



Cane River by Lalita Tademy

Announced June 20, 2001

Discussion Questions

1. Philomene says that to be a slave was “to have nothing but still have something left to lose.” Discuss the profound, but different losses suffered by each generation of women.
2. The relationships between Suzette, Philomene and Emily and the white fathers of their children range from flat-out rape, to calculated financial arrangements cemented by childbearing, to real, if forbidden and dangerous love. What did you find most surprising about these often complex relationships?
3. *Cane River* dramatizes the roots of turmoil within America’s black community on issues of skin color. Emily, for example, is described by the author as being “color-struck.” In what ways does color-consciousness continue to afflict black and mixed-race societies today? How, in *Cane River*, was the color-struck attitude a help or hindrance in successive generations’ rising fortunes?
4. During the course of researching *Cane River*, as she kept unearthing tender relationships in unexpected situations, Tademy found herself frequently being forced to rethink some long-held beliefs about slavery. What, if anything, surprised you most about the relationships described in the book? In which ways did you find Tademy’s depictions believable? Upsetting? Eye-opening?
5. The free people of color considered themselves neither black nor white. Can you think of any parallels in today’s society?
7. Each of the four women in the book approached life differently and handled the relationships to the men and children in their lives very differently. Discuss the differences.
8. Do you think that each of the women was a good mother? Was there more that any one of them could have done for their children than they did?
9. How—or did—each of the women fight against the oppression of their lives? Do you think there was more that Elisabeth or Suzette in particular could have done?
10. Philomene seems to be the strongest of the women. If you agree with this statement, what do you think accounts for her unusual strength? If you disagree, why—and who do you think was actually the strongest? The weakest?
11. Suzette changed her last name three times. Why was this so significant to her?
12. Sunday dinners were a major event in *Cane River*. What made them so important? Family dinners, in which generations come together on a regular basis, seem to be a dying tradition in this country. What effect do you think this has on families today?
13. *Cane River* was a community with both rigid hierarchies and notable exceptions to these hierarchies. Do you think that *Cane River*’s historical divisions of class, race and gender have contemporary parallels?
14. Elisabeth, Suzette and Philomene don’t talk about slavery with Emily, who was too young to remember slave life. In fact, they don’t talk much about those times with one another. How does this avoidance shape them and affect the younger generation?
15. Elisabeth says that everyone along *Cane River* was “waiting for the spider to come home.” What did she mean?
16. The author of *Cane River* made the decision to turn her family’s story into a work of fiction rather than nonfiction. What do you think motivated her to do so, and do you think it was the right decision?