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## **Read Until You Understand**

*The Profound Wisdom of Black Life and Literature*

**By Farah Jasmine Griffin**

“An impassioned inquiry into the literary roots of Black culture. . . The power of reading provides the emotional engine driving this insightful, profound, and heartfelt book.”

—*Kirkus Reviews*, starred review

“Griffin writes with learned poignance. . . Perfect for literature lovers, this survey and its moving insights will stick with readers well after the last page is turned.”

—*Publishers Weekly*, starred review

“*Read Until You Understand* gives us Farah Jasmine Griffin in full and mighty sail. Keen cultural analysis, storytelling, and gorgeous lyricism combine in this book that makes a genre of its own. In recollection there is profound insight here; we have a portrait of a rich Black community in place and time, and of the teachers Griffin finds in neighborhood, family, books, and music. The sounds, words, and wisdom that Black folks make also make us, and no one expresses that with more beauty and power than Griffin.”

—**Elizabeth Alexander**

“This wise and powerful memoir is a masterpiece. Griffin beautifully weaves her profound devotion to the life of the mind with her deep and abiding love of Black people and culture. Her magical words enchant and empower us like those of her towering heroes—Toni Morrison, Billie Holiday, James Baldwin, and Wilhelmena Griffin!”

—**Cornel West**

“Griffin’s vivid, passionate, and powerful tribute to the great gifts of Black culture offers a deep dive into such fundamental human themes as freedom, justice, rage, death, beauty, and love, as lived and celebrated through her own experience, music, and creative art, and that of countless others in the community she embraces, from the legacy of Black history to her own family, her wide explorations of literature and art, and her close friendships with many artists and writers.”

—**Elaine Pagels**, author of *The Gnostic Gospels* and *The Origin of Satan*

**READ UNTIL YOU UNDERSTAND** [W. W. Norton & Company; September 14,

**2021; \$26.95, hardcover]** by Farah Jasmine Griffin is a moving and deeply necessary

celebration of Black life, art, and literature. Through autobiographical meditations and

literary analysis of selected works by Toni Morrison, Frederick Douglass, Phillis Wheatley, James Baldwin, Jesmyn Ward, Barack Obama, Marvin Gaye, and others, Griffin honors the experiences of Black Americans. What results is an elegant and ambitious exploration of the ongoing project of American democracy that shows how Black writers and thinkers “have been working, building, creating, envisioning, showing us how to live like the future we are hoping to build is already here.”

Growing up in Philadelphia in the 1960s, Griffin had a childhood rich in extended family and community and steeped in literature and activism thanks to her beloved father, Em, who filled their home with novels, magazines, and music, ensuring that his young daughter would grow up surrounded by the “pantheon of Black brilliance.” Em’s tragic and traumatic death when Griffin is nine deepens her engagement with Black art and literature through the library of books and music he leaves behind. These works will become a lifelong “spiritual and intellectual companion” and offer solace in her grief.

In an elegant blending of memoir and close readings of a wide range of works including novels, poems, speeches, music, and art, Griffin makes connections across genres, throughout the centuries, expanding the readers experience of the words to touch on themes that are central to the human experience: mercy and justice, rage and democracy, love and death, grief and beauty. Through Griffin’s analysis, readers are struck by the immense gift and grace of African American literature which finds beauty in resistance and insists on creation in the face of annihilation.

**READ UNTIL YOU UNDERSTAND** is a testament to the power of African American art and the transcendence of the Black experience in defiance of a culture of white supremacy that attempts again and again and again to silence voices and shackle bodies. It is an urgent invitation to readers to “rethink their notion of what the United States is and their place within it and within the world.”

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**ABOUT THE AUTHOR:**

**Farah Jasmine Griffin** was the inaugural chair of the African American and African Diaspora Studies Department at Columbia University, where she is also William B. Ransford Professor of English and Comparative Literature. She is the author of numerous books and the recipient of a 2021 Guggenheim Fellowship. She lives in New York.

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