

Discussion Guide
for Book Clubs and Discussion Groups

TOGETHER

An Inspiring Response to the “Separate-but-Equal” Supreme Court Decision that Divided America

by Amy Nathan / Paul Dry Books/ 2021

www.PaulDryBooks.com / www.AmyNathanBooks.com

www.PlessyandFergusonFoundation.org

Half the book’s royalties support the work of the Plessy and Ferguson Foundation.

TOGETHER intertwines the personal stories of Keith Plessy and Phoebe Ferguson, both 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 that history—pre-Civil War, Reconstruction, the case itself, 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 and Ferguson Foundation, to bring people together rather than drive them apart. A “flip on the script,” says Keith Plessy.

Pre-Reading Questions: On the Book’s Cover

- In the artwork on the cover, who is the young man supposed to be? And the figure in green?
- What message does the artist send with the blindfold, the birds colors, the figure in green?
- What message does the author send with this cover choice? (See artist’s comments on 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 those rules upset Phoebe as well as Keith?
- How might these childhood experiences affect them both as they grow up?
- When did you first realize that skin color can affect how some 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?” Why did it feel to him like “a slap in the face of every member of the black race?”

- 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 troubled Keith and Phoebe as children — and that still affect attitudes in the U.S. 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 African Americans 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 were the pros and cons of that 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 to show the injustice of the Separate Car Act — and by Judge Ferguson in ruling against Homer Plessy? What other 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. Do those seem like views that could be expressed by a man like Martinet today?
- On page 57, Tourgée says that Blacks and whites 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 court's 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 text on p. 173?

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 African Americans' 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 by the Supreme Court, as a similar law was in 1883? (See pp. 55, 94-5)
- What examples of Jim Crow attitudes linger on today? What examples of progress moving away from Jim Crow attitudes 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 Questions: (pp. 100-135)

- How did Keith's childhood experiences influence the murals he painted in his old school? Whose portraits would you paint if you had the same assignment?

- How did Keith and Phoebe's childhood experiences influence their decision to become friends and work together?
- Rodolphe Desdunes said of the short-lived Unification Movement of 1870: "If it did not succeed, it was because it was premature." How does the Plessy and Ferguson Foundation help fulfill the goals of the Unification Movement? Would a Unification Movement succeed today? (See pp. 31-2, 117.)
- What are the pros and cons of telling history with historical markers?
- Will Bradshaw says, "As a white Southerner, my forbears not only limited opportunity for African Americans, but we buried their stories." How is the Foundation "un-burying" the stories? What other ways could they use?
- Which of the Plessy and Ferguson Foundation's historical markers told a story that introduced you to something surprising? Why is it something others should learn about?

Chapter 11 & Afterword Questions: (pp. 136-152)

- Which ways of bringing people together across racial lines are happening in your community? What new ways can you suggest?
- Phoebe Ferguson says, "You can't really have a dialogue on race unless we both have an understanding of what has occurred over the past 400 years." She adds, quoting from a book by Michael Eric Dyson: "When it comes to race, the past is always present." Do you agree?
- Scenes from the play *Se-Pa-Rate* that teenagers created in 2010 are shown on pages 10 & 136. In the play, the teens explored connections to their lives of the story of Homer Plessy, Jim Crow, and its aftermath. What connections to your own life do you see in that history?

Supplemental Materials

Extra Articles on Author's Website: On this link are several articles about other groups that bring people together, a new historical marker installed in New Orleans in 2020, and preliminary suggestions for street name changes in New Orleans.
http://www.amynathanbooks.com/attachments/articles_for_teaching_guide.pdf

To find historical markers in your area:

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