

# DISCUSSION GUIDE

## *The Book Woman of Troublesome Creek*

by Kim Richardson

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## AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

The NY Times, Los Angeles Times and USA Today bestselling author, Kim Michele Richardson is a multiple-award winning author and has written four works of historical fiction, and a bestselling memoir, *The Unbreakable Child*.

Her latest critically acclaimed novel, *The Book Woman of Troublesome Creek* has earned a 2020 PBS Reader's Choice, 2019 Library Reads Best Book, Indie Next, SIBA, Forbes Best Historical Novel, Book-A-Million Best Fiction, and is an Oprah's Buzziest Books pick and a Women's National Book Association Great Group Reads selection. It was inspired by the real life, remarkable "blue people" of Kentucky, and the fierce, brave Packhorse Librarians who used the power of literacy to overcome bigotry and fear during the Great Depression. The novel is taught widely in high schools and college classrooms.

Her forthcoming fifth novel, *The Book Woman's Daughter* is both a stand-alone and sequel to *The Book Woman of Troublesome Creek* and will be published May 3, 2022. Kim Michele lives with her family in Kentucky and is the founder of Shy Rabbit.

## BOOK SUMMARY

Set in a hilly area of rural Kentucky, *The Book Woman of Troublesome Creek* focuses on Cussy Mary Carter, a 19-year-old librarian with a genetic condition that turns her skin blue. She lives alone with her father, who made a promise to her recently deceased mother that he would see her respectably married. However, no suitor wants to marry Cussy Mary, despite her generous dowry, because of the color of her skin. Eventually, Charlie Frazier does marry Cussy Mary. On their wedding night, he beats and rapes her before dying of a heart attack.

Cussy Mary returns to work after a self-induced abortion. She visits her patron, Angeline Moffit, a young woman who is pregnant by her husband, Willie, who has been shot in the foot and is dying. Shortly after her visit, Preacher Vester Frazier (Charlie's cousin) assaults Cussy Mary in the woods. She meets a new patron, Jackson Lovett, and they bond over their shared love of books.

Cussy Mary continues with her work, going into town to the Library Center, where the White women discriminate against her, but where she has become friends with a Black librarian, Queenie. As Cussy Mary's relationship with Lovett grows, Pa becomes increasingly involved in the miners' union, and his involvement worries her; it is dangerous to work against the company that oversees the mining in their town.

When Pa finds Vester Frazier in their yard, he shoots and kills him. Doc pronounces Vester dead but warns that people will be suspicious because they are Blues. He tells them he won't talk about what happened if he can do medical tests on Cussy Mary in Lexington. She agrees, though the experience is painful; she is drugged to get the samples. However, Doc gives her medicine and food in return. She takes the medicine to Willie Moffit and gives the food to hungry schoolchildren nearby.

Doc finds a medicine that can turn Cussy Mary's skin white. However, the townspeople still reject her, and the medicine gives her unpleasant side effects. Eventually, she stops taking it. On her route, Cussy Mary finds a live baby hanging under a blue body: Willie Moffit, who had the blue gene. Inside

the Moffitts' house, she finds Angeline, dying after giving birth. Willie hanged himself after seeing the baby was blue. Cussy Mary promises to care for the new baby. Angeline dies.

Jackson proposes to Cussy Mary. She accepts, but before she can tell Pa, the miners bring back his body from the mines, where he was killed when a pillar collapsed. Several months later, Jackson and Cussy Mary get married in town, but the sheriff arrests Jackson as they leave the courthouse: He has broken the state's miscegenation laws. Despite Doc's protests about Cussy Mary's genetic condition, Jackson is arrested. Four years later, Cussy writes to Queenie, revealing that Honey is now four. Jackson was released from jail but can no longer live in Kentucky, though he still visits in the night, coming over from Tennessee. They are now thinking about moving to Ohio.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

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1. The Kentucky Pack Horse program was implemented in 1935 by the Works Progress Administration (WPA) to create women's work programs and to assist economic recovery and build literacy. Looking at the novel, how did the program affect the people in this remote area? Do you think library programs are still a vital part of our society today?
2. How has a librarian or booklover impacted your life? Have you ever connected with a book or author in a meaningful way? Explain.
3. Missionaries, government, social workers, and various religious groups have always visited eastern Kentucky to reform, modernize, and mold hillfolk to their acceptable standards. Do you think Cussy faced this kind of prejudice from the outside world? Is there any prejudice or stigma associated with the people of Appalachia today?
4. How do you think Cussy's father feels after he marries her off to an abusive man? Why do you think he agrees to Charlie Frazier's proposal in the first place? What do you imagine life was like for an unwed woman at that time?
5. Imagine you are making a community scrapbook like the ones Cussy distributes to the people of Troublesome. What would you include? Do you think these materials were helpful to Cussy's library patrons?
6. When Cussy receives the cure for her blueness from Doc, she realizes there's a price to pay for her white skin, and the side effects soon become too much to handle. If you were in Cussy's shoes, would you sacrifice your health for a chance at "normalcy"? If there weren't any side effects, do you think Cussy would have continued to take the medication? Would you?
7. How do you think Cussy feels when she is ostracized at the Independence Day celebration, despite her change of skin color? Can you relate to her feelings of isolation? Do you think these kinds of racial prejudices are still prevalent today?
8. Cussy has to deal with the loss of many loved ones in a very short amount of time. How do you think she handles her grief? Which loss was the most difficult for you to read?

9. What do you think life was like for the people of Troublesome? What are some of the highlights of living in such a remote place? What are some of the challenges the people on Cussy's library route face?
10. Back then, entering into a prohibited or interracial marriage in Kentucky was a misdemeanor that could result in incarceration, and we see these racial tensions attempt to sever Cussy and Jackson's relationship. Discuss anti-miscegenation laws and marriage laws. Do you think this kind of prejudice still exists toward interracial couples?
11. What do you think happens to Cussy, Jackson, Honey, and the other inhabitants of Troublesome after the story ends? Imagine you were Cussy. How would you feel leaving Troublesome for good?

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