



THE LOVE SONGS OF W. E. B. DU BOIS

READING GROUP GUIDE

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The great scholar, W. E. B. Du Bois, once wrote about the Problem of race in America, and what he called “Double Consciousness,” a sensitivity that every African American possesses in order to survive. Since childhood, Ailey Pearl Garfield has understood Du Bois’s words all too well. Bearing the names of two formidable Black Americans—the revered choreographer Alvin Ailey and her great grandmother Pearl, the descendant of enslaved Georgians and tenant farmers—Ailey carries Du Bois’s Problem on her shoulders.

Ailey is reared in the north in the City but spends summers in the small Georgia town of Chicasetta, where her mother’s family has lived since their ancestors arrived from Africa in bondage. From an early age, Ailey fights a battle for belonging that’s made all the more difficult by a hovering trauma, as well as the whispers of women—her mother, Belle, her sister, Lydia, and a maternal line reaching back two centuries—that urge Ailey to succeed in their stead.

To come to terms with her own identity, Ailey embarks on a journey through her family’s past, uncovering the shocking tales of generations of ancestors—Indigenous, Black, and white—in the deep South. In doing so Ailey must learn to embrace her full heritage, a legacy of oppression and resistance, bondage and independence, cruelty and resilience that is the story—and the song—of America itself.

THE LOVE SONGS OF W. E. B. DU BOIS DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. The life and legacy of W.E.B Du Bois plays a central role in this novel, from the title, to the quotations at the start of each section, to the many conversations Uncle Root, Ailey, and others have about the great scholar. What was Uncle Root trying to teach Ailey through his many musings on Du Bois? What is the author trying to communicate to readers through the inclusion of Du Bois's words and history in the novel?

2. What role does colorism play in the book, both for Ailey and for the members of her family across generations? How does Ailey experience colorism in her family, in her personal and romantic setting, throughout her academic career?

3. Chicassetta, Georgia is a key location in Ailey's present-day story and in the "sorrow songs" of her maternal ancestors, who were once enslaved on the land their descendants now inhabit. What do you make of Chicassetta and the hallowed landmarks there: the Mound and Red Mound Church, Uncle Root's pecan tree, and the former Pinchard plantation? What role do these places play in Ailey's understanding of her family's history and of her own place in the world?

4. Discuss the role education plays in the novel, particularly for Uncle Root and Ailey. How does Ailey's family history of education affect her own educational direction? How does her relationship to education inform her relationships with her family and her peers?

5. How do Ailey's experiences differ as she moves between predominantly white institutions like Braithwaite and North Carolina Regents University and Historically Black Colleges and Universities like Routledge? How does she feel she is perceived in these different institutions? How does she view herself with regard to these institutions and how do those perceptions change over the course of the novel?

6. As we follow Ailey's story, we also learn the stories of her Black and Indigenous ancestors in what would become Chicassetta. How do these ancestral experiences of oppression and resistance, bondage and independence, cruelty and resilience come to bear on Ailey's life? How do they inform the lives of the older generations in Ailey's family like Uncle Root, Dear Pearl, and Belle?

7. When Ailey and Dr. Oludara visit Moss Road Plantation, the caretaker glosses over the brutal history of the place and focuses instead on its architectural history. Throughout the novel, Ailey encounters many historical and family truths that are misrepresented or rewritten entirely. Recall some of these instances. What was the purpose of the lie? Who did it benefit? Who did it hurt?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Honorée Fanonne Jeffers is a fiction writer, poet, and essayist. She is the author of five poetry collections, including the 2020 collection *The Age of Phillis*, which won the NAACP Image Award for Outstanding Literary Work in Poetry and the Lenore Marshall Poetry Prize, was longlisted for the National Book Award for Poetry, and was a finalist for the PEN/Voelcker Award, the George Washington Prize, and the Los Angeles Times Book Prize. She was a contributor to *The Fire This Time: A New Generation Speaks About Race*, edited by Jesmyn Ward, and has been published in the *Kenyon Review*, *Iowa Review*, and other literary publications. Jeffers was elected into the American Antiquarian Society, whose members include fourteen U.S. presidents, and is Critic at Large for *Kenyon Review*. She teaches creative writing and literature at University of Oklahoma. *The Love Songs of W. E. B. Du Bois* is her first novel and was a *New York Times* bestseller, longlisted for the National Book Award, shortlisted for the Center for Fiction First Novel Prize, a Finalist for the Kirkus Prize for Fiction, longlisted for the Aspen Words Literary Prize, and an Oprah Book Club Pick.

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PRAISE FOR THE LOVE SONGS OF W.E.B. DU BOIS

An Instant New York Times, Washington Post, USA Today, and Indie Bestseller

An Oprah Book Club Selection, one of Barack Obama's favorite books of 2021, and an Indie Next List pick

Longlisted for the PEN/Hemingway Award for Debut Novel, longlisted for the National Book Award for Fiction, a finalist for the Kirkus Prize for Fiction, shortlisted for the Center for Fiction First Novel Price, longlisted for the Aspen Words Literary Price, and a nominee for the NAACP Image Award

"This sweeping, brilliant and beautiful narrative is at once a love song to Black girlhood, family, history, joy, pain... and so much more. In Jeffers's deft hands, the story of race and love in America becomes the great American novel."

-JACQUELINE WOODSON

author of *Red at the Bone* and *Another Brooklyn*

"As one of the most prolific poets of our time, Jeffers has penned a family saga that is just as brilliant as it is necessary, just as intimate as it is expansive. An outstanding portrait of an American family and in turn, an outstanding portrait of America."

-ANGIE THOMAS, author of *The Hate U Give*

"Epic.... I was just enraptured by the lineage and the story of this modern African-American family.... A combination of historical and modern story—I've never read anything quite like it. It just consumed me."

-OPRAH WINFREY, Oprah Book Club Pick

"Triumphant.... Quite simply the best book that I have read in a very, very long time.... Just as Toni Morrison did in *Beloved*, Jeffers uses fiction to fill in the gaping blanks of those who have been rendered nameless and therefore storyless.... A sweeping, masterly debut."

-NEW YORK TIMES BOOK REVIEW

"*The Love Songs of W.E.B. Du Bois* is the kind of book that comes around only once a decade. Yes, at roughly 800 pages, it is, indeed, a mountain to climb, but the journey is engrossing, and the view from the summit will transform your understanding of America.... With the depth of its intelligence and the breadth of its vision, *The Love Songs of W.E.B. Du Bois* is simply magnificent."

-WASHINGTON POST

"[An] ambitious debut novel, by a noted poet.... Jeffers amasses details, richly rendering suffering and resistance."

-NEW YORKER

"A vibrant and tender coming-of-age novel. Ailey Pearl Garfield is a young girl reckoning with what it means to be a Black woman in America.... [Ailey's] journey features complex and intimate narratives of love and heartbreak from her family's two centuries in the American South, giving her not only insight into her family's complicated past, but also the tools to imagine her own future."

-TIME

"This ambitious debut novel by a National Book Award-nominated poet chronicles the journey of an American family from the colonial slave trade through the Civil War to our present day, and one Black woman's coming-to-terms with her legacy."

-USA TODAY

"*The Love Songs of W.E.B. Du Bois*, from acclaimed poet and first-time novelist Honorée Fanonne Jeffers, has hit every note — and the finished product feels like a Southern gospel song that makes the chest swell with emotion."

-SHONDALAND

"A staggering and ambitious saga.... Themes of family, class, higher education, feminism, and colorism yield many rich layers. Readers will be floored."

-PUBLISHERS WEEKLY (STARRED REVIEW)

"A sprawling, ambitious debut novel that is as impassioned in promoting Black women's autonomy as it is insistent on acknowledging our common humanity.... Jeffers, a celebrated poet, manages the difficult task of blending the sweeping with the intimate.... If this isn't the Great American Novel, it's a mighty attempt at achieving one."

-KIRKUS REVIEWS (STARRED REVIEW)