

Book Club Guide for *The House of Eve* by Sadeqa Johnson

This reading group guide for *The House of Eve* includes discussion questions and ideas for enhancing your book club. The suggested questions are intended to help your reading group find new and interesting angles and topics for your discussion. We hope that these ideas will enrich your conversation and increase your enjoyment of the book.



Topics and Questions for Discussion:

1. Consider the epigraph from Toni Morrison. How does this set the tone for the opening section? Who do you think are the monsters in this story, if any?
2. The novel takes place before the Civil Rights movement in the mid-50s and 1960s. Discuss how racism affects both women and their families, such as when Ruby goes stocking shopping with Aunt Marie or how she's treated at the House of Magdalene. Would these instances be surprising today? Why or why not?

3. One of the biggest shocks for Eleanor is the colorism amongst Black people in Washington, DC. This is highlighted in particular when Eleanor meets William's family and describes it as being "a room filled with white-faced Negroes." How does colorism play out in the novel for both Ruby and Eleanor?

4. Both Ruby and Eleanor have mentors in their stories; Ruby with Mrs. Thomas and Eleanor with Mrs. Porter. How do these women support their mentees, and how would the story have played out if they weren't a part of Ruby and Eleanor's lives?

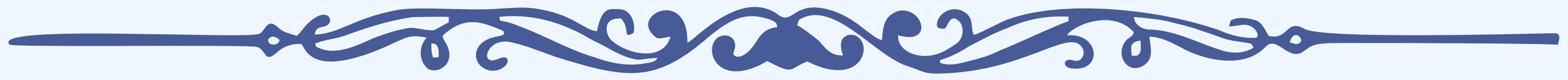
5. Ruby and Eleanor fall in love with men who are off limits and essentially forbidden. Shimmy is Jewish and William is upper class. How do these conflicts affect their relationships, and shape each woman's decisions throughout the novel?

6. William and Shimmy may seem like opposites, but how are they similar? What prejudices do both of them face?

7. The second epigraph of the book ("Sometimes there are no words to help one's courage. Sometimes you just have to jump.") comes from Dr. Clarissa Pinkola Estes, an American poet, psychoanalyst, and post-trauma specialist. Why do you think Sadeqa chose this quote, from this author, in the novel? How does trauma affect the characters?

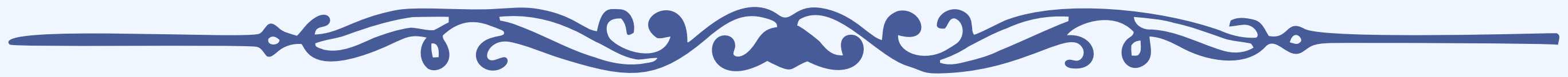
8. The role of a mother is a strong theme in the book. How do the actions of Rose, Eleanor's mother-in-law, and Mrs. Shapiro, Shimmy's mother, affect Eleanor and Ruby and what happens to them? Would you consider them cruel and abusive or justified and reasonable in their actions?

9. Both William and Shimmy propose to Eleanor and Ruby upon hearing of their pregnancies, but each woman reacts differently. Ruby says to Shimmy, “Your mother will crush our love. The world will stomp out our fire.” Could Eleanor have said the same thing to William? Why or why not?
10. Consider the other young women and the nuns at the House of Magdalene. How does religion both inside and outside of the House use Christianity to bring shame to what happened to them? How does this stigma of shame and unwed mothers affect the women, and does it still exist today?
11. Despite the hardships that each character undergoes, there remains a sense of second chances and hope. How do Ruby and Eleanor find hope, even in their darkest moments? What keeps them going?
12. How are women’s reproductive rights portrayed in the novel? How is this struggle and lack of access reflected in today’s society, and could this story have taken place in modern day?
13. In the end, Ruby notes that Mother Margaret was right: “The only way forward was to forget.” Do you think this could be said not only of Ruby, but of this forgotten history of unwed homes for mothers? What are the harms in forgetting?
14. Discuss the last chapter of the novel, which is the only time in the story the two women meet in person. How did it make you feel? If the book continued, would you want the women to connect over what happened, or remain simple acquaintances?



Enhance Your Book Club

1. The *We Rise* program that Ruby attended was based on an actual initiative called *Tell Them We Rise*, which was designed by Ruth Wright Hayre, the first African-American woman to teach full time at a high school in Philadelphia. The program would allow 116 students selected in sixth grade to attend college for free if they stayed in school. You can learn more about this program through the PBS documentary *Tell Them We Are Rising*, directed by Stanley Nelson and Marco Williams.
2. Ruby loved to paint, and would often escape into her “Ruby’s Red World.” Look up a local painting class for your book club to join, or spend an evening at a “Paint and Sip” class. How else can art be used to escape and soothe or change perspective on a situation?
3. Sadeqa Johnson was inspired to write *The House of Eve* because of her personal family history, as described in her author’s note. Are there family stories you have pondered with unanswered questions? What if you could write their stories? Consider having group members write a journal entry from an ancestor’s perspective, and share anonymously for the group to reflect on together.
4. Enjoy a themed cocktail! To make Eve’s Elixir, mix: 2 oz. cognac or whiskey, 1 oz. lemon juice, ½ oz. simple syrup or agave, and a generous pour of sparkling wine. Serve on the rocks and garnish with a lemon wheel and maraschino cherry. Enjoy!



Bibliography for *The House of Eve*

Below is a list of books that were used as research for and mentioned in *The House of Eve*:

The Girl Who Went Away by Ann Fesler

Our Kind of People by Lawrence Otis Graham

Strawberry Mansion: The Jewish Community of North Philadelphia by
Allen Meyer

Incident in the Life of a Slave Girl by Harriet Jacobs

Home to Harlem by Claude McKay

The Goodness of Violets and Other Tales by Alice Dunbar Nelson

Majors and Minors by Paul Laurence Dunbar

Twelfth Night by William Shakespeare

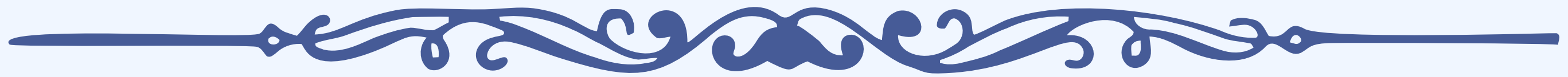
Romeo and Juliet by William Shakespeare

Our Nig: Sketches from the Life of a Free Black by Harriet E. Wilson

Uncle Tom's Cabin by Harriet Beecher Stowe

Complete Writings by Phillis Wheatley

Their Eyes Were Watching God by Zora Neale Hurston



Playlist for *The House of Eve*

Music plays a quiet but significant role for both Ruby and Eleanor. Both William and Shimmy take them to concerts for their first dates.

Below is a list of songs mentioned in *The House of Eve*:

“I Wanna Be Loved” by Dinah Washington

“Lover Man” by Billie Holiday

“Caravan” by Duke Ellington

“It Don’t Mean a Thing”

“A Blossom Fell” by Nat King Cole

“Rock and Roll” by Wild Bill Moore

“Stormy Weather” by Lena Horne

“Misty” by Sarah Vaughan

“This Little Light of Mine”

“Ain’t Misbehavin’” by Fats Waller

Musical compositions by Justin Elie

Musical compositions by Amadeo Roldán

“I’m Glad Salvation is Free” by Mahalia Jackson



A conversation with Sadeqa Johnson

What was the inspiration for *The House of Eve*?

After I wrote *Yellow Wife*, I thought about writing a young adult novel instead of another historical novel for adults. Ruby came out of an idea I had for a YA novel. She also was partly inspired by my own family history. I remembered my mother telling me that she didn't know her mother *was* her mother until she was in the third grade. My grandmother was the black sheep of the family, because she had gotten pregnant at age 14 and had my mother at age 15, out of wedlock, and she birthed her in secret. My mom had lived with her grandmother until she was eight, and then she found out that my grandmother was really her mother. I started thinking: How is that situation possible, and what does that do to the child?

I started researching how it was at that time and I came upon these homes for women. They were largely for white women: teenagers and women in their 20s who were not married. They went into these homes when they were pregnant, and were usually forced to give up their babies. But I couldn't find a Black woman in these stories.

As a Black woman, I like to write about the Black experience. We do not have just one single narrative, no matter what is shown on TV. So I kept digging, and discovered a book called *Our Kind of People* by Lawrence Otis Graham. The book peeled back the veil on America's wealthy African American upper class. They were doctors and lawyers, and I traced this research into Washington, D.C., and that was the beginning of William and Eleanor's story.

Around that time, Eleanor came to me, and she was full of rage. She was telling me that she was desperate to have a child, and desperate to fit in, and things were not working out the way she wanted them to. I figured I could solve her problem by having her adopt a baby, But adoption in the '40s and '50s was kept quiet. It wasn't openly discussed like it is now. Secret pregnancy and secret adoption. That's how the two narratives came together.

Eleanor's experience at Howard University is wildly different than she expects, after growing up in a mostly white town. Tell us about the evolution of her character.

I was watching Toni Morrison's documentary, *The Pieces I Am*. Morrison was from Ohio, and she said, "I didn't know that [Black] people separated themselves by color until I set foot on Howard's campus." She lived on a block with Germans and Italians and Poles, and everyone looked out for each other. That wasn't my experience, but I made that a part of Eleanor's experience. [At Howard], she gets a closer look at the way Black people separated themselves by color.

Of course, that is all leftover baggage from slavery: the light-skinned people who were the master's children, who often worked in the house, and the darker-skinned folks often worked in the fields. The colorism and the social situations at Howard added an extra layer to this transition time for Eleanor--being away from home, being at school, being on the poorer end of the spectrum. There was the classism she faced as well.

Ruby falls in love with a Jewish boy, and both she and the adults in her life understand that this love might hamper her chances at a college degree.

Ruby says in the book that she was okay with being unhappy, but she was not okay with being poor. Sometimes, for girls like Ruby, it's a choice. How long would her happiness last if she was poor? For Ruby, I think the choices were easy. For her family members, the only jobs available were serving white people: cleaning their houses, nannyng for them, chauffeuring them. The only way out was an education. And even that was sketchy--because, being poor, you couldn't afford it. A young girl should not have to choose between falling in love and getting an education. But if she didn't choose, this is the reality: she would be dependent on white folks. Being poor--or not being poor--is a strong motivator for a lot of decisions that people like Ruby had to make. Even now, really, that's the case.

Eleanor loves her work at the Howard library, and finds a mentor in Mrs. Porter, the librarian. What was the inspiration for her character?

Yes, Dorothy B. Porter was actually a librarian at Howard University. Growing up, the library was my foundation and my relationships with librarians totally fueled who I am today. When I stumbled upon Dorothy Porter's character, I had to figure out how to weave her in. Those scenes were a pure joy for me--writing about a woman who worked so hard to preserve African, African American, and Caribbean history. I loved being able to tie Eleanor into something so historically sound, which was also very important to her character.

Shame is a common theme in the novel: both Eleanor and Ruby are shamed for their choices and also for their struggles.

Shame for women is just rampant in our culture. If my kids misbehave, people are going to blame me--not their father! Anything that happens in the family structure is the woman's fault. My daughter couldn't find a homecoming dress that fit her shape. I told her, "It's not you that are wrong--it's the dressmakers thinking that we all fit into this one category." I think that's the case for Ruby and Eleanor: Ruby not fitting into Mrs. Shapiro's world, checking any of the boxes she thought would be a good fit for her son. And as for Eleanor, she was not of this wealthy society that Rose Pride thought William should marry into. If a woman can't get pregnant or can't carry a baby, she tends to think this is her fault. Women are taught to blame themselves for things that they are not in control over at a very early age, and that's something we deal with unless someone teaches you how to stop.

The House of Eve is ostensibly the story of two women, but really it's about multiple women: Ruby and Eleanor, their mothers, Ruby's aunt Marie, Mrs. Porter. What do you think is important about that ensemble cast?

Too often the Black women on TV look the same, act the same, sound the same. In *The House of Eve*, we have different colors, different classes, different backgrounds, different aspirations, etc. They are their own melting pot. I love being able to tell different versions of our stories.

