



## Cane River

by Lalita Tademy

### Reading Group Guide

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. Do you think Doralise was in a position to help Suzette and Philomene more than she did?
4. *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?
5. 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?
6. *Cane River* was a community made up of French planters, slaves and gens de couleur libre, or free people of color who "had accumulated a great deal of land and wealth and were just as likely to be slave owners as their white neighbors." How do you think the free people of color justified playing a willful role in their kinsmen's oppression?
7. The free people of color considered themselves neither black nor white. Can you think of any parallels in today's society?
8. 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.
9. 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?
10. 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?
11. 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?
12. Philomene coldly made a choice to stay with Narcisse Fredieu after he returned to *Cane River* following the Civil War. At this point, she was now free. Why, then, would she make this decision?
13. Suzette changed her last name three times. Why was this so significant to her?
14. Did Joseph Billes do everything he could to protect Emily and their children? Did Emily do

everything possible to protect her children?

15. Elisabeth called all of her descendants to her bedside when she knew she was dying? What were the long-term repercussions of this act for her family?
16. 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?
17. 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?
18. What are the similarities and differences between Cane River of the 1800s and the United States today?
19. In many ways, Cane River, a rural farming community established by French Catholics, was unlike other southern communities of the time. What did you find most surprising about the community and its leading citizens?
20. Each of the four major women characters in *Cane River* was born a slave, but even so, each made distinct choices regarding how she was going to live her life. What were their choices? What were the other options they might have chosen?
21. When Madame slaps Suzette in the cookhouse, Elisabeth doesn't interfere, nor does she have a heart-to-heart conversation afterward with her daughter about what happened? Why not? Was this realistic?
22. What do you think would have happened to each of the main characters if they had not been so deeply rooted in family?
23. Which living situation do you think was easier: big house or quarter?
24. Emily, in the very last scene in the book, takes a seat in the front row of the bus to return home from her trip to town. Is this something you believe she would do? Why or why not?
25. 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?
26. When Joseph moves Emily out of the house where they raised their children in order to marry a white woman, Emily asks to take only those things she considers to be her possessions. Was this foolish pride that possibly deprived her children of a larger inheritance?
27. Joseph stays close to Emily in his later years. Why do you think Emily continued to allow Joseph into her life after he kicked her out of their home and married another woman?
28. Emily's daughters Mary and Josephine never marry, and her son T.O. married a woman radically different than his mother. What do you think this says about the long-reaching effects of Emily's choices and behavior as a mother?
29. Elisabeth says that everyone along Cane River was 'waiting for the spider to come home.' What did she mean?
30. 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?