Violence

Jazz a novel that starts with the shooting of an ex-girlfriend and a woman who tries to slice open a dead girl's face is going to be a little bloody.

Jazz isn't just about two violent lunatics, though. It's about the violence that has impacted Violet and Joe since their childhoods: the suicides, the beatings, the horrific racist violence of turn-of-the-century America, and the violence inherent of slavery. There's so much violence in Jazz that the characters speak about it with chilling matter-of-factness. "He was pulled off a streetcar and stomped to death," is spoken with the kind of Yep, that happened attitude we might use to comment on yesterday's rain.

Women And Femininity

Mommy issues alert: Everyone has beef with motherhood in Jazz. And we don't blame them—most of the mamas in this novel are nowhere to be found. This makes us want to call our mothers right now. It's not just Mommy that's missing in Jazz, it's the comfort and security of a mother-figure. Harlem in 1926 is exciting, yes, but hardly comforting.

But mamahood isn't the only femininity-themed arrow in Jazz's quiver. There's also preoccupation with what it means to be a lady, a good girl, or an attractive woman. From Joe selling Cleopatra beauty products to Dorcas slipping on silk stockings in secret, the question of what it means to be a good woman in Jazz is ever-present. Having babies is only part of the super-difficult equation.

Art and Culture: Jazz Music

It's no shocker that the art form in a novel called Jazz is jazz music. The novel's structure borrows heavily from jazz music, including different character solos, a preoccupation with lust and violence, and (not going to lie to you) a tendency to get confusing. It's also set during the Harlem Renaissance, when jazz music was becoming A Thing and either seducing people with its sexiness and daring—like Dorcas—or making old women clutch their pearls, like Alice.

Jazz, like jazz, doesn't play by the established rules. It swoops around in time and slows down, speeds up, and changes direction. It's also, like jazz, totally unique and mesmerizing. Enjoy the ride.

Memory and The Past

In a novel with two fifty-year-olds as main characters, it's no surprise that memory is a big dealio in Jazz. And in a novel as historic as Jazz, it's no surprise that memory is a huge theme. And since Jazz is super preoccupied with family, no one is shocked that memory comes up a ton.

Basically, the only thing shocking about the theme of memory and the past in Jazz is the weird, reality-morphing way that memory plays into the plot. Kill an ex-girlfriend so you can preserve her memory? Sure, why not? Lie in bed and remember things you didn't do with your husband? Totally fair game in this book. The sky's the limit when it comes to the way that memory is played with in Jazz—and like the sky, memory is ever-present.

.Race

.From jazz music to the Great Migration, from slavery to hate crimes, from Golden Gray's quest for identity to the comparison between Dorcas and Violet's skin, Jazz is immersed in the history and questions of black identity. These characters look for a sense of black community as well as for personal identity, and reflect on disturbing elements of American history.

Besides Vera Louise—who is a super-auxiliary character—everyone in Jazz is black and questions of race come up on, no joke, every page

Innocence

And by innocence, we mean total lack of innocence. The Jazz Age was notorious for being a period when innocence was lost, specifically the presumed innocence of women. Behavior that was truly scandalous in the 1910s—drinking, smoking, showing your knees, wearing makeup, having sex—became much more acceptable in the 1920s, especially for the ladies.

All the characters in Jazz have an idea of what constitutes innocence and who should be innocent. A whole lot of these ideas about innocence are heaped on Dorcas: She should be innocent, but instead she's unwholesome, she's being manipulated, and she's too knowing. One of the huge conspiracy theories concerning innocence in Jazz is that jazz music, and the influence of Big Bad New York City, corrupts the young girls of 1926.