



Reading Materials

This document provides information about the reading materials for this theme, including a complete list of available titles, as well as book summaries and author information for each.

Complete Book List

Included below is the complete list of books which have been vetted and recommended for this theme, and which are available in inventory from the ICfL.

- *The Hate U Give*, by Angie Thomas. Published 2017, 464 pages.
- *The Vanishing Half*, by Brit Bennet. Published 2020, 352 pages.
- *How Much of these Hills is Gold*, by C. Pam Zhang. Published 2020, 336 pages.
- *All You Can Ever Know*, by Nicole Chung. Published 2019, 256 pages.
- *Tell Me How It Ends: An Essay in Forty Questions*, by Valeria Luiselli. Published 2017, 128 pages.
- *The Moor's Account*, by Laila Lalami. Published 2015, 336 pages.
- *No-No Boy*, by John Okada. Published 1976, 232 pages.
- *Into the Beautiful North*, by Luis Alberto Urrea. Published 2010, 368 pages.
- *Americanah*, by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. Published 2014, 588 pages.
- *The Line Becomes a River* by Francisco Cantú. Published 2019, 288 pages.
- *An American Marriage* by Tayari Jones. Published 2019, 336 pages.



Book Summaries & Author Information

Included below are the detailed summaries of each book available for this theme, as well as background information about the author.

The Hate U Give, by Angie Thomas. Published 2017, 464 pages.

This instant bestseller tells the story of a teenage girl who grapples with racism, police brutality, and activism after witnessing her Black friend murdered by the police. Published in 2017, this young adult novel is a potent and prescient exploration of the issues—already well known to most Black communities—that would become front-and-center for the larger American public with the death of George Floyd three years later in 2020.

In the novel, sixteen-year-old Starr Carter moves between two worlds: the poor neighborhood where she lives and the fancy suburban prep school she attends. The uneasy balance between these worlds is shattered when Starr witnesses the fatal shooting of her childhood best friend Khalil at the hands of a police officer. Khalil was unarmed.

Soon afterward, his death is a national headline. Some are calling him a thug, maybe even a drug dealer and a gangbanger. Protesters are taking to the streets in Khalil's name. Some cops and the local drug lord try to intimidate Starr and her family. What everyone wants to know is: what really went down that night? And the only person alive who can answer that is Starr.

But what Starr does—or does not—say could upend her community. It could also endanger her life. “What’s the point of having a voice if you’re gonna be silent in those moments you shouldn’t be?” That is the question at the center of this story about a young woman grappling with impossible questions in the glare of the media’s limelight.

Considering recent events involving the police and minorities across the nation, this novel is an important and illuminating read for public discussions. Thomas’s novel, suitable for YA and adult readers, provides an accessible window into the issues of police brutality, criminal justice, and their impact on everyday people.

Author Information

Angie Thomas grew up in Jackson, Mississippi, where she was born and still lives. This former teen rapper holds a Bachelor in Fine Arts (BFA) in Creative Writing from Belhaven University – a Christian Liberal Arts institution in Jackson. She also has an unofficial degree in Hip Hop. Angie received the first Walter Dean Myers Grant in 2015 from We Need Diverse Books, a non-profit organization that promotes the diversity of children’s literature. Her debut novel, *The Hate U Give*, published on February 28, 2017,





was acquired by Balzer and Bray/HarperCollins in a 13-house auction. One of her favorite quotes bears a lot of relevance in this series: “Mississippi is known for two things, racism and writing, and I happen to be a writer who writes about racism.” In an interview on why she writes for teens, Angie replied: “The teens I write for are going to be politicians with Twitter accounts tomorrow. If some of our readers read books about Black kids as teenagers, we wouldn't have to say, ‘Black Lives Matter’ - it would be understood. If they read about Latino kids, we wouldn't be discussing walls. People assume I want to put a political agenda into kids' heads. No. I want to install empathy in them.”

The Vanishing Half, by Brit Bennet. Published 2020, 352 pages.

This fiction on the Africa-American experience is a thought-provoking exploration on questions of racial identity across generations and continents. It follows the story of identical twin sisters who take their lives in vastly different directions on either side of the Black/White color line. Desiree and Stella Vignes grow up in Mallard, Louisiana, a town founded on colorist principles—the practice of discriminating against darker shades of skin within a community that shares the same ethnic traits or perceived race. Though the twins' family is light-skinned and accepted by their community, the sisters feel entrapped in their hometown. After the murder of their father by white men, their mother, Adele, withdraws them from school and begins working for the wealthy white Dupont family, at whose hands the girls experience significant trauma prompting them to run away from home at age 16.

Many years later, one sister lives with her black daughter in the same southern town she once tried to escape. The other passes for white, and her white husband knows nothing of her past. Still, even separated by so many miles and just as many lies, the fates of the twins remain intertwined. What will happen to the next generation when their own daughters' storylines intersect?

Weaving together multiple strands and generations of this family, from the Deep South to California, from the 1950s to the 1990s, Brit Bennett produces a story that is at once a riveting, emotional family story and a brilliant exploration of the American history of “passing.” Looking well beyond issues of race, *The Vanishing Half* considers the lasting influence of the past as it shapes a person's decisions, desires, and expectations, and explores some of the multiple reasons and realms in which people sometimes feel pulled to live as something other than their origins.

Author Information

Brit Bennett is an American author whose first novel published when she was 17 in 2016 was about three Black adolescents growing up in Southern California. Brit's father was Oceanside's first black city attorney, and their mother a fingerprint analyst for the sheriff's department. She perceives herself as a thoughtful kid who took to writing as early as 8. Brit's early accomplishments was a play about a coyote





and a short story about a Native American boy whose home is destroyed. Brit earned a BA in English from Stanford University and later received her MFA from Michigan.

When the police killed Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, and Eric Garner in Staten Island, New York, Bennett was wrapping up a residential fellowship at Michigan. Soon after the officers indicted in the killings were pronounced not guilty by the court, Bennett wrote an essay for the website *Jezebel*, entitled “I Don't Know What to Do with Good White People.” The article attracted more than 1 million views within three days. Soon after, she got the attention of a literary agent who invited her to write a book – *The Vanishing Half*.

How Much of these Hills is Gold, by C. Pam Zhang. Published 2020, 336 pages.

This book, set during the American Gold Rush and told from the point of view of two Chinese American siblings, received multiple accolades, nominations, and awards in 2020. The book depicts the conflict between Lucy and her brother Sam as they carry the corpse of their father across a harsh landscape and provides an opportunity for a deeper understanding of place, home, and history.

Newly orphaned children of immigrants, Lucy and Sam are suddenly alone in a land that refutes their existence. Fleeing the threats of their western mining town, they set off to bury their father in the only way that will set them free from their past. Along the way, they encounter giant buffalo bones, tiger paw prints, and the specters of a ravaged landscape as well as family secrets, sibling rivalry, and glimpses of a different kind of future.

Both epic and intimate, blending Chinese symbolism, magical realism and reimagined history with fiercely original language and storytelling, *How Much of These Hills Is Gold* is a haunting adventure story and an unforgettable sibling story. On a broad level, it explores the role of race in an expanding country, poses the question of where immigrants are allowed to belong, and challenges our assumptions and collective memory about the Western expansion of the United States. But page by page, it's about the memories that bind and divide families, and the yearning for home.

Author Information

Born in Beijing, China, C. Pam Zhang is symbolizing a sort of human relic of America. Her epic novel included in this series has been honored with numerous awards, including the Academy of Arts and Letters Rosenthal Award, the Asian/Pacific Award for Literature, and National Book Foundation 5 Under 35. The book was also nominated for the 2020 Booker Prize, a Lambda Literary Award, and a finalist for the PEN/Hemingway Award. Zhang's writings have appeared in *Best American Short Stories*, *The Cut*, *McSweeney's Quarterly*, *The New Yorker*, and *The New York Times*.



Starting the Conversation:

Race and Racism in America



To a question on how her writing navigates truth and what is the relationship between fact and fiction, Zhang responded that she can divide her intellectual life into three stages: (1) The child stage in which she was oblivious of what was true, (2) The young adult stage in which Pam thought she knew or could learn the truth of things, and (3) The adult stage in which she knows that truth could be slippery and perhaps undefinable. “I used to believe in objectivity from certain institutions—the classroom, for example. Now I know how politicized facts and numbers are and how what is included or obscured is determined by those in positions of power to further their own agendas. At its best, fiction can cut through the noise. It can tell an emotional truth more powerful than fact.”

All You Can Ever Know, by Nicole Chung. Published 2019, 256 pages.

This memoir explores the immigrant experience from a somewhat different perspective. Nicole Chung, a transracial adoptee born in the US, grew up knowing she was adopted, but it wasn't until she was an adult and pregnant with her own child that she decided to search for her birth family. As the *New Yorker* describes it, “Chung’s memoir is more than a thoughtful consideration of race and heritage in America. It is the story of sisters finding each other, overcoming bureaucracy, abuse, separation, and time.”

Chung was born severely premature, placed for adoption by Korean immigrant parents, and raised by a white family in a sheltered Oregon town. From early childhood, she heard the story of her adoption as a comforting, prepackaged myth. She believed that her biological parents had made the ultimate sacrifice in the hopes of giving her a better life; that forever feeling slightly out of place was simply her fate as a transracial adoptee. But as she grew up—facing prejudice her adoptive family couldn’t see, finding her identity as an Asian American and a writer, becoming ever more curious about where she came from—she wondered if the story she’d been told was the whole truth.

Chung tells of her search for the people who placed her for adoption, which coincided with the birth of her own child. Through her search we explore questions of race, identity, belonging, family, and what happens when the myths we build around our origins come into conflict with the realities of our history.

Author Information

The writer/editor, Nicole Chung, was born to Korean parents in Seattle in 1981. Because of her infancy health condition, Nicole’s parents placed her for adoption, and the White catholic adoptive parents raised her in Oregon. Nicole attended Johns Hopkins University, graduating with a BA in 2003 and an MA in 2014. Nicole’s writing career started after a class on nonfiction at the age of 20. She had served as the managing editor of *The Toast* and *Catapult* magazine’s chief editor. Today, Nicole lives in Washington, D.C, with her husband and two daughters. Reacting to a question about receiving an unexpected email from her biological father while in labor with her first child, Nicole described the occasion as “surreal” because it coincided with her delivery period. “If it were fiction, you would not believe it! But I began



searching [for my birth parents] in the very early days of my pregnancy, and I truly believed that it would all be settled by then.”.

Tell Me How It Ends: An Essay in Forty Questions, by Valeria Luiselli. Published 2017, 128 pages.

This relatively short monograph is about the horrifying but real-life experiences of child migrants at the US/Mexico border, primarily during the period of 2014-2016. Luiselli’s reflection is based on responses to the 40-item asylum questionnaire she was trained to administer at the southern border as an interpreter.

In the opening pages of this brief book, Luiselli describes the complicated and often inadequate process by which the American legal and immigration system attempts to understand and judge the complicated, traumatic, and unique experiences of these children. “The process by which a child is asked questions during the intake interview is called screening, a term that is as cynical as it is appropriate: the child a reel of footage, the translator-interpreter an obsolete apparatus used to channel that footage, the legal system a screen, itself too worn out, too filthy and tattered to allow any clarity, any attention to detail. Stories often become generalized, distorted, and appear out of focus.”

This short, accessible, powerful conversation starter humanizes these young migrants and highlights the contradiction between the idea of America as a fiction for immigrants and the reality of racism and fear both here and back home.

Author Information

Valeria Luiselli, who currently lives in New York, was born in Mexico City and grew up in South Korea, South Africa, and India. An acclaimed fiction and nonfiction writer, Valeria’s works include the novels *Faces in the Crowd* and *The Story of My Teeth*. Her book, *Tell Me How It Ends*, won a two *Los Angeles Times* Book Prizes and an American Book Award. Other recognitions include nominations for the National Book Critics Circle Award and the Kirkus Prize. Luiselli has been a National Book Foundation “5 Under 35” honoree and the recipient of a Bearing Witness Fellowship from the Art for Justice Fund. Her works, translated in more than twenty languages, have appeared in the *New York Times*, *McSweeney’s*, *Granta*, and other publications.





The Moor's Account, by Laila Lalami. Published 2015, 336 pages.

This historical fiction, which received the American Book Award, is a reframing of Alvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca's 16th-century *Naufragios* from the perspective of the enslaved man from Morocco who traveled with the explorers. The presence of the enslaved Moroccan man on the journey is a historical fact, and in this contemporary reimagining, the man referred to by the Spaniards as Estebanico, recounts the explorers' harrowing 9-year journey through the southern portion of what would later become the United States—a journey that left only four survivors from the original crew of 600. From the Florida coast through Texas and eventually back to Mexico, the narrative imagines the encounters and cohabitation with the various indigenous peoples along the way.

While the recounting is of a 16th-century event, the novel is very readable, aimed at a general audience, and highly engrossing. It gives much to consider about the dynamics of race, ethnicity, language, power, identity, culture, and border in US society in the contemporary moment.

Author Information

Laila Lalami, professor of creative writing at the University of California, Riverside, was born and raised in Morocco. She attended Université Mohammed-V in Rabat, the University College London, and Southern California, where she earned a PhD in linguistics. Laila is the author of *Hope and Other Dangerous Pursuits* (a short story collection), a finalist for the Oregon Book Award. Her novel, *Secret Son*, was on the Orange Prize longlist. Laila's essays and opinion pieces have appeared in *Newsweek*, the *Los Angeles Times*, the *Washington Post*, *The Nation*, *The Guardian*, *The New York Times*, and numerous anthologies. Laila's work has been translated into ten languages. She is the recipient of a British Council Fellowship, a Fulbright Fellowship, and a Lannan Foundation Residency Fellowship.

No-No Boy, by John Okada. Published 1976, 232 pages.

Now considered a foundational work in Asian American literature, this novel tells the story of Ichiro Yamada, a fictional version of the real-life "no-no boys." Set in Seattle immediately after World War II, the story is a gritty and tender portrait of race and racism as Japanese Americans returned from incarceration and military service.

Yamada answers "no" twice in a compulsory government questionnaire about whether he would serve in the armed forces and swear loyalty to the United States. Unwilling to pledge himself to the country that interned him and his family, Ichiro earns two years in prison and the hostility of his family and community when he returns home to Seattle. Central to the story are multi-layered tensions with Anglo-Americans, African-Americans, Chinese-Americans, and the Japanese-American community. It is a valuable historical document of postwar liberalism.





Author Information

John Okada, a *nisei* (or person of Japanese descent born in America), was born in Seattle, Washington, in 1923. He received a BA from Washington and a Master's in English from Columbia. Like many Japanese Americans who came of age during World War II, Okada was jailed after the bombing of Pearl Harbor. Subsequently, the United States government asked him to either join the U.S. Army and pledge his loyalty to his country of birth or remain in prison. Okada was set free from Idaho's Minidoka prison after he chose to join the U.S. Armed Forces. He became an army sergeant and was honorably discharged in 1946.

Okada's experience during the period was the subject of his book *No-No Boy*. The novel sheds critical light on the catch-22 situation and the identity crisis many Japanese Americans suffered after the Pearl Harbor incident. The book mirrors the fate of individuals who suffered the horrors of internment or the feelings of conflict associated with fighting for a country that saw only as second-class citizens at best. At its publication, the novel was underappreciated. It became a classic in the 1970s, just after Okada died in 1971. Little is known about Okada's life other than what can be inferred from his novel.

Into the Beautiful North, by Luis Alberto Urrea. Published 2010, 368 pages.

The town of Tres Camarones in Mexico is in trouble: most of the men have gone to the United States to work, so when bandidos come to town, nineteen-year-old Nayeli is inspired by *The Magnificent Seven* and decides to lead a quest north to find fighters to come and take back the town. With the support of Tia Irma, the town's new mayor, Nayeli and her three friends head to Tijuana to make their way over the border in search of warriors to help them. Their journey is full of losses and dangers, but also leads them to new friends and experiences that make it worth the struggle.

Author Information

Luis Alberto Urrea is a Mexican American poet, novelist, and essayist. Urrea's native Mexico has always served as his muse, inspiring all of his books that span five genres. His nonfiction book *The Devil's Highway* tells the harrowing story of a group of Mexican immigrants lost in the Arizona desert and was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize and the Pacific Rim Kiriya Prize. Urrea's novels *The Hummingbird's Daughter* and its sequel, *Queen of America*, chronicle the life of beloved healer Teresita Urrea, deemed "the Mexican Joan of Arc." His novel *The House of Broken Angels* was inspired by the death of his eldest brother.

Born in Tijuana to a Mexican father and an American mother, Urrea grew up along both sides of the border, forever affected by its dichotomy, brutality, and richness, saying, "Borders everywhere are a





symbol of what divides us. That's what interests me." He lives in Naperville, Illinois, where he is a distinguished professor of creative writing at the University of Illinois-Chicago.

Questions in Relation to "A More Perfect Union"

1. *Into the Beautiful North* offers an unusual perspective on immigration over the Mexico-US border. What does the book suggest about the motives of illegal immigrants? How does it complicate some of the normal stereotypes about immigration that readers might hold?
2. Much of the novel is about the civic responsibility Nayeli and Irma feel to help their town. What makes these characters care enough about their home to try to save it? Which other characters in the novel seem to have a similar loyalty to the places they come from?
3. The novel is organized in two parts—Sur and Norte. In the first half, Nayeli and her friends talk about the United States with confidence about the correctness of their opinions. Where do they get their ideas about what America is like? How accurate are those ideas as compared to their real experiences?
4. One of the major themes of *Into the Beautiful North* is loyalty—to friends, to family, to country, etc. Characters throughout the novel have to choose where and with whom their allegiance lies. What messages does the novel seem to communicate about loyalty? Which characters seem to be the strongest positive and negative examples of this trait?
5. The novel treats many aspects of the characters' odyssey with humor, even difficult or tragic moments. What effect does this comedic approach create for readers? Does it weaken or strengthen the novel?
6. Luis Alberto Urrea grew up in the borderland of Tijuana and San Diego and has claimed to be more interested in what unites these two areas than what separates them. How is Urrea's joint loyalty to both Mexico and the United States apparent in the novel?

Americanah, by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. Published 2014, 588 pages.

Americanah follows a young Nigerian woman, Ifemelu, through her childhood and youth in Lagos, where she begins a deep and intimate relationship with Obinze, a fellow student. The novel switches back and forth between the two main characters and between past and present as Ifemelu and Obinze go to college together, head overseas to the U.S. and U.K. to seek their fortune, then ultimately end up back in Nigeria. The novel grapples thoughtfully with a wide range of issues including race, national identity, economic inequality, cultural stereotypes, family loyalty, and global citizenship in the 21st century.

Starting the Conversation:

Race and Racism in America



Author Information

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie was born in Enugu, Nigeria in 1977. She grew up on the campus of the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, where her father was a professor, and her mother was the first female Registrar. She studied medicine for a year at Nsukka and then left for the US at the age of 19 to continue her education on a different path. She graduated summa cum laude from Eastern Connecticut State University with a degree in Communication and Political Science.

She has a master's degree in Creative Writing from Johns Hopkins University and a Master of Arts degree in African History from Yale University. She was awarded a Hodder fellowship at Princeton University for the 2005-2006 academic year, and a fellowship at the Radcliffe Institute of Harvard University for the 2011-2012 academic year. In 2008, she received a MacArthur Fellowship.

She has received honorary doctorate degrees from Eastern Connecticut State University, Johns Hopkins University, Haverford College, Williams College, the University of Edinburgh, Duke University, Amherst College, Bowdoin College, SOAS University of London, American University, Georgetown University, Yale University, Rhode Island School of Design, and Northwestern University.

Questions in Relation to "A More Perfect Union"

1. Ifemelu's first blog focuses on her experiences "discover[ing] race in America"? What roles does she play as a non-American Black in the blog and in the novel?
2. The dinner parties that Ifemelu and Obinze attend as expatriates expose them to a range of attitudes about America, Great Britain, and Africa. How do those attitudes reflect different perspectives about citizenship and national identity?
3. Ifemelu eventually finds work as a babysitter for Kimberly, a white woman who works for a charity in Africa. Adichie writes that "for a moment Ifemelu was sorry to have come from Africa, to be the reason that this beautiful woman, with her bleached teeth and bounteous hair, would have to dig deep to feel such pity, such hopelessness. She smiled brightly, hoping to make Kimberly feel better" (152). How does Kimberly exemplify the sense of guilt or obligation that many white Americans feel toward Africa and Africans?
4. In her effort to feel less like an outsider, Ifemelu begins faking an American accent. She feels triumphant when she can do it, and then feels ashamed and resolves to stop (175). Which aspects of her becoming an American are most difficult for Ifemelu as she struggles to figure out how much she will give up of her Nigerian self?
5. Why does Ifemelu struggle to decide whether or not to give up her Nigerian accent? How is this decision symbolic of the dilemmas faced by other immigrants in the novel?
6. Books are an essential part of Ifemelu's and Obinze's relationship when they first meet. Obinze, in particular, is very interested in reading American books. How do literature and media affect



their view of American culture? How are other characters, like Blaine and Shan, affected by their relationship with American literature?

7. *Americanah* was published in 2013. In the book, we see the context of being Black in America during the Obama administration. Did you feel the context was different reading the book now? Are there elements that feel outdated, or was the content even more relevant today?

The Line Becomes a River by Francisco Cantú. Published 2019, 288 pages.

Francisco Cantú, the grandson of a Mexican immigrant and son of a park ranger, grew up near the southwestern border of the United States. After attending college and studying issues related to the border, Cantú decided to join the Border Patrol in an attempt to better understand the region and its challenges. *The Line Becomes a River* communicates Cantú's experiences during his years working for Border Control, including his often-harrowing encounters with migrants (both alive and dead), his growing awareness of the violence and complexity of immigration issues, and the ethical questions his job raises for him. He describes the people he interacted with, as well as the physical and psychological costs that he and others paid in their attempts to enforce (or escape from) border policies. Cantú blends his personal experiences, stories from his work, extensive research, and powerful writing to paint a moving picture of the complexities of the world of the border.

Author Information

Francisco Cantú served as an agent for the United States Border Patrol in the deserts of Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas from 2008 to 2012. A former Fulbright fellow, he is the recipient of a 2017 Whiting Award. His essays and translations have been featured on *This American Life* and in *Best American Essays*, *Harper's*, *Guernica*, *Orion*, *n+1* and *Ploughshares*. He lives in Tucson, Arizona.

Questions in Relation to "A More Perfect Union"

1. What does the US/Mexico border represent—both literally and figuratively—for the different characters in the book? How does the border function as both a weapon and a tool for those who live near it?
2. Cantú describes nightmares, teeth grinding, and a new interest in violence (like his shooting a bird) as some of the consequences of his work with the Border Patrol. What effect do these details have on your perception of the author and his story?
3. When deciding to join the Border Patrol, Cantú characterizes his decision as a compassionate one: "At least if I'm the one apprehending [people crossing the border], I can offer them some small comfort by speaking with them in their own language, by talking to them with knowledge of their home." How does his plan to offer kindness along with border enforcement work out? Does his behavior or attitude seem different from other agents without his cultural background?

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4. What role does Cantú's mother play in the book? Does she reinforce or challenge Cantú's presentation of himself and his motivations?
5. Early in the book, Cantú claims that "stepping into a system doesn't mean that the system becomes you." In what ways do his experiences in the Border Patrol prove or disprove this claim? How does "the system" assert control over the characters Cantú describes, including himself?
6. Cantú recounts many difficult and emotional events in the book, but doesn't include much description of his thoughts or feelings about what he experiences. What effect does this have on your reactions to the events he includes?
7. The book describes a variety of ways that Americans and migrants view immigration and think it should be dealt with. Which perspectives does Cantú seem to agree with and which does he seem to criticize?

An American Marriage by Tayari Jones. Published 2019, 336 pages.

In *An American Marriage*, Tayari Jones tells the story of Roy and Celestial, a talented young Black couple who are just starting their life together. They both have big plans for their careers and high hopes for their shared future, but their lives are shattered when Roy is convicted of a crime he didn't commit and sentenced to twelve years in jail. The novel describes the legal and personal challenges the couple faces as they and their friend Andre try to deal with the aftermath of Roy's conviction. Told from the alternating perspectives of Celestial, Roy, and Andre, the novel explores issues of racial justice, family relationships, and the complexity of the modern American Dream.

Author Information

Tayari Jones is the author of the novels *Leaving Atlanta*, *The Untelling*, *Silver Sparrow*, and *An American Marriage* (Algonquin Books, February 2018). Her writing has appeared in *Tin House*, *The Believer*, *The New York Times*, and *Callaloo*. A member of the Fellowship of Southern Writers, she has also been a recipient of the Hurston/Wright Legacy Award, Lifetime Achievement Award in Fine Arts from the Congressional Black Caucus Foundation, United States Artist Fellowship, NEA Fellowship and Radcliffe Institute Bunting Fellowship. *Silver Sparrow* was named a #1 Indie Next Pick by booksellers in 2011, and the NEA added it to its Big Read Library of classics in 2016. Jones is a graduate of Spelman College, University of Iowa, and Arizona State University. She is currently an Associate Professor in the MFA program at Rutgers-Newark University.

Questions in Relation to "A More Perfect Union"

1. The novel's title, *An American Marriage*, emphasizes the cultural and geographical context of Roy and Celestial's relationship. In what ways does their marriage seem characteristically



- “American”? What effect does that description have on the way you read the events in the book?
2. Celestial explains Roy’s conviction by saying that “he didn’t do anything but be a black man in the wrong place at the wrong time.” What role did Roy’s race and gender play in his treatment by the legal system?
 3. During the five years that Roy spends in prison, his relationship with Celestial disintegrates under the strain of separation and disappointment. What factors cause this disintegration? How much of it is because of Roy’s conviction and how much might have happened under normal circumstances?
 4. One major theme in the novel is the relationship between parents and children, including Roy’s relationship with his two father figures, Olive’s relationship with Roy and Celestial, and Celestial’s relationship with her unborn children (and perhaps with her dolls as well). How do these relationships shape the characters and their interactions with each other? In what ways might these relationships also be typically American?
 5. In what ways is the novel a critique of the American justice system? What might have prevented Roy from going to prison for someone else’s crime? How might that have changed the trajectory of his life and relationships?
 6. The lives of Celestial and Roy look very different at the end of the novel than they did at the beginning. Which of these differences seem like positive changes? Which seem negative?