

Reading Group Guide

These discussion questions are designed to enhance your group's conversation about *Rebel Yell*, a timely novel of political intrigue, family secrets, and espionage, steeped in our country's racial history and framing our unique political moment.

For discussion

1. In what sense was Abel Jones the third born a prince of the black bourgeoisie?
2. What events leave Abel with an understanding of the Civil Rights movement as an unnamed, unacknowledged war?
3. Food in general, and meals in particular, play an important role in this novel. Which food items do you think are the most important identity markers for Abel? For Hope? For Ajay?
4. Parties and other ritualized food exchanges are a significant part of *Rebel Yell*. Compare and contrast the Thanksgiving festival at Hope and Waycross's house and the winter party Hope's father would give; the repass at Sammie's house and the repass at Grandma's house; the Martha's Vineyard barbeque hosted by the aunts and Hope and Abel's picnic in the snow; and finally, Abel's thirteenth birthday party and Ajay's "milk, please" breakfast debacle.
5. Throughout the novel there is both a sense of safe and unsafe places, and a sense that one's wisdom is in part defined by being able to discern which is which. As depicted in *Rebel Yell*, who is particularly safe or unsafe in Birmingham? In Rome? In Waynesville? In the Philippines? In West Virginia? In Cambridge? In Nashville? Are different places safe for different characters? Name other locations within the novel that are peculiarly safe or unexpectedly dangerous.

6. Hope has a very complex relation to race, as did her mother, Canary, before her. Make the argument that Canary was born a princess of the black West Virginia. Does Canary maintain this identity at Oberlin? In her marriage? In Rome? How does Canary (either inadvertently or on purpose) start passing for white? What is a Melungeon?
7. If we come to understand Canary's journey, at least in part, as being a journey of passing from blackness and a national identity to passing into whiteness and an international identity—is it more or less significant to understand Hope's journey as one of passing from whiteness and an international identity into a black and national identity?
8. Discuss the importance of the Flying Horses and the Confederate Memorial to Hope and Abel both as locations of love and locations of memorial.
9. At one time or another, Hope and Abel each function as “secret” agents of the government. Why does Abel find this secrecy to be sheltering? Why does Hope find the secrecy to be imperiling?
10. Both Abel and Hope have traumatic family secrets that they share with Nicholas Gordon and Mo Henry. Is Nicholas a worthy confidante? Is Mo Henry? Why are Abel and Hope drawn to these men?
11. Waycross, Hope's second husband, was one of young Abel's protectors. In what sense can we understand his marriage to Hope to be a continuation of that old role?
12. Waycross was a young boy in the pre-Civil Rights era segregated south. Abel grew up during the Civil Rights era. Both were the sons of successful professional

- men. Which of Hope's two husbands had more confidence in his father's power? How did the times in which they were raised influence their understanding of their father's power?
13. Hope is raised by her great-aunts after her father dies. What are the biggest challenges that Hope faces when she goes to live with the aunts? How well does she meet these challenges?
 14. Near the end of the novel, why does Hope return to Rome? What does she do at the Vatican?
 15. Photographs appear throughout *Rebel Yell*: Abu Ghraib photographs, wedding photographs, beach pictures, and finally a set of pictures Abel took of Ajay and the senator from Illinois. How do the final photographs Abel took of Ajay change Hope's understanding of her first husband?
 16. Street talk and gossip play a major role in *Rebel Yell*. Who is telling this story? Hope? Abel? Nicholas? North Nashville's black community through its gossip?
 17. Throughout the novel, gifts are exchanged: books, pearls, writings, a car, ribbons, a locket, sneakers, and a basketball are some of the most significant. What else belongs on this list? Which gift exchange did you find most compelling?
 18. We learn that in his final moments Abel understands himself to be a powerful man whose absence would change the political landscape. Who does he die trying to make a way for? In what sense can his death be considered the death of a good soldier? If his death can be understood this way, is he finally a good soldier for the civil rights movement as well as for the United States of America?

19. Abel married two very different women, Hope and Samantha. What, if anything, do these women have in common? What are their most significant differences?
20. Randall says that one of her favorite lines in the book is, “The rules of life, unlike the rules of war, cannot be rewritten.” (95) If you had to choose, what would you say is your favorite line in the book?