

# The TWELVE-MILE STRAIGHT *A Novel* ELEANOR HENDERSON

## Reading Group Guide

1. The novel's namesake, the twelve-mile straight, is a road that connects the Jesup family farm to the nearest town. From the initial lynching of Genus Jackson, the road remains thematically important throughout the whole novel. In what ways does the road act as a character in its own right?
2. How does the relationship between Elma and Nan change over time? How is their relationship informed by the power imbalance between the two? In what ways is Elma able to protect Nan and in what ways does she fail?
3. What is the historical impact of Prohibition and the Great Depression on the Jesup family and the farm?
4. Which gender roles does Elma end up submitting to, and which are she able to subvert?
5. The novel is narrated by an omniscient voice. How did it affect your experience as a reader to hear the perspective of multiple characters, even characters considered to be villains?
6. Nan has her tongue cut out at a young age, rendering her mute. How does this state further entrench her status within the racial and gendered power structure of the Jesup family? Is there any way in which she is able to establish agency in spite of this?
7. What was the impact of having the paternity of both Nan and the twins hidden to the reader for most of the novel? Were there hints established early on that led you to the truth?
8. Who in the novel is truly innocent? Who is unequivocally evil? Among the characters who are complicit in the structural injustice around them, do any of them achieve redemption? Are there any heroes?
9. The novel deals with various forms of violence, almost all of which is inflicted by men, both in physical abuse of other men, and sexual abuse of women. Is there a stylistic difference in the way Henderson writes about these two forms of violence?

