

CONGRATULATIONS, THE BEST IS OVER!

R. Eric Thomas

essays



READING GROUP GUIDE

Dear Reader,

One night in late 2020, I was driving home down a dark, winding country road in Baltimore County, coming back from picking up takeout. (Italian, if you're curious. Pasta! With a blush sauce!) I was listening to the local NPR station, which was rebroadcasting the recording of a live variety show from 2019. At the point that I came in, a magician was performing a trick in front of an audience. As he talked through a disappearing act, I found myself getting drawn in, imagining the setup, the crowded room, the soon-to-be-vanished object. The show wasn't designed for the radio, so I had to imagine a lot. He wasn't, for instance, describing what the object looked like or giving me, the listener, a play-by-play of what he was doing. The magic was only intended to happen in that room, that night. Still, I was rapt.

This night in the car was months into the pandemic; it had been forever since I'd been in a crowded room or seen a live performance or felt a sense of wonder. I was beginning work on this book, what I'd imagined as a breezy collection of humorous essays about tiptoeing into midlife. But things had changed.

As I recall, the magician didn't say any special words, which is a shame because—as I write in this book—I'm a real abracadabra kind of guy. Bless me with that sweet bippity-boppity goodness, please! Instead, on the radio I just heard him say “And now . . .” and then came the rustle of fabric, an anticipatory pause and what I can only describe as the sound of absence. The audience from 2019 exploded in delighted applause and I, alone in my car in 2020, gasped, awestruck. He'd made it disappear! Whatever it was!

This little anecdote didn't make it into the book, but it shifted the way I was thinking about the project and my life at the time. As I wrote and found a new, bolder book inside of the idea I began with, I kept going back to the moment of awe in the car, how easily I'd slipped into belief, how little I'd needed to convince me that something extraordinary had happened, how much I needed just a moment of magic. I thought that sometimes you don't need to see something evanesce or return to feel the wonder of transformation. And that became one of the core engines of this book . . . that magical thing, that miracle: transformation.

Abracadabra.

With love and pasta,
R. Eric Thomas

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Put down the cupcake and let's talk. . . .

1. Which essays in *Congratulations, The Best Is Over!* resonated with you the most, and why? Which moments did you find the funniest? The most moving?
2. What did this book make you consider about your relationship to your hometown or city? How does where you live affect who you are or who you will become?
3. Do you have juicy stories about your neighbors? Please dish!
4. Why do you think the concept of “returning home” can be so fraught?
5. The pandemic affected all of us in different ways. Did any of R. Eric Thomas’s experiences feel similar to yours, or different? How did you cope?
6. Some of these essays are about loneliness, depression, or grief. What did you think about Eric’s reflections? How do you handle these towering feelings?
7. The author writes: “Life feels, sometimes, like I’m in a different world from some of the people around me.” Have you ever felt the same way?
8. “Often, it feels like so many of us who are considered ‘other’ don’t have narrative or political value beyond the worst parts of our lives,” R. Eric Thomas writes, “But I know that we are more than that.” Discuss the importance of telling and hearing stories of joy and hope. Why do some seek to erase the “other”?
9. What has been your experience been with making friendships as an adult?
10. Life is a journey. Ask yourself: where am I now? Are you in the middle, like Eric? At a rest stop, stuck in traffic, somewhere else entirely?
11. What did you take away from reading *Congratulations, The Best Is Over!*?

