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Book Club Kit Discussion Guide

The Warmth of Other Suns
by
Isabelle Wilkerson
(New York: Random House, 2010)

Author: Isabel Wilkerson, the Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist, is author of *The New York Times*' bestseller, *The Warmth of Other Suns*. The book brings to life one of the greatest underreported stories of the 20th Century, a migration that reshaped modern America. Wilkerson interviewed more than 1,200 people, unearthed archival research and gathered the voices of the famous and the unknown to tell the epic story of the redistribution of an entire people. She chose to tell the story through three unforgettable protagonists as they make the decision of their lives.

Warmth won the 2010 National Book Critics Circle Award for Nonfiction, the 2011 Anisfield-Wolf Award for Nonfiction, the 2011 Hillman Book Prize, the 2011 Lynton History Prize from Harvard and Columbia universities, the 2011 Heartland Prize for Nonfiction, the Stephen Ambrose Oral History Prize, the Independent Literary Award for Nonfiction, the Horace Mann Bond Book Award from Harvard University, the NAACP Image Award for best literary debut and was shortlisted for the 2011 Pen-Galbraith Literary Award for Nonfiction and the Dayton Literary Peace Prize. [From isabelwilkerson.com]

Summary: From World War I to the 1970s, some six million black Americans fled the American South for an uncertain existence in the urban North and West. They left all they knew and took a leap of faith that they might find freedom under the Warmth of Other Suns.

Their leaving became known as the Great Migration. It brought us James Baldwin, Miles Davis, John Coltrane, Richard Wright and the forebears of Michelle Obama, Toni Morrison and of most African-Americans in the North and West. It set in motion the civil rights movement and created our cities and art forms.

This is the story of three who made the journey, of the forces that compelled them to leave and of the many others—famous and not so famous—who went as far as they could to realize the American Dream. [From isabelwilkerson.com]

Questions:

1. *The Warmth of Other Suns* combines a sweeping historical perspective with vivid intimate portraits of three individuals: Ida Mae Gladney, George Swanson Starling, and Robert Pershing Foster. What is the value of this dual focus, of shifting between the panoramic and the close-up? In what ways are Ida Mae Gladney, George Starling, and Robert Foster representative of the millions of other migrants who journeyed from South to North?
2. In many ways *The Warmth of Other Suns* seeks to tell a new story—about the Great Migration of southern blacks to the north—and to set the record straight about the true

- significance of that migration. What are the most surprising revelations in the book? What misconceptions does Wilkerson dispel?
3. What were the major economic, social, and historical forces that sparked the Great Migration? Why did blacks leave in such great numbers from 1915 to 1970?
 4. What were the most horrifying conditions of Jim Crow South? What instances of racial terrorism stand out most strongly in the book? What daily injustices and humiliations did blacks have to face there?
 5. In what ways was the Great Migration of southern blacks similar to other historical migrations? In what important ways was it unique?
 6. After being viciously attacked by a mob in Cicero, a suburb of Chicago, Martin Luther King, Jr. said: “I have seen many demonstrations in the South, but I have never seen anything so hostile and so hateful as I’ve seen here today” (p. 389). Why were northern working-class whites so hostile to black migrants?
 7. Wilkerson quotes *Black Boy* in which Richard Wright wrote, on arriving in the North: “I had fled one insecurity and embraced another” (p. 242). What unique challenges did black migrants face in the North? How did these challenges affect the lives of Ida Mae Gladney, George Starling, and Robert Foster?
 8. Wilkerson points out that the three most influential figures in jazz were all children of the Great Migration: Miles Davis, Thelonious Monk, and John Coltrane. What would American culture look like today if the Great Migration hadn’t happened?
 9. What motivated Ida Mae Gladney, George Starling, and Robert Foster to leave the South? What circumstances and inner drives prompted them to undertake such a difficult and dangerous journey? What would likely have been their fates if they had remained in the South? In what ways did living in the North free them?
 10. Near the end of the book, Wilkerson asks: “With all that grew out of the mass movement of people, did the Great Migration achieve the aim of those who willed it? Were the people who left the South—and their families—better off for having done so? Was the loss of what they left behind worth what confronted them in the anonymous cities they fled to?” (p. 528). How does Wilkerson answer these questions?
 11. How did the Great Migration change not only the North but also the South? How did the South respond to the mass exodus of cheap black labor?
 12. In what ways are current attitudes toward Mexican Americans similar to attitudes toward African Americans expressed by Northerners in *The Warmth of Other Suns*? For example, the ways working-class Northerners felt that Southern blacks were stealing their jobs.
 13. At a neighborhood watch meeting in Chicago’s South Shore, Ida Mae listens to a young state senator named Barack Obama. In what ways is Obama’s presidency an indirect result of the Great Migration?

14. What is the value of Wilkerson basing her research primarily on firsthand, eyewitness accounts, gathered through extensive interviews, of this historical period?

15. Wilkerson writes of her three subjects that “Ida Mae Gladney had the humblest trappings but was perhaps the richest of them all. She had lived the hardest life, been given the least education, seen the worst the South could hurl at her people, and did not let it break her . . . Her success was spiritual, perhaps the hardest of all to achieve. And because of that, she was the happiest and lived the longest of them all” (p. 532). What attributes allowed Ida Mae Gladney to achieve this happiness and longevity? In what sense might her life, and the lives of George Starling and Robert Foster as well, serve as models for how to persevere and overcome tremendous difficulties?

[From isabelwilkerson.com]