

Book Club Discussion Guide



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The Love Songs of W.E.B. Du Bois, a novel

By Honoree Fanonne Jeffers

About the author:

Honorée Fanonne Jeffers is a poet, essayist, and novelist. She's the author of five critically acclaimed books of poetry. Her first novel (and sixth book), *The Love Songs of W.E.B. Du Bois*, is forthcoming from Harper on August 24, 2021.

Through the perspective of one young, Black girl, Ailey Pearl Garfield, *Love Songs* tells the stories of several generations of Ailey's family in central Georgia, from the Removal of Indigenous people(s) to the enslavement and freedom of African Americans, and through to our present, fractious day. *Love Songs* has received starred reviews from Publishers Weekly, Kirkus Reviews, and BookList. In addition, *Love Songs* has received positive mentions in Atlanta Journal Constitution, Essence, The New York Times, Observer, and was named an "anticipated" book by Ms. and GoodReads—and BookPage has called Honorée "a writer to watch."

Honorée's latest book of poetry, *The Age of Phillis*, is based upon fifteen years of research on the life and times of Phillis Wheatley Peters, a formerly enslaved person who was the first African American woman to publish a book. *The Age of Phillis* won the 2021 NAACP Image Award for Literary Work: Poetry, was long-listed for the 2020 National Book Award in Poetry, was a finalist for both the 2021 PEN/Volcker Award and the 2021 Los Angeles Times Book Prize in Poetry, and *The Age of Phillis*

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was chosen as the “common read” for the scholarly conference, Society of Early Americanists for the academic year of 2020-2021.

Honorée has won fellowships from the American Antiquarian Society, the Aspen Summer Words Conference, the Bread Loaf Writers Conference, the MacDowell Colony, the National Endowment for the Arts, the Rona Jaffe Foundation, the Vermont Studio Center, and the Witter Bynner Foundation through the Library of Congress. In consideration of Honorée’s scholarly research on Phillis Wheatley Peters, she was elected to the American Antiquarian Society, a learned organization to which fourteen U.S. Presidents have been elected. She has won the 2018 Harper Lee Award for Literary Distinction, and in 2020, she was inducted into the Alabama Writers Hall of Fame; both notations recognize lifetime achievement.

Honorée is Professor of English at University of Oklahoma in Norman, where she has taught since 2002.

Source: Author’s website: (<https://honoreejeffers.com/>)

About this book:

The great scholar W. E. B. Du Bois once wrote about the Problem of race in America, and what he called “Double Consciousness,” a sensitivity that every African American possesses in order to survive. Since childhood, Ailey Pearl Garfield has understood Du Bois’s words all too well. Bearing the names of two formidable Black Americans—the revered choreographer Alvin Ailey and her great grandmother Pearl, the descendant of enslaved Georgians and tenant farmers—Ailey carries Du Bois’s Problem on her shoulders.

Ailey is reared in the north in the City but spends summers in the small Georgia town of Chicassetta, where her mother’s family has lived since their ancestors arrived from Africa in bondage. From an early age, Ailey fights a battle for belonging that’s made

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all the more difficult by a hovering trauma, as well as the whispers of women—her mother, Belle, her sister, Lydia, and a maternal line reaching back two centuries—that urge Ailey to succeed in their stead.

To come to terms with her own identity, Ailey embarks on a journey through her family’s past, uncovering the shocking tales of generations of ancestors—Indigenous, Black, and white—in the deep South. In doing so Ailey must learn to embrace her full heritage, a legacy of oppression and resistance, bondage and independence, cruelty and resilience that is the story—and the song—of America itself.

Source: Author’s website: (<https://honoreejeffers.com/>)

Discussion Questions:

1. The life and legacy of W.E.B Du Bois plays a central role in this novel, from the title, to the quotations at the start of each section, to the many conversations Uncle Root, Ailey, and others have about the great scholar. What was Uncle Root trying to teach Ailey through his many musings on Du Bois? What is the author trying to communicate to readers through the inclusion of Du Bois’s words and history in the novel?
2. What role does colorism play in the book, both for Ailey and for the members of her family across generations? How does Ailey experience colorism in her family, in her personal and romantic setting, throughout her academic career?
3. Chicassetta, Georgia is a key location in Ailey’s present-day story and in the “sorrow songs” of her maternal ancestors, who were once enslaved on the land their descendants now inhabit. What do you make of Chicassetta and the hallowed landmarks there: the Mound and Red Mound Church, Uncle Root’s pecan tree, and

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- the former Pinchard plantation? What role do these places play in Ailey's understanding of her family's history and of her own place in the world?
4. Discuss the role education plays in the novel, particularly for Uncle Root and Ailey. How does Ailey's family history of education affect her own educational direction? How does her relationship to education inform her relationships with her family and her peers?
 5. How do Ailey's experiences differ as she moves between predominantly white institutions like Braithwaite and North Carolina Regents University and Historically Black Colleges and Universities like Routledge? How does she feel she is perceived in these different institutions? How does she view herself with regard to these institutions and how do those perceptions change over the course of the novel?
 6. As we follow Ailey's story, we also learn the stories of her Black and Indigenous ancestors in what would become Chicassetta. How do these ancestral experiences of oppression and resistance, bondage and independence, cruelty and resilience come to bear on Ailey's life? How do they inform the lives of the older generations in Ailey's family like Uncle Root, Dear Pearl, and Belle?
 7. When Ailey and Dr. Oludara visit Moss Road Plantation, the caretaker glosses over the brutal history of the place and focuses instead on its architectural history. Throughout the novel, Ailey encounters many historical and family truths that are misrepresented or rewritten entirely. Recall some of these instances. What was the purpose of the lie? Who did it benefit? Who did it hurt?

Source: Publisher's website (<https://www.harpercollins.com/>)