

Book Club Discussion Guide



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The Color Purple

By Alice Walker

About the author:

Alice Walker is an internationally celebrated writer, poet and activist whose books include seven novels, four collections of short stories, four children's books, and volumes of essays and poetry. She won the Pulitzer Prize in Fiction in 1983 and the National Book Award.

Walker has written many bestsellers; among them, *The Temple of My Familiar* (a wisdom tale that originates in prehistory); *By The Light of My Father's Smile* (sexuality and forgiveness as paths of healing); *Possessing the Secret of Joy* (1992), which explores the effects of female genital mutilation on one woman's psyche as well as her body (she becomes a patient of a fictional Carl Jung). This novel led to the 1993 book and documentary film *Warrior Marks: Female Genital Mutilation and the Sexual Blinding of Women*, both collaborations with British-Indian filmmaker Pratibha Parmar, and *We are the Ones We Have Been Waiting For: Inner Light in a Time of Darkness*. (Meditations on spiritual and political issues).

Her other novels are: *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* (one family's struggle to survive the sharecropping system – slavery under another name – in the South), *Meridian* (a spiritual biography of The Civil Rights Movement), *The Color Purple* (liberation from enforced, male dominant, religion and thought; also poses the question never asked by societies in which they occur: what becomes of the children whose parents are lynched/assassinated?) and *Now Is the Time To Open Your Heart* (a couple on the verge of separating decides to live together, fully in the present, despite awareness of the universal unraveling of societies around the globe).

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In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose examines the creative inheritance of one's maternal line, and how our own contributions, whether political, activist, or poetic connect on this foundation. *Essays in Living By the Word* reflect Walker's Earth and Womanist based spirituality. *Anything We Love Can Be Saved: A Writer's Activism* (explores activism as a source of inspiration), *The Same River Twice: Honoring the Difficult* chronicles the adventure of having a film made of her novel *The Color Purple* and weathering storms of censorship, banning, criticism, and verbal attack.

Walker has been an activist all of her adult life, and believes that learning to extend the range of our compassion is activity and work available to all. She is a staunch defender not only of human rights, but of the rights of all living beings. She is one of the world's most prolific writers, yet continues to travel the world to literally stand on the side of the poor, and the economically, spiritually and politically oppressed. She also stands, however, on the side of the revolutionaries, teachers and leaders who seek change and transformation of the world. Upon returning from Gaza in 2008, Walker said, "Going to Gaza was our opportunity to remind the people of Gaza and ourselves that we belong to the same world: the world where grief is not only acknowledged, but shared; where we see injustice and call it by its name; where we see suffering and know the one who stands and sees is also harmed, but not nearly so much as the one who stands and sees and says and does nothing."

Alice Walker was awarded the Mahmoud Darwish Literary Prize for Fiction 2016.

Source: <http://alicewalkersgarden.com/about/>

About this book:

Published to unprecedented acclaim, *The Color Purple* established Alice Walker as a major voice in modern fiction. This is the story of two sisters—one a missionary in Africa and the other a child wife living in the South—who sustain their loyalty to and trust in each other across time, distance, and silence. Beautifully imagined and deeply compassionate, this

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classic novel of American literature is rich with passion, pain, inspiration, and an indomitable love of life.

Source: <https://www.hmhco.com/shop/books/The-Color-Purple-Musical-TieIn/9780544805026>

Discussion Questions:

1. In Celie's first letter to God, she asks for a sign to let her know what is happening to her. Discuss the way confusion and deception become powerful tools for those characters who want to take advantage of Celie. Unravel the layers of lies that are told to her throughout the novel, perhaps making lists that compare the fiction she is expected to believe with the truth about her world. These can be concrete (Celie's impression that Pa is too poor to provide properly for her, and the later realization that he had more resources than he ever lets on) or abstract (the assertion that Celie is unintelligent, though she demonstrates constant intelligence in planning for her safety and that of her sister). Ask the students to recall their own experience with a revelation: when in their lives has the truth set them free?
2. What is the effect of not knowing Albert's last name? In early novels, it was not uncommon for authors to use a blank in place of a character's name, to create the illusion that the character was someone the reader might know—someone whose identity had to be kept secret. What does it mean that Celie must call her husband Mr. ____? When does she at last begin calling him by his first name?
3. Why does Albert tell Harpo to begin beating his wife, Sofia? Why is it so important to Harpo that his wife have no will of her own? Is his relationship with Squeak (Mary Agnes) fulfilling? What do these scenes tell us about the nature of abusive cycles? Is cruelty something that is taught—something that is unnatural? In your opinion, what does it take for someone (male or female) to deserve true respect?

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4. Just as Celie grew up being told she was inferior, Shug Avery was always told she was evil. What are your impressions of Shug, from the photo Celie sees early on, to the end of the novel, when Celie and Albert have united in their devotion to Shug? What does Shug teach Celie about being loved, and about finding one's true self? What price does Sofia pay for being her true self?
5. What does it take for Celie to finally reach her boiling point and reject oppression?
6. What is Celie's opinion of Grady and his haze of addiction?
7. Why is it difficult for Shug to commit to the people who love her? In what ways does Shug bring both pleasure and heartache to them?
8. Nettie's life with Corrine and Samuel gives her the first semblance of a healthy family life she has ever known, but Corrine's jealousy taints this. Only the memory of that crucial early scene, when Celie lays eyes on her daughter at the store, absolves Nettie just before Corrine dies. The Color Purple brims with these intricate turns of plot. List the seemingly minor scenes that turn out to be pivotal in the lives of the characters.

Source: *Lit Lovers* (<http://www.litlovers.com/reading-guides/fiction/211-color-purple-walker?start=3>)

Other formats available at Halifax Public Libraries:

- e-book