



ABHM Book Club Discussion Guide
March 21st, 2024
***The Water Dancer* by Ta-Nehisi Coates (2019)**

How to Use this Guide:

[America's Black Holocaust Museum](#) staff created this guide to assist in reading and discussion of *The Water Dancer* by Ta-Nehisi Coates (2019). 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.

Suggested Questions for Discussion:

1. Why do you think Coates uses terminology like “Tasked,” “Quality,” and “Low,” instead of “slaves” and “masters” or even “enslaved people” and “enslavers”? Do you think such considerations of language are important when studying, writing, and talking about this history? What did you think about his choice in language?
2. How are the concepts of motherhood, fatherhood, and family considered in this narrative? How does family affect how Hiram defines or interprets freedom? What does this story tell us about children and adolescence during slavery? See pages 5, 22, 70, 83, 98, 157, 205, 207, 351, 372, 381, 393, and 396.
3. What does this novel have to say about the lives of Black women, in particular, during enslavement? How does Hiram’s relationship with certain women change over time? What does Hiram learn about power, gender, race, and class throughout his life due to these relationships? See pages 75, 111, 159, 218, 229, 245, 252, 309, 311, 333, 337, 340, 343-345, 347, 359, and 367.

4. How and why does Coates choose to humanize the Walkers, his own enslavers and family? Where does he show that the system of slavery is detrimental to most of the characters? What did you think about Coates's descriptions of the downfall of the system of slavery? What does this novel have to say about class, in particular? See pages 7, 25, 41, 51-52, 57, 107, 121, 142, 315, 329, and 337.
5. What do you think Coates is saying about white people's roles in racial justice causes historically with characters such as Corrine Quinn and Micajah Bland? How do they understand their contributions to the fight for abolition and what are their motivations? See pages 151, 161, 176, 219, 233, 237, 268, 287, 368, 370, 373, and 400.
6. Did you know immediately who "Moses" was in this story? Why do you think Coates chose to include such a historic figure? What impact did that have for you as a reader? See pages 170, 217, 231, 243, 255, 270, and 284.
7. What is the significance of water in this story? Why do you think Coates used it as the medium for Hiram's power? Why do you think Coates chose to include a fantastical element in this story, with "conducting" as a kind of power? How does "memory" relate to this power? See pages 64, 104, 156, 172, 258, 271, 278, 281, 282, 356, 358, 377, 379, and 398.
8. *The Water Dancer* is Coates's first novel. Why do you think he chose fiction for this particular topic? What was gained or lost by fictionalizing the story? For those of you who have read his autobiographical works, do you see some of Coates's own life story in these pages?
9. What does *The Water Dancer* add to our understanding of the Underground Railroad? To the individuals who built and ran the operation? What did you learn about the Underground Railroad that you didn't know before? Was everyone who was involved in the Underground Railroad there of their own free will? See pages 144 and 157.
10. How does this book relate to current conversations about racial justice in this country? How does it relate to [other titles](#) we have read for this book club?