

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FOR READERS AND BOOKCLUBS

1. **Historical context:** How does the novel depict the historical backdrop of 1935, especially concerning the themes of race, gender, and class? Was there anything that surprised you about the setting?
2. **Character Development:** The three female protagonists—Othella, Vivian Jean, and Zinzi—each have distinct backgrounds and motivations. Which character did you find most compelling, and why?
3. **Character Development:** As an antagonist and co-star of the novel, Katherine Dunham's personality was drawn from articles, her own writings, and various other sources. What insights did you gain regarding her dedication to anthropology and African dance? What aspects of Katherine's story surprised you?
4. **Identity and Transformation:** How do the characters evolve throughout the story? What role does the expedition play in shaping their individual journeys?
5. **Sisterhood Survival:** The novel highlights the necessity for women to support one another during challenging times. How do their relationships develop, and what insights does the book offer regarding female solidarity?
6. **Secrets and Truths:** Many characters conceal parts of their past or identity. How do these secrets influence their actions and decisions? What do you believe the novel conveys about truth and deception?
7. **Themes:** The book explores themes of love—both romantic and platonic—and its connection to power. How do the dynamics of love and power manifest for each woman?

8. Katherine Dunham's Influence: This novel draws inspiration from the real-life choreographer Katherine Dunham. How does her presence, whether directly or indirectly, affect the experiences of the characters?
9. The Role of Nature: How does the ruggedness of Cockpit Country impact the story? Is it more than a location or backdrop? Does it serve as a metaphor for any of the characters?
10. Cultural Exploration: What have you discovered about Jamaican Maroon culture and the history of Caribbean dance through this novel?
11. Final Thoughts: Were you satisfied with the novel's conclusion? What do you believe happens to each of the women after the events of the story?
12. The Meaning of the Title: The title comes from Langston Hughes' poem "Union." In what ways do the poem's themes—oppression, rebellion, and power structures—show themselves in the novel?
13. The Silk Cotton Tree – What does the silk cotton tree symbolize for Vivian Jean? How does its symbolism evolve throughout the novel?