

# **A Toast Before Dying Short Guide**

## **A Toast Before Dying by Grace F. Edwards**

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## Overview

Mali Anderson, a former African-American police officer, now a student studying sociology, is asked to investigate a murder for which a friend has been arrested. Since Mali knows Harlem well and still has police connections, she agrees to help find the real murderer of Thea, a former beauty queen who worked in a popular bar prior to her death. Before the murder can be solved, two more murders take place and Mali finds her own life in danger. Her love relationship with a NYC police officer adds intrigue and romance to the plot in this adult mystery novel which will appeal to the older adolescent reader.

## About the Author

Born and raised in Harlem, Edwards published her first novel, *In the Shadow of the Peacock*, in 1988. Her first of four Mali Anderson mystery novels, *If I Should Die*, was published in 1997. She currently lives in Brooklyn.



## Setting

The streets of Harlem provide the atmosphere and setting for the novel and the author's obvious love of and knowledge about Harlem gives added depth to the plot.

Descriptions of the places include not only historical information but also details that appeal to the senses, making the reader want to eat the food, meet the people, and walk the streets. For those who have always pictured Harlem as only a blighted inner city slum area, Edwards's descriptions defy this categorization and show it to be a vibrant, fascinating area despite its pockets of desolation.

Mali lives in the Harlem neighborhood called Strivers' Row because of all the Black professionals who have bought houses on the block. This block of houses was once the home of jazz greats W.C. Handy and Eubie Blake. Since she has always lived and worked in Harlem, Mali has great knowledge of all types of people, lifestyles, and businesses. This insight into present-day Harlem enables her to help people that the police seem uninterested in helping.

While refraining from using Black English or dialect, Edwards still maintains the integrity of the setting with her intense descriptions. She describes both people and places in such a manner that the reader feels a part of the culture. Her descriptions of the food, the dress, and the demeanor of the characters make the use of dialect unnecessary. She also uses music by great black artists to set the mood and scenes as she takes the reader from location to location.

Add to this excellent use of setting a strong plot line and the result is a readable mystery that appeals to all types of readers.

# Social Sensitivity

The main social issue of the novel is that of race relations. Thea's mother murders her daughter in order to keep her black heritage a secret and protect her other daughter from society's prejudices. The issue of miscegenation is addressed by both Miss Adele and Marcella, in Marcella's case as an excuse for murder. Mali's harasser, a white officer, caused her to lose her temper, strike him, and quit the force. Kendrick's arrest is convenient; the police, inundated with other murders in Harlem, do not care that they may have arrested an innocent black man.

While Mali's Harlem is busy and vibrant, much of the urban blight in Harlem is the direct result of graft and corruption during the empowerment initiatives of the 1960's and 1970's, often by white politicians and developers. The continuing segregation of society is obvious in the people who live in Harlem.

On the other hand, the novel is not a bitter diatribe or a means of raising social consciousness. It is very matter of fact—this is the way things are and here is a brief historical perceptive that partially explains the situation.

*A Toast Before Dying* is an adult novel that will interest the mature young adult reader, but it does contain adult subject matter. Since it is a murder mystery, there are elements of violence. Also, sex and sexual situations are treated and described in an adult but not overly explicit manner.

Mali and Thad have a romantic relationship and several scenes portray what takes place during their encounters, but their relationship is only a subplot to the mystery.

Homosexuality is mentioned in connection with one character, but is not graphic in nature. While none of this is especially problematical for the more mature reader, the teacher needs to be aware of these aspects of the content.

# Literary Qualities

A good mystery tells a good story but usually does not fit the category of great literature, and *A Toast Before Dying* falls into this characterization of a good story without much depth. As a private investigator novel with a female protagonist for a sleuth, it follows a typical mystery format with numerous characters, a proliferation of clues, an element of danger, and a few red herrings. Since there are few African American mystery writers and even fewer female African American detectives, Edwards's book will appeal to a neglected audience while telling a tale that can be enjoyed by any mystery buff.

The mostly straightforward, linear plot does use some flashback when necessary for clarity. The most prominent use of flashback is with the introduction of new characters to tell something about their lives. While most of the flashback is direct description, some of it is in the stories about characters, told especially as a form of gossip or as reminiscences from some of the older characters such as Mali's father and Miss Adele.

This use of flashback as an unobtrusive, natural, and conversational occurrence helps the story to flow easily.

As with all mysteries, there are elements of foreshadowing that are not necessarily apparent until the denouement with the tying up of loose ends. For the most part, this foreshadowing is not obvious and may not be recognized as such until the end of the novel. The clues are there, though, especially with the many references to living black in a white world and Thea's hidden past. Mali's first visit with Miss Adele is the most prominent example of foreshadowing but the arcane clues are obvious to only the most astute reader. Street gossip from Bertha and from others also serves as a means of using foreshadowing, especially in the subplot dealing with Senator Michaels's dealings with the other women in his life.

As the investigation untangles the various threads of the story, the challenge to the reader becomes determining which of the foreshadowings to believe and which to consider as red herrings.

While the climatic unveiling of the actual murderer may not be a surprise revelation to the reader, there is enough doubt and false clues to add an element of suspense to the ending. Edwards ties up the loose ends without awkwardness or affectation.

Historical, sensual, and musical motifs underlie the plot. As Mali traverses Harlem, she, as the narrator, gives a running commentary on the history of places and people. She names places and their locations.

(The inclusion of a map of Harlem would be nice for those unfamiliar with the area and for those who are visual learners.) Her father tells her stories of people who were prominent in Harlem's past. As a result, the reader gains a sense of the setting and an understanding of the past. While much of the commentary highlights the positive



elements of the past, social commentary about the graft and failure of empowerment initiatives and black/white relationships, especially with the police, also appear.

Edwards assails the senses with her visual images, sounds, and smells. Her description of the foods are enough to make the reader run to the kitchen for a snack, only to find nothing seems as satisfying as what she describes. The reader gains a real sense of the essence of Harlem, both the attractive and the unattractive that exist in close proximity to each other. These details elevate the book to something more than the average mystery story as the sense of the place and the people add welcome details to the story.

Her use of music, especially jazz, in her description of places and activities also enhances the story. While the average reader might not be familiar with all the artists and songs mentioned, this underlying motif adds depth to the narrative.





## Themes and Characters

The dominant theme of righting the wrong of someone unjustly accused of a crime is underscored by related themes of keeping secrets and the past's influence on the present. When the police arrest Kendrick, an old friend and the brother of her hairstylist Bertha, for the murder of a beautiful and popular bartender, Mali agrees to try to find the real murderer since the police, already having a viable suspect for just one of hundreds of murders in Harlem that year, are uninterested in pursuing the case any further. Like most others who know Kendrick, Mali does not believe that he could have shot Thea point blank in the face. Kendrick admits that they had argued, but says that he loved her very much and wanted to marry her. In the process of trying to find out what really happened, Mali learns a great deal just from listening to conversations at two beauty salons which lead her to try to discover who Thea really was and from where she came.

Mali discovers that Thea is involved with two other men besides Kendrick—the owner of the bar and a local politician, both of whom have motives to want her dead. When a wealthy white woman, Teddi, hires Mali to investigate, the plot thickens. Mali easily discovers that Teddi has a romantic and professional interest in Kendrick, but is surprised to learn that Teddi is Thea's sister. The investigation leads Mali to two sources of information—Too Hot, the local bookie and numbers runner, and Flyin' Home, a wheelchair-bound former cat burglar whom Mali once arrested. When Flyin' Home gets shot and dies, Mali realizes that someone is very worried about what she might discover and that she may be close to finding the identity of the real killer. The murder of the owner of the bar where Thea worked also adds intrigue and the discovery that Thea was pregnant further thickens the plot.

In the end, by discovering Thea's history, Mali solves the crime and frees Kendrick.

Unfortunately, the process results in a suicide and two additional murders, destroys a politician and his wife, and opens old wounds of miscegenation and black/white relations. Thea's mother, in order to continue passing as white, abandoned her child as an infant and left her for Thea's grandmother to raise. When Thea discovers who her mother is and wants to develop a relationship with her, she sets in motion the events that lead to her death. As the investigation progresses, Thea's relationship with the politician becomes common knowledge and further tragedy results. The only positive outcome of Mali's investigation is the discovery of the truth that frees Kendrick.

Unfortunately, many are hurt in the process.

The other important theme is that of race relations in both the past and the present. In one sense, the novel can be viewed as social commentary. The police, mostly white, once they have a suspect, are reluctant to investigate further. Mali left the NYPD because of the harassment of a white officer and even now has a suit against the department.



Thea's mother Marcella left her to be raised by a grandmother so that she could continue to pass as white. Teddi, raised in a white world, is able to accept the fact that she has "Negro blood" and wants a relationship with her sister. When Teddi confronts her mother after learning that she shot Thea, Teddi condemns her by saying she has just exchanged one prison for another. Marcella replies that she did it for her because "I learned long ago that if you're black, you cannot—you will not be allowed to live as a human being."

Underlying both major themes is the concept of both sexual and love relationships between adult men and women. Mali has an intense emotional and sexual relationship with Tad, a New York police officer who is away for further training and plays only a small part in this novel (although he is a major character in Edwards's other Mali Anderson books). Kendrick's relationship with Thea led the police to suspect him as her killer. Her relationship with Henderson Laws, owner of the Half Moon bar where Thea is shot, and with Senator Michaels results in the murder of Laws and the attempted suicide of the senator's wife and the successful suicide of his secretary. Miss Adele, Thea's grandmother Dessie, and Thea's mother Marcella all have stories of their love affairs/marriages with white men. For the most part, all such relationships have unhappy endings. Only Mali's and Thad's relationship has the potential for success.

As with most mystery novels, while Edward's characters are finely drawn, most serve merely as pawns to move the story along and are fairly one-sided. Mali, as the main character, is multi-faceted but does not essentially change from the beginning of the story to the end. She is self-sufficient, bright, and caring but her emotions frequently get in the way of her good sense.

While loyal to her friends, she will doggedly pursue the truth, even if someone gets hurt in the process. She is rather bullheaded and rarely listens to advice from those who care about her safety. These characteristics serve her well as she seeks the truth, but often place her in positions of danger. Because she knows Harlem so well from having lived there all her life as well as having been a cop in the area, she has connections with people from many walks of life. Her inherent fairness and street smarts enable her to elicit information from even those she once arrested.

Thea, the murdered bartender and former beauty queen, is an enigma that must be decoded. She has always kept her past secret and even her longtime best friend knows little about her. While several people know bits and pieces of her life, only Miss Adele knows most of her story and she keeps this secret until she has no choice but to tell Mali what she knows. Thea thus becomes a tragic figure, not only because of the manner of her death, but also because of her history. Unwanted by her mother because of the color of her skin, Thea goes through life always seeking some type of love that will fill the emptiness in her soul.

Mali's father, while a minor character, has a special importance as the keeper of history. He knows almost everything there is to know about the Harlem of the past. As a jazz musician who has played in all the major Harlem clubs, he knows those in power and



the stories of most people of any importance. His knowledge frequently serves to direct Mali's investigation and his connections open many doors for her.

For the most part, though, the other characters, while they may be important for the plot, have little depth. Kendrick, the accused murderer who wants to be an actor and loved Thea, is good-hearted, rather naive, and falsely accused. His sister Bertha is loyal and worried. Her job as a hairdresser makes it easy to pick up gossip. She is the epitome of the strong black woman who makes it on her own. Too Hot, the numbers runner, embodies the rather flamboyant bad boy who has won a place of respect among some elements of society.

Senator Edwin Michaels personifies the dishonest politician who neglects his wife to have multiple affairs. He uses blackmail and bribery to keep others under his control. In the end, he loses his position of power as he withdraws from the senatorial race after his wife attempts suicide and his secretary dies from her suicide attempt but not before making documents showing his duplicity available to the press. Miss Adele is the wise old woman who knows the secrets but only reveals them in time to allow Mali to figure out the motive for Thea's death. Marcella, like her daughter, is a tragic character in that her choices have been so poor. Killing her daughter is more acceptable than revealing her black heritage. Teddi, as a pivotal character with connections to both Thea and Kendrick, acts to bridge the gap between the two worlds of black and white.



## Topics for Discussion

1. Characterize Mali Anderson's life as (a) a detective, (b) a friend, (c) a daughter.

2. Edwards uses much sensual imagery.

Give examples of this imagery and categorize it by which sense it appeals to.

3. Why did Michaels's secretary Rita commit suicide?

4. List all the suspects who had reason to kill Thea and what their motive was.

5. How important is setting to this story?

How would it be different if it took place where you live?

6. Dessie, Miss Adele, Marcella, and Thea all have tragedy in their backgrounds.

Compare and contrast how each one handles the situation.

7. Sometimes the author of a mystery gives the reader false clues or red herrings.

What false clues does Edwards use to complicate the plot?

8. What is the significance of the title *A Toast Before Dying*?

9. Predict what you think Teddi will do now that both her sister and mother are dead and she has knowledge about her heritage.

10. Look for examples of stereotypes when it comes to characters.

# Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Find out what you can about the history of Harlem. When was the area at its peak? Why did it decline into a slum area?
2. Find out what you can about the lives of some of the musicians mentioned in the novel. Listen to recordings of their music.
3. Edwards talks about many types of foods. Find a recipe book and prepare one of the dishes mentioned.
4. "Miscegenation" means marriage or cohabitation between a white person and a person of another race. How does the author use this term as part of plot development and characterization.
5. Find a map of Harlem from the Internet or an atlas. Plot the places where Mali goes as she tries to find out who murdered Thea.
6. Mysteries can be divided into several different types. Find out what these types are and decide into which category *A Toast Before Dying* fits.
7. Based on recent newspaper stories, is Edwards' portrayal of the New York Police Department and the judicial system valid? Why or why not. Use specific examples. Are the problems with NYPD unique or can they be found other places, especially in your community.
8. Edwards portrays Senator Michaels as both corrupt and a womanizer. Do you think this is a fair portrayal of politicians? Why or why not?

## For Further Reference

Bush, Vanessa. Review of *A Toast Before Dying*. *Booklist* (April 15, 1998): 1380. A short, complimentary review.

Havens, Shirley E. Review of *A Toast Before Dying*. *Library Journal* (November 15, 1998): p. 124. A brief but positive review of the novel.



## Related Titles/Adaptations

A Toast Before Dying is the second of four Mali Anderson mysteries. While it, as well as the others, can be read independently or out of order, it is more enjoyable to read the series in the order published. The first book, *If I Should Die*, gives the best background of Mali and establishes important relationships as Mali tries to find the murderer of the director of the Uptown Children's Chorus. In the third volume, *No Time to Die*, Mali solves the murder of her old friend Claudine. The newest addition, *Do or Die* has Mali searching for the killer of the daughter of an old friend of her dad's.

Three other Black female authors feature female Afro-American sleuths. Valerie Wilson Wesley's Tamara Hale is a former Newark, NJ police officer, now a private eye. Penny Mickelbury's Carole Ann Gibson is a Los Angeles lawyer who defends all types of criminals and Eleanor Taylor Bland's Marti MacAlister is a police detective in Lincoln Prairie, near Chicago. All three authors are considered outstanding by the critics and are part of a growing group of Afro-American mystery writers.

# Copyright Information

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