

A READER'S GUIDE FOR *RUBY* BY CYNTHIA BOND

A SELECTION FOR OPRAH'S BOOK CLUB 2.0


A NOVEL



A haunting debut novel from gifted storyteller Cynthia Bond, *Ruby* brings to life a suffocating all-black community in East Texas. When the glamorous Ruby Bell returns to her hometown of Liberty Township after living in New York City, her sanity unravels as she faces the secrets of her past. The townsfolk enjoy spinning vicious gossip about Ruby—the way she screams each night like a distant train, entertains the “good men” of the town, and whispers to ghosts that dwell upon her land. At the root of her pain is a tale that no one dares to hear. The only one courageous enough to try is Ephram Jennings, a wounded soul himself, who has loved Ruby all his life. An inspiring tribute to the human spirit, *Ruby* will captivate your reading group. We hope this guide enriches your journey.

QUESTIONS AND TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

1. How did Ruby's story change the way you view the world? What does the novel show us about the nature of trauma and the power of compassion?
2. Celia copes with tragedy by putting her world in strict order, from her family life to her church life. But Ruby becomes lost to disorder. What accounts for their different approaches to emotional pain?
3. At the heart of the novel is Ruby's vision of her children, and her vision of herself as a mother. How is she able to respond with a nurturing urge although no one nurtured her? Discuss the roles of mothers and fathers in Liberty.
4. How did your understanding of the Dyboù shift throughout the novel?
5. What protection do you think Ma Tante gives to young Maggie, Ruby, and Ephram? Are they comforted by her powers, or does she only stoke their fears?
6. What fuels the racism depicted in the novel? Do some of these factors persist today? Discuss Ruby's different experiences with racism in East Texas, New York City, and on her trip back to Liberty.
7. As you read the story of Ruby's aunt, how did you react to the notion that the past is still present? What does it take to overcome the Bell family's legacy?

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- 8.** What role does Christianity play in Liberty? Does faith enhance or hinder Celia and her congregation in their attempts to heal Ruby? What does Ephram's baptism mean to him?
 - 9.** Discuss the irony of the township's name. Is there any liberty for the novel's black characters there? How do their experiences compare to the freedoms and shackles Ruby encounters in New York?
 - 10.** Otha Jennings and Ruby both lose their sanity as a result of Reverend Jennings's actions, while Chapter 20 reveals the Reverend's own tormented past. In the novel, how do women and men react differently to trauma? How are the expectations for Liberty's girls different from those for the boys?
 - 11.** The author gives us vivid scenes of the night on which Ruby's fate was hinged. What were the Reverend's motivations that night? As you read the scene from the perspective of different characters, how did your perceptions change?
 - 12.** Evoking the image of a precious gem, why is Ruby's name appropriate? Throughout her life, what is she taught about her beauty and her value?
 - 13.** What common losses do Ruby and Ephram share, from childhood to adulthood? What opens their eyes to the possibility of peace? What do you predict for their future?
 - 14.** Although Ruby is a work of fiction, the situations it describes are very much a reality. How can you and your community help protect the most vulnerable?
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