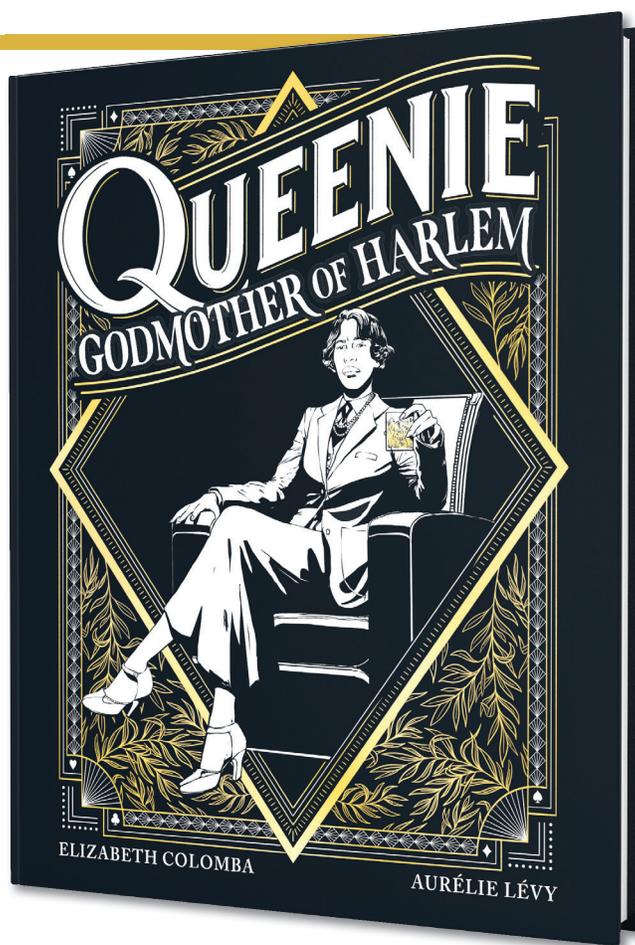


## INTRODUCTION

**Queenie: Godmother of Harlem** is a glimpse into the underworld of organized crime during 1920s America, following the leader of a major criminal organization in Harlem. This incredible historical figure was a Black woman from Martinique named Stephanie St. Clair. She spoke five languages, had a heavy French accent, and ruled with an iron fist. Her early life directly affected her rise through the ranks to become one of the most powerful and respected mob bosses in the city. In fact, Queenie controlled the hugely influential racketeering game, or the “numbers,” which became even more important as Prohibition came to an end in 1933. Her story also reflects a Robin Hood-esque theme with her willingness to help her own community, use the media to uplift the downtrodden, and ensure that justice was served to those who deserved it. **Queenie** provides a look inside the world of Harlem at the height of the Harlem Renaissance, which was a microcosm of Black American life in the 1920s: the emergence of Black art, intelligentsia, music, and opulence. Reading **Queenie** allows the reader to examine St. Clair’s motives but also understand how a woman of color overcame impossible odds to become a legend.



Supporting the national Common Core State Standards (CCSS) in reading informational text for high school curriculums, **Queenie** is an appropriate selection for grades 11–12 and early college level in language arts, social studies, or humanities classes. The following prompts provide for a critical analysis of **Queenie: Godmother of Harlem** using the CCSS for Informational Text.

## STANDARDS AND SKILLS

Graphic novels are a unique medium used in classrooms and preferred by many students. This document from **ReadWriteThink: Graphic Novels/Terms and Concepts** provides a simple overview of the layout of a graphic novel to provide a better understanding of how to approach teaching the story.

### GRADE 11–12 - READING: LITERATURE

#### CCR.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.1

Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text, including determining where the text leaves matter uncertain.

**QUEENIE**  
**Godmother of Harlem**  
 Written by **ELIZABETH COLOMBA**  
 Illustrated by **AURÉLIE LÉVY**

ISBN 978-1-4197-5774-7 • U.S. \$24.99  
 7 x 8½" • Hardcover • 160 pages



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## CCR.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.2

Determine two or more themes or central ideas of a text and analyze their development over the course of the text, including how they interact and build on one another to produce a complex account; provide an objective summary of the text.

## CCR.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.5

Analyze how an author's choices concerning how to structure specific parts of a text (e.g., the choice of where to begin or end a story, the choice to provide a comedic or tragic resolution) contribute to its overall structure and meaning as well as its aesthetic impact.

## GRADE 11-12 - READING: INFORMATIONAL TEXTS

### CCR.ELA-LITERACY.RI.11-12.1

Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text, including determining where the text leaves matters uncertain.

### CCR.ELA-LITERACY.RI.11-12.2

Determine two or more central ideas of a text and analyze their development over the course of the text, including how they interact and build on one another to provide a complex analysis; provide an objective summary of the text.

### CCR.ELA-LITERACY.RI.11-12.3

Analyze a complex set of ideas or sequence of events and explain how specific individuals, ideas, or events interact and develop over the course of the text.

## GRADE 11-12 - GRADES 6-12 LITERACY - HISTORY/SOCIAL STUDIES:

### CCR.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.2

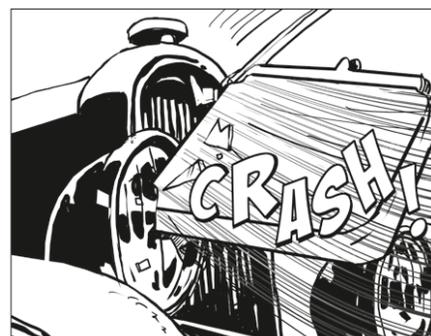
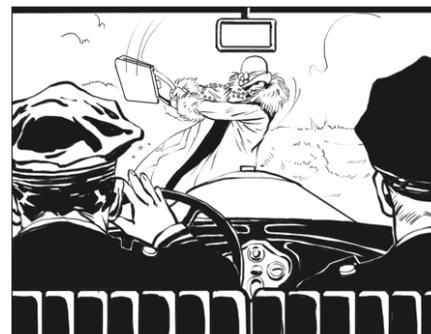
Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary that makes clear the relationships among the key details and ideas.

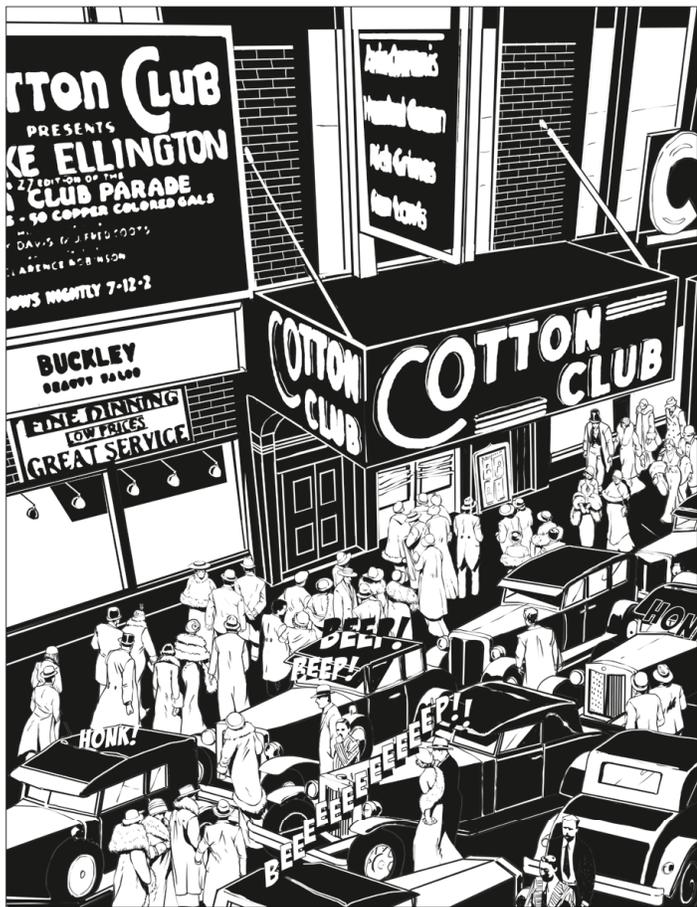
### CCR.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.3

Evaluate various explanations for actions or events and determine which explanations best accords with the textual evidence, acknowledging where the text leaves matters uncertain.

## PRE-READING IDEAS

Harlem, New York, is famous for many reasons, but particularly as a mecca for Black wealth and culture. Before Harlem became what it is today, it was populated with inhabitants of Dutch descent. Have students research to create a visual timeline showing how Harlem went from a small enclave of the Dutch to a bustling American city.





The book takes place in Harlem, New York, at the height of the Harlem Renaissance. The Harlem Renaissance introduced world-famous artists, musicians, and thinkers like W. E. B. Du Bois, Langston Hughes, Claude McKay, Louis Armstrong, Josephine Baker, Billie Holiday, and more. Have students pick an artistic medium to research how Black artists in Harlem affected culture changes that can still be felt today. Allow students to create their own rendition of how they would like to convey their research.

The 1920s was a time of exposure to many cultural elements and freedoms but also a time of growing organized crime. The *mafia*, which is a Sicilian word for “boldness” or “swagger,” began in Sicily in the early 1800s and was established in the United States by the late 1800s/early 1900s during the wave of immigration to the United States from that region. Organized crime grew across the United States and was primarily run by Italian families, but the business of organized crime was also led by Irish and Jewish figures. Give students the opportunity to research and create a documentary story about the history of the mafia, its infamous leaders, and the relationship the United States government has with the organized crime circuit.

At the beginning of the 1900s in the United States, race relations were at an all-time low. Racial violence against Black communities saw mobs of white supremacists attack their neighborhoods and laws discriminate against Black workers. Worst of all, the rise of deaths due to violence against Blacks was at the height of how America was dealing, or lacked dealing, with the issue of racial segregation. In the introduction, the poem *If We Must Die*, by Claude McKay, is written as a response to the racial violence of 1919. The summer of that year was called the Red Summer. Have students read and analyze the poem. Have students make connections to the social unrest of 2019–2020 and what they believe can be done to help end racial injustice.

Finally, Stephanie St. Clair is originally from the Eastern Caribbean island of Martinique. Review the history of the island to garner a better understanding of the rich culture developed as a collision between Indigenous traditions and French colonization. Reference this information to analyze the flashbacks in the book that help the reader understand how her early life experiences shaped her personal life and her profession as a mob boss.

***Freedom has a price.  
Freedom is priceless.  
History depends on whose version is told.  
Here is ours.***

**—ELIZABETH COLOMBA**

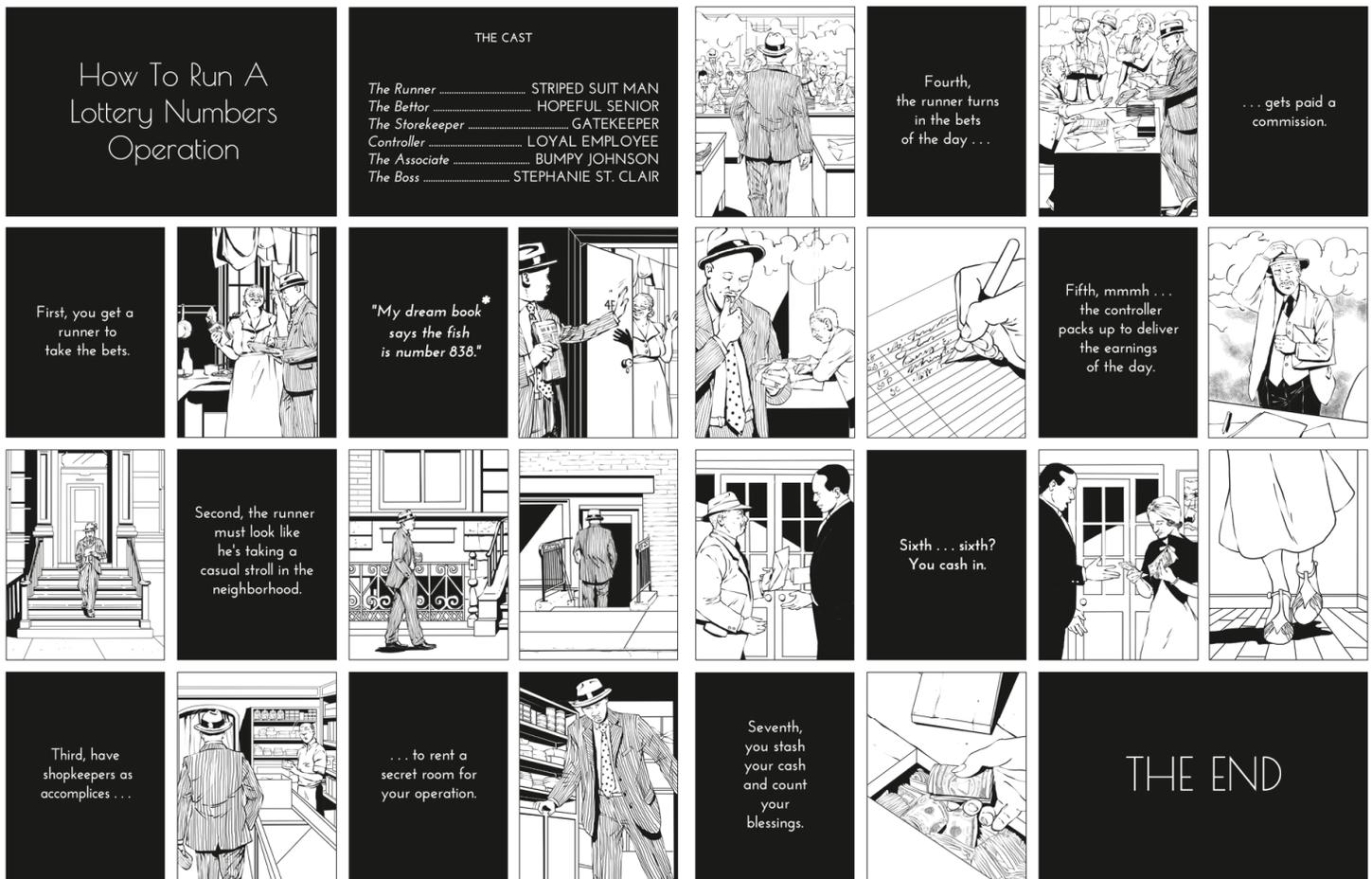


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## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. As you read the story, take notes on the life through the flashback sequences throughout Stephanie St. Clair aka Queenie. How do these flashbacks help build an understanding of who Queenie was as a person? As a leader of organized crime? As a Black woman living in America?
2. Describe the relationship between the police force and organized crime, especially Queenie. How did each party affect the other? Was their relationship reciprocal?
3. Queenie was a powerful mob boss, a Black woman, in the 1920s which was not at all common. While she remained independent, there were still many men who affected her life. For each man listed, explain the relationship Queenie had with him and how that impacted her life:
  - a. Dutch Schultz
  - b. Thelonious Monk
  - c. Rosenfeld
  - d. Owner of the main house in Martinique
  - e. Father Divine
  - f. Bumpy
  - g. Nelson
  - h. Police commissioner
  - i. Duke
4. What is a “runner”? Explain their role in the organized crime family run by Queenie.
5. Would you consider Queenie a community activist? Explain your answer.
6. On page 21, the photographer states, “Image is a powerful tool.” Explain how Queenie exemplified this quote. Use information from the story to validate your answer.
7. During the crash of 1929 that led to the Great Depression, many Americans lost their life savings and more. On page 36, Rosenfeld says to Queenie: “The Depression has been lucrative for us.”
  - a. Define the word *lucrative*.
  - b. Explain why Rosenfeld made this statement.
  - c. What type of relationship did Queenie and Rosenfeld have given their different backgrounds?
8. The newspaper that is read in the story is called *Amsterdam News*. Research the history of New York to connect the title of the newspaper to what you discover.
9. Foreshadowing is a common theme in the book. When Queenie arrived on Ellis Island she was told by another female passenger that she would be working the streets because she is female and Black. How did Queenie respond? Did her response come true? Can you find other parts of the book that are examples of foreshadowing?





10. On page 60, Bumpy “realizes” he was “the Indian” after watching a movie. The author explains the reference to the famous 1965 interview between James Baldwin and William Buckley. Have students watch and take notes on the interview between Baldwin and Buckley. Have students answer the following questions:
  - a. Why would the author reference an interview that happens more than 40 years AFTER the book takes place?
  - b. What connections can be made from the interview and Bumpy describing himself as being “the Indian”?
  - c. Are there parallels to the experiences of Black people in the 1920s, the 1960s, and today? If so, describe them. If not, explain.
11. The Cotton Club was one of the most famous jazz clubs during the Harlem Renaissance. What influence did the club have on artists during that time? What role did Jack Johnson play in building a reputation for the Cotton Club?
12. How did local theaters and music joints like the Cotton club provide places for “business” exchanges for the mob?
- 13.. Pages 66–67 show a diagram of *The Schultz Way*. Which famous board game is the diagram modeled after? Why would the author use that board game for the analogy?



14. The early 1900s saw some of the most horrific racial violence against the Black community ever recorded. The Ku Klux Klan was on the rise, supported by state officials that led to an increase in racial violence implemented by the Klan known as lynching. Use the [Equal Justice Initiative](#) website to learn more about the history of lynching in America and what that organization is doing to help provide education about this horrific history.
15. Rosenfeld was integral to Queenie's life. How did the author utilize the character of Rosenfeld to shed light on the treatment of Jews in America during that time? There is a translation of a quote on page 98 that is helpful.
16. The diagram on page 100 titled Harlem Presents: "A piece of the pie" explains the life of the average American compared to those who are wealthier. What does the author mean in the subtitle "What makes Stephanie St. Clair's business so attractive"? What types of business are the author referring to? Is St. Clair the only one who provides this kind of "business"?
17. Who is Lucky Luciano? What type of relationship did he have with Queenie?
18. Queenie may have been an activist in her community, but she also displayed the characteristics of a stone-cold mobster. Find examples in the story. Use those stories to write a newsreel about how Queenie responded to her adversaries.
19. The story's beginning and end show Queenie being released from prison. How does her being sent to prison reflect the corruption of the police force and judicial system of that time period? How does Queenie manage to always remain "on top" even if law enforcement were after her?
20. The story includes many quotes that are words of wisdom Queenie shares with other people. Pick one quote or words of wisdom shared by Queenie and analyze the message. Would you be able to relate to what was being said? Do you know someone who would benefit from her words of wisdom?



21. At the end of the book, Queenie states that spring is coming, and the weather is getting warmer, but she explains that "it means I'm coming home." What does coming home mean in this context? Is home used as a metaphor?

***Pray as though everything depended on God.  
Work as though everything depended on you.***

**—STEPHANIE ST. CLAIR aka QUEENIE**



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## EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

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### ISLAND BLOG:

Research the island of Martinique to create a blog. The focus of the blog is to discuss the beauty of the island and to also explain how colonialism impacted the culture of the island.

### SOCIAL MEDIA POST:

Choose one historical figure from the back of the book. Create a social media post about the life of the person you chose. Explain why they are significant and what makes them so interesting.

### MAFIA TIMELINE:

Create a timeline of the history of the mafia in the United States and how the mafia influenced American culture.

### GLORY OF THE HARLEM RENAISSANCE:

Create a slide deck, Nearpod, or other online platform that highlights the greatness of the Harlem Renaissance.

## SUPPLEMENTARY READINGS

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[“What the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre Destroyed,”](#) interactive, in [“Teaching About the Tulsa Race Massacre with the \*New York Times\*,”](#) by Nicole Daniels and Natalie Proulx, *New York Times*, May 27, 2021.

[“Prohibition Profits Transformed the Mob,”](#) *Prohibition: An Interactive History*, Mob Museum.

[“A New American Identity: The Harlem Renaissance,”](#) *Stories* series, Smithsonian National Museum of African American History & Culture.

