



Island

Island Queen

Discussion Questions

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VAN



Vanessa Riley here.

Thank you for reading *Island Queen*. Dorothy Kirwan Thomas’s story needed to be told. She should be in our history books. The discussion guide asks thought provoking questions about the book—the troubles and triumphs of this valiant person. Have a wonderful time chatting about Dorothy and thinking of the women like her whose stories need to be told.

Also, I’ve also added the ‘Baby Daddy’ chart. I know many find it helpful.

Be Blessed!!!

Vanessa





ISLAND QUEEN Discussion Guide

1. Before reading ISLAND QUEEN, had you read other books set in the colonial West Indies? What were your impressions about the time and place before you read Dorothy's story?
2. What does Dorothy take away from her early years, enslaved by her father, living in the shadow of her parents' tumultuous and unequal relationship? How did her mother use what very little power she had to protect Doll and Kitty, and try to secure a better future for them?
3. Early in the novel Dorothy says of John Coseveldt Cells, "I had a piece of his heart. I knew it. I gripped it in my hand. Didn't know if I'd have to give it back." How would you describe the long relationship between Dorothy and Cells? Why do you think he made the choices he did, particularly with regard to marriage and his children with Doll? If he had married Dorothy, how would their lives have changed?
4. What did you make of Dorothy's relationship with Mr. Foden? Did he view her differently than the other men around her did? Was she right when she said "'That man was better to me than my own flesh.' Better than the man I loved."?
5. During an argument, Dorothy tells Cells "We are a mirror, two people who want the world, but I live in the truth. I live in my skin. My *black* skin." How are Doll and Cells mirror images? Why does she throw the truth of his birth in his face in that moment? Does Doll live a more authentic life than Cells because the truth of her birth and her race cannot be hidden? How does that play out later in her relationship with their daughter Catharina, who was raised as White?
6. Dorothy frequently suffers from deep depression after her children are born, which her mother says "...is the sadness, comes sometimes when you have children." Do you know women who have suffered the same post-partum depression? Do we treat it differently in modern times?
7. How does Doll's life and fortune depend on her ability to leverage her relationships with the powerful men around her, from Foden, to Cells, Thomas, and Prince William? Are women today still dependent on their relationships with men for status and security? What has changed and what hasn't?
8. At her daughter's wedding, Doll reflects: "Pure happiness couldn't exist without sacrifice." What do you think brings Doll pure happiness? What are the sacrifices she's had to endure to achieve that happiness?
9. Although she struggled to free herself from slavery, Doll later makes the decision to enslave others. "I tried to think I'd be better than these white men and women. I had to...do things that sickened me...I prepared to sell my soul. If I had to be a full member of the planter class, the slaveholding class, I'd be a better massa than them all." Is she just deceiving herself? Can her decision to participate in slavery ever be justified? Did your opinion of Doll change when she crossed that line?
10. When the Entertainment Society reaches out to Doll, she tells them, "All my life I've been singled out as that one woman, that one different from the rest. Now I'm sitting with women, good powerful women. And you want to help me. That's different. I like this kind of different."



Why has it taken so long for Doll to develop bonds with women outside her own family? Why is her alliance with the Entertainment Society so transformative?

11. When Dorothy, her daughters, and granddaughters appear in London society, she thinks, “Seeing colored girls led by me, a woman with beautiful jet skin invited to the prince’s ballroom, must be shocking, causing such stirs.” Why does Dorothy defy the whispers and proudly bring her family to take their place in that ballroom?
12. At the end of the novel, Dorothy ultimately gets the assurances she wants from Lord Bathurst. Why do you think the author set up the novel with this story as the opening and closing? What about Dorothy’s life made her able to journey to the heart of the British Empire and defend her hard-won fortune?
13. In the author’s note, Vanessa Riley writes “Finding Dorothy Kirwan Thomas, and the women of the Entertainment Society, and so many other Black women who had agency and access to all levels of power has restored my soul.” How does our understanding of history change when we focus on the stories of women like Doll and her peers? Why have their lives been left out of traditional history books, or novels about their time?