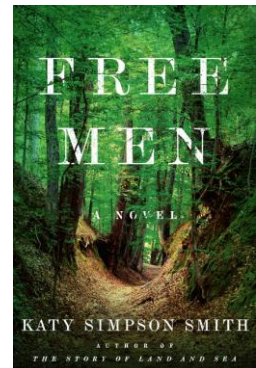


Free Men

Harper

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Questions for Discussion

1. How does the setting of the novel affect the actions of the characters? How might their stories unfold differently in another place or time?
2. Le Clerc is fascinated and confused by the bond among the three fugitives. Why do they feel connected, and why do they decide to stay together after the events at the creek?
3. For Le Clerc, “disorder was intoxicating” and “flashes of the undomesticated soothed [him].” What kind of upbringing is he reacting against, and why does he believe he’ll be more fulfilled in America?
4. Bob’s mother countered their captivity as slaves by telling stories “like they were rare sugar.” How might such storytelling help during extreme, unjust hardship? What roles can memory and imagination play when making sense of our lives?
5. Throughout his life Bob finds comfort in incessant talking, even when void of much truth or meaning. Why has he developed this habit? What might he mean later in his life when he says that “talking is how to cross over all the holes in the world”?
6. Beck is an enslaved woman who had “given up...having any feeling again that even tasted like love.” In what ways is Bob influenced by her rejection of him? In what significant ways is his wife Winna similar or different? What lessons does he learn about the shape love takes in slavery?
7. For their daughters Delphy and Polly, Bob wants freedom, while Winna wants safety. In a situation where these are mutually exclusive, which is more important? Why?
8. How is Cat’s tragic upbringing similar to or different from the childhoods of Bob, Istilicha, or even Le Clerc? How do these formative years shape their sense of the world?
9. Cat’s gruesome experience working as a medical assistant taught him that “no man is never hurt” and to be “precious toward [his] body.” How do these ideas influence his behavior and decision-making?
10. How is it that Cat is the least guilty of wrongdoing and yet believes he’s the most deserving of punishment and retribution?

11. Istilicha, in his constant arranging of leaves and sticks, believes that in life “there was little to control besides debris.” What might this mean? What does the idea imply about how to live one’s life?
12. On the verge of his first tribal battle, Istilicha tells himself that “to bend the paths of little beings to your own vision” is “the peak of all living.” To what extent is this true or not? What role has such an idea played in human history? Does Istilicha’s belief change as he gains more experience?
13. Istilicha believes that power comes only from violence or money. Would the other men agree? What might be other significant sources of power?
14. How do the three fugitives and even Le Clerc justify their own acts of violence and harm?
15. Many characters in the novel are literally or psychologically “orphaned.” What is central to this experience? How do these feelings of isolation or abandonment affect each of the characters? Is a lack of attachment the same as freedom?
16. In what ways do the women in the book make different choices about their lives than the men do? Why might this be? What social and cultural factors in this era make women’s lives even more constrained, and how do they react against this?
17. Consider the old woman who lives alone in the woods. What important qualities does she possess? How does her treatment of each of the men affect them? She refers to Bob, Cat, and Istilicha, for instance, as both “bandits” and sons, and her rings shock Le Clerc into thoughts of his mother. What do these scenes add to the narrative exploration of the nature of family, intimacy, and loneliness?
18. Le Clerc observes that “despite the rhetoric” about equality in America, there are “few encounters between rich and poor” and at meetings about liberty “slaves would circulate with glasses of wine.” How did such blatant hypocrisy lay the foundation for the next few centuries of American history? Why was Le Clerc expecting to see something different in the New World?
19. In his quest for a universal connection, or “sublayer,” among all people, Le Clerc considers that the fugitives’ desperation has them, “like all men here, . . . pursuing . . . advancement, or hope.” What might this mean? If that sublayer isn’t fear or grief or faith, what might it be?
20. What does freedom actually mean for each of the characters, and how does it change over the course of the novel? In what ways can freedom be burdensome or undesirable? What is the best balance between individual liberty, bonds of family or kinship, and social connection?