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Johnston Public Library Book Discussion Questions

Red Clay by Charles B. Fancher

Summary

An astounding multigenerational saga, *Red Clay* chronicles the interwoven lives of an enslaved Black family and their white owners as the Civil War ends and Reconstruction begins.

In 1943, when a frail old white woman shows up in *Red Clay*, Alabama, at the home of a Black former slave—on the morning following his funeral—his family hardly knows what to expect after she utters the words “... a lifetime ago, my family owned yours.” Adelaide Parker has a story to tell—one of ambition, betrayal, violence, and redemption—that shaped both the fate of her family and that of the late Felix H. Parker.

But there are gaps in her knowledge, and she’s come to *Red Clay* seeking answers from a family with whom she shares a name and a history that neither knows in full. In an epic saga that takes us from *Red Clay* to Paris, to the Côte d’Azur and New Orleans, human frailties are pushed to their limits as secrets are exposed and the line between good and evil becomes ever more difficult to discern. *Red Clay* is a tale that deftly lays bare the ugliness of slavery, the uncertainty of the final months of the Civil War, the optimism of Reconstruction, and the pain and frustration of Jim Crow.

With a vivid sense of place and a cast of memorable characters, Charles B. Fancher draws upon his own family history to weave a riveting tale of triumph over adversity, set against a backdrop of societal change and racial animus that reverberates in contemporary America. Through seasons of joy and unspeakable pain, Fancher delivers rich moments as allies become enemies, and enemies—to their great surprise—find new respect for each other.

Discussion Questions

1. With which *Red Clay* character, or characters, do you most identify? Why?
2. Although Felix Parker is the central figure in *Red Clay*, the novel’s female characters are hugely consequential. Indeed, the story unfolds through the shared memories of Black and white Parker women. How do the book’s female characters influence the way you engage with the story?
3. Do you find Edna Mae Daniels, the prostitute, to be a sympathetic character or an object of scorn, and why? How does her backstory affect your response to her?

4. Why do you think Addie's companion, Isabelle, chooses to take Addie's child as her own?
5. Addie Parker's worldview follows a remarkable arc that makes it all but inevitable that she would seek out Felix's family when she learns of his death. How does her storyline affect the way you engage with the novel?
6. Would Addie have been a different person if the death of her mother had not led to her being sent north to boarding school? How so?
7. No other individual in *Red Clay* changes as much as Claude Parker. Is his transformation, his descent into madness, the result of weakness in his character or simply his inability to cope with change?
8. Are there similarities between the motives for John Robert Parker's suicide and Claude Parker's mental breakdown?
9. Do you detect symbolism in the fact that John Robert Parker rides a black stallion that is then inherited by his son Claude?
10. Felix Parker succeeds in life against overwhelming odds. What factors make it possible for him to accomplish this?
11. How critical is Felix's banishment to the fields on his road to maturity?
12. How does the depiction of slavery in *Red Clay* strike you, and does it alter your understanding of the institution in any way?
13. Is your understanding of the Reconstruction era changed by reading this novel? If so, in what ways?
14. Do you see parallels between the backlash against Reconstruction, as presented in *Red Clay*, and the current political and social upheaval in America?
15. Can you speculate about how the course of American history might have changed if Reconstruction had not been abandoned?
16. Does *Red Clay* cause you to think differently about class distinctions within both the white and Black communities at the time the novel is set, as well as now?
17. What do you take away from the novel's depiction of enslaved Black people, and later freedmen, prioritizing family ties in contrast to stereotypes often imposed on them?
18. What is most interesting to you about the insights into the 19th century culture of the Creoles of color?
19. How are observations of the natural world used to enhance emotion or advance the story?

20. What role does food play in telling the Red Clay story?

Summary from GoodReads.com
Discussion Questions from BookClubs.com