THIS HERE IS LOVE

BOOK CLUB KIT

Author Note • Discussion Questions • Author Q&A • And More!

"In these pages, we have love rooted and rebuilt in the land that stripped these compelling characters of almost all they have, and a blueprint for how hope may still move us forward."

— DéLana R. A. Dameron, author of *Redwood Court*

About the Book

As the seventeenth century burns to a close in Tidewater, Virginia, America's character is wrought in the fires of wealth, race, and freedom.

Young Bless, the only child left to her enslaved mother, stubbornly crafts the terms of her vital existence. She stands as the lone bulwark between her mother and irreparable despair, her mother's only possibility of hope, as Bless reshapes the boundaries of love.

David is a helping child and a solace to his parents, and he gave a purpose to their trials. His survival hinges on his mother's shrewd intellect and ferocious fight, but his sustenance is his freed Black father's dream of emancipation for the entire family.

Jack Dane, a Scots-Irish boy, sails to Britain's colonies when his father sells him into indentured servitude as an escape from poverty. There Jack learns from the rich the value of each person's life.

A breathtaking, haunting, and epic saga, *This Here Is Love* intimately intertwines us with these beautifully drawn, unforgettable American characters. Bless, taken to serve the slaveowner's daughter, must decide where she belongs: with the enslaved or above them. David, sold away from his people, retreats into himself even as he yearns to unite with others. Jack, acting impetuously, changes his fortune, but will doing so sacrifice his humanity?

All three come together on Jack's land. As they face and challenge each other, they will relinquish and remake beliefs about family and freedom, even as they confront the limits of love.

Photo by Jennifer Natalie Fish

A Note from the Author

Princess Joy L. Perry

This Here Is Love is set in a time when the America we know was *becoming*, during the movement away from the real possibility of integration and freedom for Africans in the colonies to an almost certain condition of enslavement. Before this change, this turning, African and European servants mingled freely. They lived side by side. They formed friendships. They intermarried. Together, they ran away from cruel masters.

I wanted to chart the change from brothers and sisters in oppression to enslaved and enslaver. What did that sound, look, and feel like? How did the ideas, beliefs, and actions of immigrants who had firsthand experience with poverty and abuse devolve into their enthusiastic participation in chattel slavery? So came the character Jack.

And, of course, I wanted to know how and why the enslaved endured. Why didn't they just refuse to live? This would have been a reasonable reaction to the horrors they faced. So came the characters Cassie and Bless, Anthony, Phoebe, and David.

To write their world, I read about colonial agriculture, foodways, clothing, birth control, plants and herbs, race relations, and seventeenth-century laws. It was especially difficult to read laws established in the 1660s and 1670s that systematically stripped Blacks of rights, such as the right to carry arms, to testify, to travel, and to intermarry with the people of their choice. In 1662, one devastating law declared, "All children born in this country shall be held bond or free only according to the condition of the mother."

Reading, however, would enable me to write the facts but not the feelings of having the world constrict around you until the only sure things are labor and sorrow.

I dragged family and friends to old plantation sites. I toured Colonial Williamsburg in the heat of July and watched a man plow the tobacco fields with oxen and imagined pouring all that energy, sweat, and misery into someone else's pocket.

I visited the site of an old whipping post in Portsmouth, VA. I went to Moses Myers's house in Norfolk, VA and toured the back stairs that the "servants" used to move unobtrusively through the house, like ants in the walls, and I stood on the ballast stone floor of the kitchen where an enslaved woman had stirred the pots.

At one of Thomas Jefferson's plantations, I put my hand in the brick where an enslaved child had left a hand impression. At Shadwell Plantation in Virginia, I stood in the wide and beautiful driveway and tried to imagine being carried away from home forever.

After an official tour at Magnolia Plantation in South Carolina, I walked back to the slave cabins to explore each one alone. I went to the Old Slave Mart Museum where I saw the shackles worn by coffles of slaves. The manacles and chains were larger, heavier than I had imagined.

I took a bus tour through the Great Dismal Swamp. Mosquitoes swarmed each time we exited the bus. The guide told us that bobcats used to stalk the swamp. She named the varieties of poisonous and nonpoisonous snakes that still prowled the underbrush. She pointed out a bear in the distance.

Back on the bus, I tried to imagine how desperate I would have to be to consider this place not a danger but a haven.

On all those trips, everywhere I went, I took handwritten notes on what I saw and what it felt like to stand, eyes closed, with my hand on a wall or fence rail in the silence of those places.

This Here Is Love is a book of research, a book of questions, of sights, weights, textures. It is a book of bafflement and fury, of disappointment and redemption, of longing and love. It is the book in which I explain to myself how we became *this* America.

Discussion Questions

1. What did the book's opening scene set up for you as a reader? Why do you think Princess Joy L. Perry started here?
2. "As he descended the hatch, Jack realized that though they were on the same ship, the families were embarking on wholly different journeys" (p. 11). How does Jack's premonition come to fruition, or not, over the course of the novel?
3. Perry does an amazing job of holding many characters' lives in her hands at once. How did the alternating, often brief chapters move the work along? How did you feel about this structural approach? What do you think this style offered her as an author?
4. In first reading about these characters from different backgrounds, what assumptions did you have about what opportunities (or not) would be available to them? Did their experiences align with or challenge those expectations?
5. As children David, Jack, Bless, and Lydia have early and profound experiences that radically alter how they see their parents and correspond with their loss of innocence or naivete. Are any of their experiences similar? And how do these experiences echo throughout their lives in the years that follow?

6. Every character in *This Here Is Love* is faced with doing the "best, hard thing" (p. 58) in horrific circumstances. Were there any characters whose actions surprised or challenged you?
7. Rowan believes that "survival is no cause for shame" (p. 68). Do you agree? Did the experience of reading this novel reinforce or challenge your feeling? Do feelings of shame dictate the course of the characters' lives? Do they feel other emotions in relation to survival that affect them profoundly?
8. How did your perception of David, Jack, and Bless evolve over the course of the novel? How did you understand their actions at the novel's end? In particular, what do Jack's final actions say about him?
9. Black readers may recognize echoes of their own family history in this work. Did reading this novel make you reflect on the lives or opportunities of your own ancestors?
10. Jeremiah's scarring of Bless is a reclaiming of the bodily wounds inflicted on enslaved bodies—becoming a testament to love and a map to the future, not just a symbol of hate and the trauma of the past. Were there other moments of resistance and were they understood as such?
11. "'What I can't understand,' he said, his bafflement sincere, 'is how in the world you can love them.' Bless equaled Jeremiah's bewilderment when she asked in return, 'Who else was there for me to love?'" (p. 138). Do you agree with Bless? How does each character in the novel seek love? What sacrifices does it demand?

Discussion Questions (continued)

12. Did reading this novel make you think about our current moment in time? How does reading historical fiction reflect the societal pressures of the present and enhance our understanding not only of where we come from, but where we might be heading?
13. What would you say was the primary motivator for the various characters? What did their motivations have in common? How did they differ?
14. Esther can be a difficult character—were you sympathetic to her?
15. Bless grapples with the question of "[w]hich daughter had she saved, and which had she failed, utterly, to protect?" (p. 299). How would you answer that impossible question?
16. Perry writes that "Jeremiah and Bless got down to the brave business of love" (p. 165). What different types of love—familial, parental, romantic—had the most impact on the novel? Whose bravery most surprised you?
17. Have you read other novels that look at the time of slavery in colonial America or the US? If so, how does *This Here Is Love* differ from them in the aspects of enslaved life that are considered or revealed? How are they similar?
18. Every character in this novel is capable of inflicting pain, but also unexpected grace and love. Perry has a gift for evoking the vast universe of complexity each human being contains and the profound warping the human spirit must undergo to exist in corrupt and vile systems while also exposing the toll they take on both the enslaved and the enslavers. How do you respond to that complexity?
19. "Here was where they stood. From here, they would have to begin again" (p. 163). How can these two sentences be read as a template for the whole novel and the many lives it contains?
20. Why do you think Perry chose this title: *This Here Is Love*? How did it frame your reading?

"In the tenderest of prose and the most compelling of storytelling, Princess Joy L. Perry has reached back centuries to our earliest national moments, writing of the confusion that occurs when power crosses love—but oh, how that love can survive!
A love at the beginning and at the end. A love which is the sweetest human wisdom, the most merciful of legacies."

—Honorée Fanonne Jeffers, author of *The Love Songs of W.E.B. Du Bois*

Q&A With Author Princess Joy L. Perry

Q: While researching your novel you visited old plantation sites, heritage sites, the Great Dismal Swamp, and other important locations. Why did you feel it was important to travel to these places while you were writing the book?

A: Because I live in a time so removed from the era in which the story is set, I needed to feel an emotional connection with Colonial Virginia. Reading triggered my empathy and my anger about the violence and injustice that facilitated slavery, but standing in places where slaves stood and withstood bondage allowed me to enter the past in a more

complete way that is hard to put into words. Seeing a one-dimensional building on a screen is nothing like the visceral reaction felt when you place your hand in the imprint of an enslaved child's hand, as I did at Monticello, knowing that a child as real as myself—but hindered from reaching her full, personal potential—pressed her hand into that brick. Feeling the weight of iron shackles helped me better understand in my body what it might be like to carry those shackles.

I know that my experience was not nearly the same as that of those who were enslaved. I walked away from Monticello and back into my own self-determined life. I set the shackles down at will. But visiting those places, touching the evidence of slavery, amplified an ache within me. I needed that ache, and I needed details that I could only learn by touch to put my characters' experiences into words.

"A fierce and luminous debut."

—Sheri Reynolds, author of *The Rapture of Canaan*

Q: In order to lend the story historical accuracy you also researched seventeenth-century laws, birth control, plants and herbs, and foodways. What were some of the interesting things you learned?

A: I learned that the choice of slaves was not necessarily random. Captives were often chosen for enslavement based on a skill set they developed in their homeland. For example, Anthony might have been taken from a tribe of people known for their skill with farming. This speaks to economics being the primary driver of enslavement despite other ennobling explanations layered on over the course of American enslavement. I learned about the presence, from 1619 on, of "maroons," runaways who removed themselves to far places like the Great Dismal Swamp or lived in hiding places underground and in the woodlands near the farms they had fled. Concerning daily life, I learned many details about planting tobacco, butchering hogs, weaving fabric, blacksmithing, and how to shoe a horse. Making the story fit the facts of history was one of the most challenging and enjoyable things I have ever done.

"An utterly riveting intergenerational saga of love, betrayal, theft, and resilience."

—Lawrence Hill, author of *Someone Knows My Name*

Q: There were especially difficult laws that were established in the 1660s and 1670s that systematically stripped Blacks of rights. Is that why you decided to set your book just after this period, in 1690?

A: I chose this period because slavery as we now understand it was *becoming*. The Black Codes were instituted because crossing racial lines was not unusual—the Virginia legislature had to create penalties and punishments that induced Black and white colonists to stay apart. For instance, interracial marriage was not outlawed in the Colony of Virginia until 1691. To me, this means that until this law, color, or lack thereof, was not a disqualifying factor when choosing an employee, friend, or mate. This speaks of an in-between time, a time when race was *becoming* an impenetrable line. I am interested in the forms of conditioning (social, economic, psychological) of Blacks, whites, and Native Americans that made race an unapproachable barrier. That is why I chose this time period.

Q: You currently live in Norfolk, Virginia, and your book is set in Virginia. Does your family have ties to the state dating back in history?

A: My family has ties to North Carolina. Though I was born in Virginia, my grandparents, parents, and siblings were all born in North Carolina. From what I have been able to ascertain though a commercial DNA test, my enslaved ancestors hailed from various West African groups of people who were brought to eastern North Carolina. I chose Virginia as my setting because of its rich colonial history and the accessibility of landmarks tied to slavery.

Q: You did not use a computer and instead you wrote your book down in longhand. Was it important to you to write this story using only tools that your characters would have had access to as well?

A: I honestly never thought of the fact that my characters would only have access to pen and some form of paper. I write longhand because, when it comes to story, I think and imagine better that way. Another reason is that I do not like to come to the computer empty-handed, so I write in my notebook first. For me, this makes getting started on the writing day a lot easier. I have something to bring to the blank screen. Also, writing in my notebook means that, by the time I sit down at the keyboard, I have written out and tinkered with a version of a sentence, paragraph, or page at least twice before I ever type it out. By that time, the *feeling* I want is usually there even if the final wording is not.

Q: There's a beautiful song that's sung by the characters. What's the background on this song?

A: My maternal grandmother, Ruth Slade Gaskins, known to us as "Ma Ruth," and to people in the community as "Miss Ruth," spent the majority of her adult life as a sharecropper on Willow Branch farm in Bertie County, North Carolina. Once she moved off the farm and into the town of Windsor, NC she became a cook and housekeeper for a white family in the town. My grandmother sang in the choir of her Baptist church. She kept a garden, and she loved to fish. Always spirited, she was well into her middle age when she learned how to drive, and after several tries, earned her driver's license.

I am not sure what first compelled Ma Ruth to tell us about "Grandma," my maternal grandfather Arthur's grandmother who lived with the young couple around the time of my mother's birth, but the story goes that Grandma was an enslaved child. As a young child, it was her job to run around in the garden, beating a metal pan with a spoon, and singing, "Hark! the blackbird said to the crow! Why do the farmer hate us so?" to keep the birds from pecking up whatever seeds or fare was growing in the garden.

When telling the story, Ma Ruth sang the "Hark!" and the "Why?" with long and lilting notes, like a field holler or hog call, sounds that would catch the attention and carry over some distance. The rest of the song came to my ear as a quick patter. The secret of the song – what I realized as an adult – what both of my grandmothers surely already knew, is that the "blackbird" and the "crow" of the song are the Black enslaved pondering why the "farmer," the white landowner who holds them in bondage, hates them, and why he *treats* them so.
Now that I do understand the real question at the heart of the song, my heart aches every time I repeat the words to myself. And then I imagine a little black girl singing those words.

Sadness aside, I am also struck by the clever simplicity and outright sassiness of the song. Surely, the "farmer" heard children like my great-great-Grandma singing. Did he understand? Did he think it a simple rhyme, or was he aware of the tiny little rebellion occurring in his own kitchen garden? I doubt it. If he'd known that even his smallest prisoners questioned the legitimacy their bondage, of chattel slavery, surely the verse would not have made its way through history to me.

So, after the ache, there is a blooming feeling of pride. My enslaved ancestors knew they deserved to be free. That certainty, held in the heart, and sung in code, is a joyful, edifying legacy passed to me by Ma Ruth - always smiling and so tickled, each time she sang this song.

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