

A NOTE FROM SILAS HOUSE

This novel started with a secret.

While researching my family genealogy I came upon a distant relative's admission papers to the infamous Eastern State asylum. Listed as the reason: Unnatural Desire. Not long after, I was helping my parents decorate family graves at a mountaintop cemetery and I saw his name upon a tombstone. My father didn't know much about him beyond the fact that he and his wife had lived separate lives the last ten years of their marriage. A search for his death certificate revealed that he had died by hanging himself.

Around the same time my hometown marked the hundred-year anniversary of a shameful event it had been striving to overcome ever since: one of the most notorious white riots in the nation's history, when 300 Black citizens were rounded up at gunpoint and run out of town in a single night.

The sad stories had risen to the light, but I knew that there were love stories entangled there, too. I knew there was joy along with the sorrow. I knew the extraordinary always thrives in places that appear ordinary.

I started to think about all the people whose lives have been negated by the myth that they left rural places or that they never existed there to begin with. I thought about the ones who stayed and fought for their places in the world. I thought about those who left and pined for home the rest of their lives, despite their complex feelings about it. And I always thought of my own knotty feelings about where I'm from: a place I love to my bones even though I do not feel safe or welcome there anymore.

So I did what I always do when I'm trying to understand something better: I began to write. I took long walks in the woods and sat by creeks and thought. Before long I had four core characters, eager to tell their tales: Tom and Amos, whose desire felt ancient; Maeve and Paschal, bound by their love for knowledge. All torn between their forbidden love for each other and their devotion to one patch of land where a constantly threatened grove of tulip poplars held their secrets.

We do not have enough romance these days. We certainly do not have enough epic love stories. I wanted to write a novel to look at the intricacies of what it's like to love someone when the rest of the world is telling you it's a sin, when your own country is telling you that you are inferior for being who you are, when you are from a place that does not love you as much as you love it.

I hope you will enjoy being with these characters as much as I have. Most of all I hope they will move you and make you think about all the forgotten people who have paved the way for so many of us in quiet and forceful ways. They deserve to be remembered properly, in all of their beautiful complexities.

Thank you kindly,

Silas House

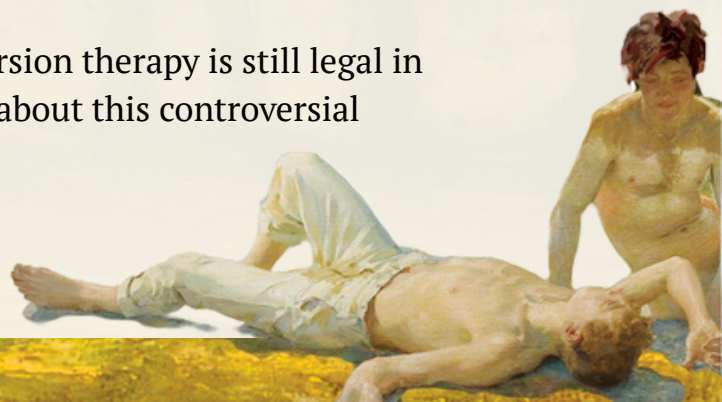


DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Note: these questions contain spoilers for The Tulip Poplars.

1. How do the trees of the title serve as a metaphor for larger themes within the book?
2. Tom Foster grapples with trying to align his sexuality with his religious upbringing. Why is this such a difficult thing to do? Despite the time period of the book, is Tom's journey relatable based on people you have known, or yourself?
3. Tom's father Caleb is a guiding force for him even after he dies. What does Caleb mean when he says, "You can tell everything you need to know about a person by how they treat small things?" And how is that manifested in the novel?
4. The novel explores faith, doubt, and religion through a number of characters: Rector Day and Prophet Thatcher represent both the positives and negative of organized religion. Tom and Maeve have a spiritual connection to nature, while Amos leans more toward atheism. Meanwhile the book opens with a quote from Nick Cave: "My life is dominated by the notion of God, whether it's His presence or His absence." Where do you see yourself and your spiritual life on this continuum? Which character did you most identify with?
5. About sixty years is covered in this novel, revealing that there has been progress on issues of race and sexuality, but also that not enough has changed. What particular things about Appalachia, race, or sexuality did you learn while reading this novel?
6. House has said that he didn't want the gay sex scenes to happen off the page and wanted to treat them the same way straight sex scenes so often are in literature. Did you feel these scenes were necessary and added to the book or were they uncomfortable for you to read? If they were uncomfortable for you to read, what is gained by that discomfort as a reader?
7. In the novel, an infamous white riot, the Corbin Expulsion, is an impetus for major changes. Did you know about this event, or the concept of a "sundown town" before reading *The Tulip Poplars*?
8. House notes in the acknowledgements that conversion therapy is still legal in a majority of the states in the USA. How do you feel about this controversial form of therapy?

Questions continue on following page.



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Note: these questions contain spoilers for The Tulip Poplars.

9. Maeve wants very badly to get an education but cannot, due to mores of the time period. In what ways did this aspect of the book resonate for you and your own family stories? Do you have relatives or ancestors who were limited by their access to education?

10. Eliza's character probably has the most evolutionary arc in the novel, going from a woman who cannot connect with her child to someone who sacrifices herself because she thinks this will help him. How did you feel about her character overall?

11. Chosen family is a major theme in this book, not only for the orphaned characters but also for the queer characters. Have you created your own chosen family? What needs does a chosen family meet? In what ways might it also feel melancholy? How might it save a person?

12. The book begins with the image of a tulip poplar growing out of a deteriorating piano. How does this image tap into themes about the natural world, changing ways of life, and other aspects of the novel?

13. Tom and his father are both experienced grafters who seek to bring trees to life, in direct opposition to the logging and clear-cutting of the mountains. How does this inform us about Tom and Caleb's characters?

15. Amos goes to New York City in the hopes of being freer to be who he is, but in what ways does he experience the opposite of freedom once in the city? Did you find his desire to return to rural Kentucky to be surprising? What is gained, and lost, in his return?

16. Maeve realizes that Tom is in love with Amos because of the way he responds to a piece of classical music. Did you find this effective, and did you seek out any of the music to listen to yourself?

17. Most novels set in Appalachia focus on coal-mining or farming. In *The Tulip Poplars*, we encounter miners and farmers but also professors, doctors, and seminary-trained priests. Similarly, the book shows the region as being more diverse than it is usually assumed to be, with white people, Black people, Hispanic people, and queer people all living in the same place together. What has your experience of Appalachia been?

