

SISTER DISTRICT ACTION NETWORK

WARMTH OF OTHER SUNS - BOOK CLUB READER'S GUIDE

Prepared by Gaby Goldstein, SDAN Director of Research

UPDATED: 9/25/19

Hello Friends!

Sister District Action Network ('Sister District', more info at the end of this document) hosts a quarterly book club. **If you haven't joined, please [sign up here](#) to vote on future books and keep in the loop with regard to book club events and information!**

Our current book selection is *The Warmth of Other Suns* by Isabel Wilkerson. This reader's guide provides discussion questions and additional materials.

A. **Discussion Questions.**

[Chicago Public Library Discussion Questions:](#)

1. The author equates the Great Migration with other vast movements of refugees from war or famine, where people must "go great distances... to reach safety with the hope that life will be better wherever they land." Talk about migration due to necessity in terms of Ida Mae, George and Robert. Did each of them migrate out of necessity? How do their stories differ when put in that context?
2. Why did Isabel Wilkerson choose to focus on these three individuals after interviewing so many migrants? What similarities or contrasts between the three different stories might have influenced her decision?
3. How is reading this book a different experience than reading a straightforward history of the Great Migration?
4. Wilkerson calls the Great Migration "the greatest untold story of the 20th century." What are some of the reasons this story was never told?
5. In his memoir *Black Boy*, Richard Wright wrote, "I had fled one insecurity and embraced another," a quote Wilkerson uses at the start of her chapter "Transplanted in Alien Soil." Discuss this in terms of Ida Mae, George and Robert. Was this true of them? Is this universally true for all migrants?

6. While Robert Foster had his sights set on a life in California, his brother Madison believed, “running away meant Jim Crow had won, and Madison wasn’t going to give the rascals that.” Discuss the African Americans who chose to stay in the South, and the conflict people face when they must choose between possibility and what they know.
7. Wilkerson mentions “The Negro in Chicago” (p. 275), a report published in 1922 that included recommendations for improving race relations. The report was largely unheeded, according to Wilkerson. Are we still feeling the ripple effects of race relations from 1922 today in Chicago? How did the conditions faced by African American migrants affect the race relations of the city for decades to come?
8. Discuss the life in the North that George found, and what he witnessed about the differences between North and South while traveling back and forth as a porter. Think of the African American passengers who would move to the segregated train as they entered the South. What would you have done, as a porter on that train? How did this experience shape George as a person?
9. What anecdote in the book made the most lasting impression? Which of the three main narratives was most memorable?
10. Wilkerson writes that “across the South, someone was hanged or burned alive every four days from 1889 to 1929” (p. 39). Public lynching is looked back upon with disgust as a barbaric act. What actions today will people look back upon in a hundred years as barbaric or inhumane?
11. How did the Great Migration influence Northern culture? Consider blues music or the literature of the Harlem Renaissance.
12. What similarities and/or difference does the Great Migration have with the experience of other migrations? Consider European immigrants from the early 20th century, or the many migrants coming to American cities today.
13. More people live in cities than anytime in history. Is Chicago still an attractive destination for people seeking a better life?

Publisher's Discussion Questions:

1. The Warmth of Other Suns combines a sweeping historical perspective with vivid intimate portraits of three individuals: Ida Mae Gladney, George Swanson Starling, and Robert Pershing Foster. What is the value of this dual focus, of shifting between the panoramic and the close-up? In what ways are Ida Mae Gladney, George Starling, and Robert Foster representative of the millions of other migrants who journeyed from South to North?
2. In many ways The Warmth of Other Suns seeks to tell a new story—about the Great Migration of southern blacks to the north—and to set the record straight about the true significance of that migration. What are the most surprising revelations in the book? What misconceptions does Wilkerson dispel?
3. What were the major economic, social, and historical forces that sparked the Great Migration? Why did blacks leave in such great numbers from 1915 to 1970?
4. What were the most horrifying conditions of Jim Crow South? What instances of racial terrorism stand out most strongly in the book? What daily injustices and humiliations did blacks have to face there?
5. In what ways was the Great Migration of southern blacks similar to other historical migrations? In what important ways was it unique?
6. After being viciously attacked by a mob in Cicero, a suburb of Chicago, Martin Luther King, Jr. said: “I have seen many demonstrations in the South, but I have never seen anything so hostile and so hateful as I’ve seen here today” (p. 389). Why were northern working-class whites so hostile to black migrants?
7. Wilkerson quotes Black Boy in which Richard Wright wrote, on arriving in the North: “I had fled one insecurity and embraced another” (p. 242). What unique challenges did black migrants face in the North? How did these challenges affect the lives of Ida Mae Gladney, George Starling, and Robert Foster?
8. Wilkerson points out that the three most influential figures in jazz were all children of the Great Migration: Miles Davis, Thelonious Monk, and John Coltrane. What would American culture look like today if the Great Migration hadn’t happened?

9. What motivated Ida Mae Gladney, George Starling, and Robert Foster to leave the South? What circumstances and inner drives prompted them to undertake such a difficult and dangerous journey? What would likely have been their fates if they had remained in the South? In what ways did living in the North free them?
10. Near the end of the book, Wilkerson asks: “With all that grew out of the mass movement of people, did the Great Migration achieve the aim of those who willed it? Were the people who left the South—and their families—better off for having done so? Was the loss of what they left behind worth what confronted them in the anonymous cities they fled to?” (p. 528). How does Wilkerson answer these questions?
11. How did the Great Migration change not only the North but also the South? How did the South respond to the mass exodus of cheap black labor?
12. In what ways are current attitudes toward Mexican Americans similar to attitudes toward African Americans expressed by Northerners in *The Warmth of Other Suns*? For example, the ways working-class Northerners felt that Southern blacks were stealing their jobs.
13. At a neighborhood watch meeting in Chicago’s South Shore, Ida Mae listens to a young state senator named Barack Obama. In what ways is Obama’s presidency an indirect result of the Great Migration?
14. What is the value of Wilkerson basing her research primarily on firsthand, eyewitness accounts, gathered through extensive interviews, of this historical period?
15. Wilkerson writes of her three subjects that “Ida Mae Gladney had the humblest trappings but was perhaps the richest of them all. She had lived the hardest life, been given the least education, seen the worst the South could hurl at her people, and did not let it break her Her success was spiritual, perhaps the hardest of all to achieve. And because of that, she was the happiest and lived the longest of them all” (p. 532). What attributes allowed Ida Mae Gladney to achieve this happiness and longevity? In what sense might her life, and the lives of George Starling and Robert Foster as well, serve as models for how to persevere and overcome tremendous difficulties?

B. Additional Materials.

- [The Great Migration](#) (Chicago Public Library curated reading list)
- Isabel Wilkerson - discusses the [book's research process](#) (Video clip - 5 mins)
- Isabel Wilkerson - [TED Talk](#) about the Great Migration (Video clip - 20 mins)
- Isabel Wilkerson - discusses the [book and process at Yale University](#) (Video clip - 60 mins)
- Isabel Wilkerson - [Q&A on CSPAN](#) about the book (Video clip - 60 mins)
- Ta-Nehisi Coates - [Eight Thoughts on The Warmth of Other Suns](#) (essay)

Sister District Action Network (SDAN) is a 501(c)(4) organization that primarily focuses on nonpartisan education and advocacy on civic engagement issues. Specifically, SDAN aims to:

- *Educate voters on the importance of state and local elections;*
- *Train new leaders interested in becoming community activists;*
- *Conduct research in partnership with nonprofit and academic partners to test new methods to increase civic engagement and voter participation;*
- *Disseminate best practices for voter engagement and civic participation.*

SDAN is affiliated with the Sister District Project, but it is a separate legal entity.