

Southfield Public Library

The Colored Car by Jean Alicia Elster

Discussion questions used at SPL April 8th & 14th 2015

1. This story is grounded in historical facts and truths like “Separate but Equal”, *Plessy vs Ferguson (1896)*, Jim Crow laws, and the Mason-Dixon Line which are historical references in American society. How much of America’s history are you familiar with? Did you learn something new?
2. Parents are responsible for teaching their kids certain facts of life. Do you think Patsy’s father should have explained “the protocol” to her when he brought the tickets?
3. May responds to her mother’s question about why she had not explained to Patsy Jim Crow/Black Code Laws in the South by stating “...sometimes the best preparation is to just live through it” (pg. 90-91). What do you think?
4. What things exist today that parents, especially African American parents, should educate their children about? I am thinking about the many cases of young black men and boys being shot & killed surrounding an encounter with law enforcement or stranger danger for children or girls being alone after dark.
5. What are your thoughts on Mrs. Lewis’s comment about Marian Anderson riding the colored car, “...riding in the colored car is such a small part of her journey. Such a small part.”
6. Why do you think Patsy is so traumatized by the colored car experience? Is there anything that you’ve experienced that was that traumatic for you?
7. Douglas Ford, Patsy’s father, decided not to purchase Giuseppe’s truck because he did not feel he could trust him (pg. 118) after the fruit incident. When Patsy tells her father she thinks Mr. Williams started the fire (pg 192), he tells her that whether he did or not, what’s important is that the family is safe. What do you think the Ford family is trying to teach us about revenge and facing adversity?
8. Life lessons appear to be one of the themes of this book. What life lesson can you recall?
9. Friends vs Neighbors. Is there a difference in your mind? Pg.195 Patsy asks her mother May if Mrs. Carson and Mrs. Chambers were still her friends, May states they are our neighbors and we have to live with our neighbors.
10. The soot smudge/stain on the quilt does not wash out, why?
11. Two of Elster’s Grandmother’s recipes were included in the book? Why do you think she included them? Do you think they add to the story?
12. The majority of the story is set in Detroit. Do you think we gain more from Patsy’s experience because we live in the same area?
13. For those of us who recently read, *I know why the caged bird sings*, how would you compare the two? Is one story more powerful to you than the other?

Southfield Public Library

General discussion questions

- For the person who chose the book – What made you want to read it? What made you pick it for the book club? Did it live up to your expectations?
- How is the book structured? First person? Third person? Flashbacks? Narrative devices? Do you think the author did a good job with it?
- How would you describe the author’s writing style? Concise? Flowery? How is language used in this book? Read aloud a passage that really struck you. How does that passage relate to the book as a whole?
- How effective is the author’s use of plot twists? Were you able to predict certain things before they happened? Did the author keep you guessing until the end?
- Did the book hold your interest?
- How important is the setting to the story? Did you feel like you were somewhere else? Did the time setting make a difference in the story? Did the author provide enough background information for you to understand the setting and time placement?
- Which is stronger in the book – the characters or the plots?
- Would you recommend this book to someone else? Why? And to whom?

Southfield Public Library

Additional Questions for Author Q&A

- Why did you decide to become a writer?
- Are there any authors that have inspired your work?
- What inspired you to tell this story?
- What draws you to write for younger readers?
- What was the most challenging part of telling this story?
- What research did you do to ensure the story was authentic?
- How does the plot mirror your own experiences?
- Is there a character that you most identify with?
- Since the novel is based on your family's experiences, which parts of the story really happened?
What did you modify?
- What is the message you want readers to take away from your story? Does the message change based on the age of the reader?