



## ABHM Book Club Discussion

October 7th, 2021

***Strange Fruit: Billie Holiday and the Biography of a Song* by David Margolick (2001)**

### How to Use this Guide:

[America's Black Holocaust Museum](https://www.abhm.org/) staff created this guide to assist in reading and discussion of *Strange Fruit* (2001). 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 the song, "Strange Fruit".

### Suggested Questions for Discussion:

1. Were you surprised to learn about the origins of "Strange Fruit"? Have you heard about Abel Meeropol before? Why did he write the poem "Bitter Fruit" and did it have the impact he hoped it would? See pages 11, 13.
2. What were the tensions over "Strange Fruit"'s ownership and why did they exist? Why do you think Billie Holiday lied about the origins of the song in her autobiography? See pages 31, 50, 59, 105.
3. When did you first hear "Strange Fruit" and how did it make you feel? In *Strange Fruit*, Margolick discusses whether or not other people should cover and/or modernize the song; what do you think? According to the book, what did Billie bring to the song that other singers did not? See pages 77, 78, 112-113.
4. On page 4, "Strange Fruit" is called "the first significant protest in words and music, the first unmuted cry against racism." Do you agree or disagree? What are some other protest songs you can think of? What impact have protest songs had and what impact do you think they can have today, if any? See also pages 39, 60, 68, 122

5. Meeropol's poem was inspired by a photograph of the double lynching that Dr. Cameron survived, which took place not in the South, but in Marion, Indiana in 1930. Why, then, do you think the song emphasized lynching violence in the South? How does "Strange Fruit" fit in with the long history of anti-lynching activism? See pages 20, 21, 42.
6. Where did Billie Holiday choose to sing "Strange Fruit" and why did she need to choose these spots carefully? How did the audience react, depending on their race or the location she chose to perform? Who do you think Billie was singing the song for? Why did she choose to end her sets with it? See pages 27, 63, 64, 70, 72, 74, 76, 91, 118.
7. How did the context of WWII and the Red Scare affect "Strange Fruit"'s reception and popularity? How did foreign audiences react? See pages 65, 68, 70, 81, 96-97.
8. Have you seen other documentaries, movies, or read other books that tell this history? How does this book compare to those other sources?
9. What do you make of the debate in *Strange Fruit* about whether or not Billie understood the nature of the song? Or about the debate over whether people should cover it or leave it to Billie? See pages 29-30, 83, 120, 126.

### **"Strange Fruit"**

Southern trees bear a strange fruit,  
Blood on the leaves and blood at the root,  
Black body swinging in the Southern breeze,  
Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees.

Pastoral scene of the gallant South,  
The bulging eyes and the twisted mouth,  
Scent of magnolia sweet and fresh,  
And the sudden smell of burning flesh!

Here is a fruit for the crows to pluck,  
For the rain to gather, for the wind to suck,  
For the sun to rot, for a tree to drop,  
Here is a strange and bitter crop.

**Additional Resources:**

“Strange Fruit: Anniversary of a Lynching,” NPR:

[https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=129025516&fbclid=IwAR2a-K9VeT2rUs-nlA7J6L5aFh4ftvm6twNC\\_5fKlvZAYN6uwFITfkOnGE#:~:text=Strange%20Fruit:%20Anniversary%20Of%20A%20Lynching%20:%20NPR&text=Strange%20Fruit:%20Anniversary%20Of%20A%20Lynching%20On%20Aug.,worker%20and%20raping%20his%20companion](https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=129025516&fbclid=IwAR2a-K9VeT2rUs-nlA7J6L5aFh4ftvm6twNC_5fKlvZAYN6uwFITfkOnGE#:~:text=Strange%20Fruit:%20Anniversary%20Of%20A%20Lynching%20:%20NPR&text=Strange%20Fruit:%20Anniversary%20Of%20A%20Lynching%20On%20Aug.,worker%20and%20raping%20his%20companion)

“The Strange Story of the Man Behind ‘Strange Fruit,’” NPR:

[https://www.npr.org/2012/09/05/158933012/the-strange-story-of-the-man-behind-strange-fruit?fbclid=IwAR0d\\_45loFea00CTzB2C\\_QsZr0JohM2wUepsyKgL-qrMg1YYQXJi89PiiXk](https://www.npr.org/2012/09/05/158933012/the-strange-story-of-the-man-behind-strange-fruit?fbclid=IwAR0d_45loFea00CTzB2C_QsZr0JohM2wUepsyKgL-qrMg1YYQXJi89PiiXk)

Billie Holiday performing “Strange Fruit”: <https://youtu.be/Web007rzSOI>

<https://youtu.be/-DGY9HvChXk>

Andra Day performing “Strange Fruit”: <https://youtu.be/Epm0v1px2oM>

*Billie* documentary on Hulu: <https://g.co/kgs/6fnLTe>

*The United States vs Billie Holiday* movie on Hulu:

<https://www.hulu.com/movie/the-united-states-vs-billie-holiday-6f7be3b0-69c5-49ab-8472-2b5b1dabcfe8>

Emmett Till Antilynching Act: <https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/house-bill/35>