



THE KITCHEN HOUSE

Reading Group Guide

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why do you think the author chose to tell the story through two narrators? How are Lavinia's observations and judgments different from Belle's? Does this story belong to one more than the other? If you could choose another character to narrate the novel, who would it be?
2. One of the novel's themes is history repeating itself. Another theme is isolation. Select scenes from *The Kitchen House* that depict each theme and discuss. Are there scenes in which the two themes intersect?
3. "Mae knows that her eldest daughter consorts with my husband. . . . Almost from the beginning, I suspected their secrets" (page 107). Why does the captain keep Belle's true identity a secret from his wife and children? Do you think the truth would have been a relief to his family or torn them further apart? At what point does keeping this secret turn tragic?
4. Discuss the significance of birds and bird nests in the novel. What or who do they symbolize? What other symbols support the novel?
5. "When I saw their hunger I was struck with a deep familiarity and turned away, my mind anxious to keep at bay memories it was not yet ready to recall" (page 24). Consider Lavinia's history. Do you think the captain saved her life by bringing her to America as an indentured servant? Or do you think it was a fate worse than the one she would have faced in Ireland? Discuss the difference between slavery and indentured servitude.
6. Marshall is a complicated character. At times, he is kind and protective; other times, he is a violent monster. What is the secret that Marshall is forced to keep? Is he to blame for what happened to Sally? Why do you think Marshall was loyal to Rankin, who was a conspirator with Mr. Waters?
7. "I grew convinced that if she saw me, she would become well again" (page 188). Why does Lavinia feel that her presence would help Miss Martha? Describe their relationship. If Lavinia is nurtured by Mama and Belle, why does she need Miss Martha's attention? Is the relationship one-sided, or does Miss Martha care for Lavinia in return?
8. "Fortunately, making myself amenable was not foreign to me, as I had lived this way for much of my life" (page 233). Do you think this attribute of Lavinia saves or endangers her life? Give examples for both.
9. Describe the relationship between Ben's wife, Lucy, and Belle. How does it evolve throughout the novel? Is it difficult for you to understand their friendship? Why or why not?

10. "I was as enslaved as all the others" (page 300). Do you think this statement by Lavinia is fair? Is her position equivalent to those of the slaves? What freedom does she have that the slaves do not? What burdens does her race put upon her?

A CONVERSATION WITH KATHLEEN GRISSOM

What information surprised you while doing research on white indentured servants?

When I first began my research I was astonished to discover the great numbers of Irish that were brought over as indentured servants. Then, when I saw advertisements for runaway Irish indentured servants, I realized that some of them, too, must have suffered under intolerable conditions.

At times in the novel, you can almost smell the hearty foods being prepared by Mama and others. In your research, did you find any specific notes or recipes from kitchen houses that you can share with your readers?

In 1737, William Byrd, founder of Richmond, wrote of the many types of fruits and vegetables available in Virginia. Watermelons, pumpkins, squashes, cucumbers, artichokes, asparagus, green beans, and cauliflower were all being cultivated. I discovered that many of these were preserved by pickling. For those interested in how this was done and for recipes from that time, an excellent resource is *Martha Washington's Booke of Cookery and Booke of Sweetmeats*, transcribed by Karen Hess.

While in Williamsburg, I watched re enactors roast beef over a spit in a kitchen fireplace. Small potatoes in a pan beneath the meat were browning in the drippings, and I cannot tell you how I longed for a taste. That was my inspiration for the Christmas meal. For basics, such as the chicken soup, I built a recipe around what I knew would have been available for use in the kitchen house at that time.

Whenever Belle baked a molasses cake, I craved a taste. I did try several old recipes that I found, but I was unsatisfied with the results. So, using the old recipes as a baseline, my daughter, Erin, and I created our own version of a simple yet moist and tasty molasses cake. I am happy to share it with the readers.

½ cup butter
1/3 cup packed brown sugar
1 egg
½ cup milk
1 cup molasses
2 cups flour
1 teaspoon baking soda
1 teaspoon ground ginger
1 teaspoon cinnamon
2 dashes ground cloves
¼ teaspoon salt

Preheat the oven to 350 degrees. Grease an 8-inch square baking pan.

In a large bowl, cream the butter and sugar. Beat in the egg. In a separate bowl, combine the milk and the molasses. In another bowl, combine the flour, baking soda, ginger, cinnamon, cloves, and salt. Add each of these alternately to the butter mixture, beating well between additions. Spoon batter into the prepared pan.

Bake for approximately 45 minutes, or until a toothpick comes out clean.

Why did you choose not to go into detail about some of the most dramatic plot points in the novel, for example, the death of Waters or the abuse of young Marshall?

For the most part, Lavinia and Belle dictated the story to me. From the beginning, it became quite clear that if I tried to embellish or change their story, their narration would stop. When I withdrew, the story would continue. Their voices were quite distinct. Belle, who always felt grounded to me, certainly did not hold back with description, particularly of the rape. Lavinia, on the other hand, felt less stable, less able to cope; and at times it felt as though she was scarcely able to relate her horror.

It is interesting that your novel has two narrators—Lavinia and Belle. Do you have any plans to continue the story into the next generation—perhaps from the perspectives of Jaime and Elly?

In 1830, Jamie is a well-respected ornithologist in Philadelphia and Sukey is enslaved by the Cherokee Indians in North Carolina. These are the two voices I hear. In time I will know if I am meant to tell their story.

Presently I am writing *Crow Mary*, another work of historical fiction. A few years ago I was visiting Fort Walsh in the Cypress Hills of Saskatchewan. As I listened to an interpreter tell of Mary, who, in 1872, at the age of sixteen, was traded in marriage to a well-known fur trader, a familiar deep chill went thorough me. I knew then that I would return to write about this Crow woman. Some of her complex life is documented, and what fascinates me are her acts of bravery, equal, in my estimation, to those of Mama Mae.

This is your first novel after diverse careers in retail, agriculture, and the arts. How have each of these experiences contributed to your writing style?

I don't know that any endeavor specifically contributed to my writing style, but I do know that every phase of my life helped prepare me to write this book.

The dialogue of the slaves in this novel is very believable. It must have been a difficult thing to achieve. How did you go about creating authentic voices from two hundred years ago?

At the very beginning of my research I read two books of slave narratives: *Bullwhip Days: The Slaves Remember* and *Weevils in the Wheat: Interviews with Virginia Ex-Slaves*. Soon after, the voices from *The Kitchen House* began to come to me. My original draft included such heavy

You said you wrote the prologue in one sitting after being inspired by a map you found while renovating an old plantation tavern. Since this is your first novel, do you think you were “guided” by residents of the past?

Not only do I feel I was guided but also that I was gifted with their trust. However, I am not alone in this. In Alice Walker’s book *The Color Purple*, she writes: “I thank everybody in this book for coming. A.W., author and medium.” Unless I misread that, I’d say, in this experience, I’m in good company.

Your book has been described as “*Gone with the Wind* turned upside down.” Are you a fan of Margaret Mitchell’s novel? Which writers have inspired you through the years?

I have only recently read *Gone with the Wind*. Although I did enjoy it, a few of the writers that have truly inspired me are Robert Morgan, Alice Randall, Susan Fromberg Schaeffer, Edward P. Jones, Nuala O’Faolain, Alexandra Fuller, Susan Howatch, Rick Bragg, Breena Clarke, Beryl Markham, Alice Walker, Joan Didion . . . this list could go on forever. I love to read.

There are many characters in this novel. How did you go about choosing their names?

They were all taken from different lists of slaves that I found in my research.

What advice do you have for writers working on their first novels?

If you feel called to write a book, consider it a gift. Look around you. What assistance is the universe offering you as support? I was given an amazing mentor, a poet, Eleanor Drewry Dolan, who taught me the importance of every word. To my utter amazement, there were times she found it necessary to consult three dictionaries to evaluate one word! Take the time you need to learn the craft. Then sit down and write. When you hand over your completed manuscript to a trusted reader, keep an open mind. Edit, edit, and edit again. After you have written a great query letter, go to AgentQuery.com. This site is an invaluable resource that lists agents in your genre. Submit, accept rejection as part of the process, and submit again. And, of course, never give up!