

Discussion Guide
for Book Clubs and Discussion Groups
For the Second Edition of

TOGETHER

*An Inspiring Response to the “Separate-but Equal”
Supreme Court Decision that Divided America*
by Amy Nathan / Paul Dry Books/ 2023

Online Copy of this Guide is available at:

<https://www.pauldrybooks.com/products/together-2nd-edition>

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<https://www.plessyandferguson.org>

TOGETHER intertwines the personal stories of Keith Plessy and Phoebe Ferguson, born in 1957, with the history of the 1896 Supreme Court decision that bears their names, *Plessy v. Ferguson*. The book provides a compact overview of the history of that case and its Jim Crow segregation aftermath, which still has an impact on life in the U.S. today. In 2009, Keith and Phoebe decided to change the ending of the story that links their families by creating the Plessy & Ferguson Foundation, to bring people together rather than drive them apart. A “**flip on the script,**” says Keith Plessy. Then in 2022, one year after the First Edition was published, they achieved an amazing victory: a posthumous pardon for Keith’s ancestor Homer Plessy whose 1892 arrest for sitting in a train car for white riders started the court case. Thus the need for this Second Edition so the book can tell the whole story of Homer Plessy’s quest for justice.

Pre-Reading Questions: On the Book’s Cover

- In the artwork on the cover, who do you think the young man is supposed to be?
- What message is the artist sending?
- For the artist’s views, see his comments on the copyright page.

Chapter 1 Questions: (pp. 2-9)

- How did rules that separate people by skin color trouble Keith Plessy and Phoebe Ferguson as children? Were you surprised that the rules upset Phoebe as well as Keith?
- How might their childhood experiences affect them both as they grow up?
- When did you first realize that skin color can affect how people are treated by others? How did that make you feel at the time?

Chapter 2 Questions: (pp. 10-35)

- Why did the 1890 Separate Car Act upset Homer Plessy and Rodolphe Desdunes, with Desdunes writing that it was the most insulting of all “among the many schemes devised by the Southern statesmen to divide the races?”
- Before the Civil War, what limitations were placed on free people of color and on those who were enslaved? What roots do you see in those limits for the rules that would trouble Keith and Phoebe as children — and that still affect attitudes today?
- Why was slavery so important to the Louisiana economy? How did officials try to make sure that slavery would continue?
- What new rights did Black people gain after the Civil War from three new amendments to the U.S. Constitution — and also from Louisiana’s 1868 Constitution? What role did people of color play in expanding rights?
- Why were voting rights seen as so important?
- How did former Confederacy supporters try to block equal rights for Black people? What parallels do you see with tactics used today?

Chapters 3 and 4 Questions: (pp. 36-57)

- Why was Keith upset with his fifth grade textbook? How might that feeling affect him later in life?
- What strategy did the Citizens’ Committee use to try to overturn the Separate Car Act? What are the pros and cons of their choice?
- The Citizens’ Committee members were men of color, mainly successful businessmen, writers, or craftsmen. What were the benefits of such a membership? Would it have helped to have a more diverse membership? Would that have been possible then? Or now?
- What were the main arguments used in court by the Citizens’ Committee’s lawyer — and those by Judge Ferguson in ruling that the state’s law was acceptable? What points would you have made as either the lawyer or the judge?
- How might links to Governors Nicholls and Foster have influenced the judge’s decision?
- Why did Supreme Court decisions in 1883, 1876, and 1890 suggest trouble for the Plessy case? Why did the Committee still continue?

- On page 53, Martinet describes the pain he experiences as a person of color. Are those views that someone like Martinet might have today?
- On page 57, Tourgée says that Black people and white people need to work together. What relevance does his comment have for today?

Chapter 5 Questions: (pp. 58-67)

- What main points did Tourgée make to oppose the Separate Car Act at the Supreme Court?
- What main reasons did the seven-judge majority use to support the Separate Car Act?
- What arguments did Justice John Marshall Harlan use to oppose the majority decision?
- The book introduces different interpretations of the 14th Amendment: (p. 55), (pp. 60-61), (pp. 62-4); (pp. 52, 59). What's your interpretation of the 14th Amendment? See its text on p. 181.

Chapter 6 Questions: (pp. 68-81)

- Why do you think Phoebe's family never told her of her great-great-grandfather's role in the spreading of "separate-but-equal" policies?
- What similarities are there between Jim Crow restrictions and pre-Civil War limits placed on free people of color and on enslaved people?
- How did the 1898 Constitution's limits on Black voting, new jury rules, and limits on high school education for Black students help guarantee Jim Crow a future?
- Which Jim Crow restrictions do you think were most destructive to Black people's ability to succeed? Which would have felt most insulting? What roots do you see in this chapter for problem the nation still faces?

Chapter 7 Questions: (pp. 82-99)

- Why did *Brown v. Board of Education* succeed in ending a form of segregation while the *Plessy v. Ferguson* case didn't?
- How did lawmakers make sure the Civil Rights Act of 1964 wouldn't be struck down as a similar law was in 1883? (See pp. 55, 94-5)
- What examples of Jim Crow attitudes linger on today? What progress do you see?
- New Orleans is changing names of streets named for slaveholders or Confederacy

supporters. Which people introduced in this book should have streets named for them?

Chapters 8, 9, 10, 11 Questions: (pp. 100-135)

- How did Keith's childhood experiences influence the murals he painted in his old school? Whose portraits would you paint?
- How did Keith and Phoebe's childhood experiences lead them to work together?
- Rodolphe Desdunes said of the short-lived Unification Movement of 1870: "If it did not succeed, it was because it was premature." Does the Plessy & Ferguson Foundation fulfill the goals of the Unification Movement? Would a Unification Movement succeed today?
- What are the pros and cons of telling history with historical markers?
- Which of the Foundation's markers told a story that introduced you to something surprising? Why is it something others should learn about?
- Phoebe Ferguson says, quoting Michael Eric Dyson: "When it comes to race, the past is always present." Do you agree?
- In the play *Se-Pa-Rate*, teens explore links to their lives of the *Plessy* decision history. What connections do you see in your own life?

Epilogue & Afterword Questions: (pp. 149-160)

- The District Attorney said of the pardon: "There are small things we can all do, every day, to atone for the sins of the past we had nothing to do with." What other wrongs of the past need to be revisited and repaired? How might that be done in symbolic ways or more practical ones?
- Phoebe Ferguson said (page 154) that we can learn from the wrongs of the past. What have you learned from the wrongs described in this book that can help you and your community going forward?
- Which ways of bringing people together across racial lines are happening in your community? What new ways can you suggest?

Supplemental Materials

Extra Articles on Author's Website:

<http://www.amynathanbooks.com/attachments/articlesforteachingguide.pdf>

To find historical markers in your area:

Historical Marker Database - <https://www.hmdb.org>

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