinkers" and saying it lets him be "levels" with them?

**How does this reflect the way he positions himself as someone with insight or authority?**

4. Why does Ray keep agreeing with Kofi ("Yeah, I hear you") even when the things he's saying about women are harsh or simplistic?

**Is Ray actually convinced, or is something else going on?**

5. At the end of the chapter, Ray starts thinking about his own "nature."

**Why is this moment important, and what does it suggest about the direction of his thinking?**

## Chapter 6

1. Why does Ray lie and say he's "fine" even though his body immediately contradicts him?

**What does this moment show us about his relationship to pain, control, and other people's concern?**

2. At what point does "endurance" turn into something more dangerous?

**How can we see that line being crossed here?**

3. Werda moves closer and tries to communicate with Ray even though they don't share a language. Why is this small gesture important in this scene?

**What does it suggest about how visible Ray's condition has become to others?**

## Chapters 7 and 8

1. How does Temi leaving and Ray's physical collapse happen almost at the same time?

**What does this suggest about the connection between his emotional state and his body?**

2. Ray insists that Temi was "controlling" and that he is better off without her.

**How does Chapter 8 challenge this idea through what happens when she is no longer there?**

3. In both chapters, Ray downplays serious events. Why does he describe both so casually?

**What does this reveal about his mental state?**

4. Why does Ray become suspicious of doctors, hospitals, and even the security guard?

**How does this paranoia connect to his obsession with control and fear of being stopped?**

5. Ray says, "You start something together and finish it alone." How does this line sum up both his relationship with Temi and his destructive journey with his body?

**How do you feel about Ray and his character now? Has it changed since the start of the book?**

## Chapters 9, 10 and 11

1. Why is Ray's first real urge to cry after leaving the hospital described as happening "without someone having caused it"?

**What does this tell us about how he understands pain, responsibility, and control?**

2. Even after surgery, Ray keeps getting worse rather than better. How does the author show this?

**How do Chapters 10 and 11 show that the real illness is no longer just physical?**

3. Kofi and the others slowly disappear from Ray's life. How does this growing isolation affect his sense of identity and purpose?

**As the reader, how does this make you feel?**

4. Ray compares himself to being trapped under a heavy weight he can no longer lift. How does this metaphor reflect both his physical condition and his mental state?

**Think about his thoughts and actions since the start of the book.**

5. Ray insists he doesn't want to die and that this was all about "self-control." How do these chapters challenge that belief?

**Where do we start to see him lose control instead of proving it?**

## Chapter 12 and Afterword

1. How does Ray's belief that he is "just bloated" show the gap between what he thinks and what is really happening to him?

**What does the reader understand that Ray doesn't?**

2. Does philosophy help Ray cope, or does it help him avoid the truth?

**Think about how he uses Marcus Aurelius and Schopenhauer in Chapter 12.**

3. How does the Afterword change the meaning of the ending of Ray's story?

**How does knowing that Ray dies affect how you read his final words?**

4. Was Temi right to publish Ray's story even though he wouldn't have wanted her to?

**Who owns a story after someone has died?**

5. When do you think Ray truly lost control, even if he didn't realise it?

**Look back across the whole book, not just the final chapters.**