



[ABHM Book Club](#) Discussion Guide
September 25th, 2025 at 6 PM CT
***Thirty Years a Slave* by Louis Hughes**

How to Use this Guide:

[America's Black Holocaust Museum](#) staff created this guide to assist in reading and discussion of *Thirty Years of Slave*. Please feel free to print a copy and keep it with your book as you lend to friends and others who are interested. Do not expect to get through all of the questions during the upcoming meeting nor in one sitting. Perhaps consider them as conversation starters or an invitation to reflect more deeply about this book. Please also check out our [walking tour](#) in partnership with Forest Home Cemetery, where Louis Hughes is buried.

Suggested Questions for Discussion:

1. Slave narratives were important catalysts for the abolitionist movement and helped illuminate this terrible history in personal ways. Have you read other slave narratives? How did this compare? How does this relate to enslaved people's pursuit of literacy and education? See pages 2, 84, and 159.
2. Had you heard of Hughes before this book club? Did you know he is buried at Forest Home Cemetery and you can go visit his grave today? There are many other untold stories at the cemetery that you can discover on our developing [walking tour](#).
3. One of the cruelest aspects of enslavement was the systematic separation of families. What does Hughes share about the loss of children in this system, through both death and separation? How is childhood lost in enslavement in other ways? See pages 4, 7, 14, 18, 30, 35, 36, 65, and 80.

4. Hughes attempts to escape a total of five times throughout his life. What do these consistent attempts to seek freedom reveal about the system of slavery? What strategies, tools, and networks were used in these attempts? See pages 65, 71, 74, 105, and 115.
5. As the American Civil War looms, Hughes notes the conversations happening on the plantation around him. What were some of the conversations and attitudes he observed? How and why was the meaning of the war different for enslaved people versus enslavers? See pages 90, 91, 98, 117, 136, and 138.
6. After the war, one of the main goals for those who were newly freed was to reunite with family. What does Hughes' own story reveal about the difficulty of this endeavor? Who does he reunite with and what does this mean to him? See pages 151, 153, 154, 157, 162, and 164.
7. In freedom, Hughes travels to a few places, including Canada, before finally settling in Milwaukee for the rest of his life. What was his experience in Milwaukee? Why do you think he chose to stay here, of all places? For those of you from Milwaukee, did reading a narrative connected to your city impact you? See pages 153, 156, 159, 161, and 167.
8. While reflecting on his own enslaver, Hughes directly addresses the fallacy of the "benevolent" enslaver. What do you think about this concept? Why would enslavers worry about their perceived treatment of enslaved people when the entire system is inherently cruel? What does this reveal about slave society, in general? What does this narrative reveal about the complicity of white women to the institution of slavery? See pages 35, 59, 152, and 168.
9. Where does religion and spirituality come up in Hughes' reflections? How was Christianity and, more specifically, scripture used differently by enslaved people and enslavers? See pages 41, 43, 87, 117, and 118.
10. What does Hughes' own pursuit of freedom reveal about how emancipation worked in real time? The war ended in April 1865, but Hughes didn't arrive in Memphis as a free person until July 4th, 1865. Given what we know about the events of Juneteenth, was this a similar situation of delayed emancipation? See pages 140 and 150.