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# First-Year and Common Reading Guide

# The Water Dancer

## A Novel

by Ta-Nehisi Coates

### One World

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### ABOUT THE BOOK

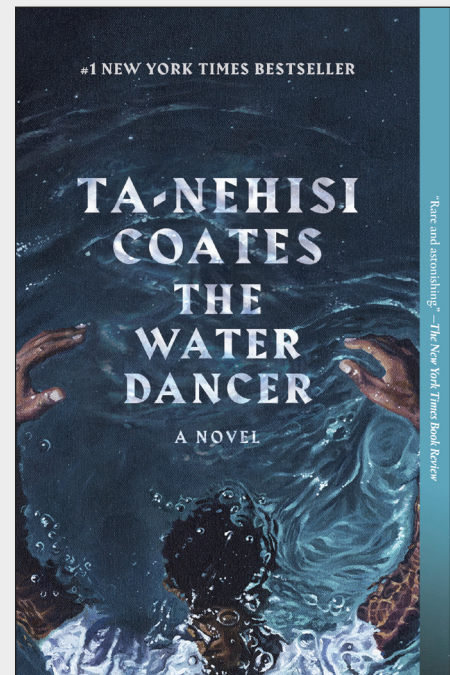
Young Hiram Walker was born into bondage. When his mother was sold away, Hiram was robbed of all memory of her—but was gifted with a mysterious power. Years later, when Hiram almost drowns in a river, that same power saves his life. This brush with death births an urgency in Hiram and a daring scheme: to escape from the only home he's ever known.

So begins an unexpected journey that takes Hiram from the corrupt grandeur of Virginia's proud plantations to desperate guerrilla cells in the wilderness, from the coffin of the Deep South to dangerously idealistic movements in the North. Even as he's enlisted in the underground war between slavers and the enslaved, Hiram's resolve to rescue the family he left behind endures.

This is the dramatic story of an atrocity inflicted on generations of women, men, and children—the violent and capricious separation of families—and the war they waged to simply make lives with the people they loved. Written by one of today's most exciting thinkers and writers, *The Water Dancer* is a propulsive, transcendent work that restores the humanity of those from whom everything was stolen.

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

TA-NEHISI COATES is the author of *The Beautiful Struggle*, *We Were Eight Years in Power*, and *Between the World and Me*, which won the National Book Award in 2015. He is the recipient of a MacArthur Fellowship. Coates lives in New York City with his wife and son.



*“The Water Dancer is a jeroboam of a book, a crowd-pleasing exercise in breakneck and often occult storytelling that tonally resembles the work of Stephen King as much as it does the work of Toni Morrison, Colson Whitehead and the touchstone African-American science-fiction writer Octavia Butler. . . . It is flecked with forms of wonder-working that push at the boundaries of what we still seem to be calling magical realism.”*

—Dwight Garner, *The New York Times*

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Who is the narrator of *The Water Dancer*, and why might the author have chosen to write the novel in first person from their perspective? Although the book has only one narrator, what other voices and points of view are represented in the book? Which of the other characters are also revealed as storytellers within the narrative as they share their own stories with Hiram? How would you say that these additional narratives enrich the story and expand its scope? What do they reveal about the power of storytelling and bearing witness? Was there a single character or point of view that you identified with most? Alternatively, were there any characters or points of view to which you struggled to relate? If so, did your perspective change at all by the story's end?
2. What series of events "shook forever [Hiram's] sense of a cosmic order" (5)? Who does Hiram see on the bridge just before the carriage, in which he is driving his brother Maynard, plummets into the Goose? What do you think Hiram means when he says, "slavery murdered [his brother]" (7)? After they have been cast into the river, what does Hiram feel "reflected [for the first time] the true nature of [their] positions" (8)? What impact do these events have on his life and how is Hiram changed as a result of the experience? What does this experience inspire Hiram to do?
3. Who are the Tasked and what does Hiram mean when he says that their culture and community is "its own America" with "its own grandeur" (52)? Who are "the Quality" and how does the use of this term serve to expose the hypocrisy of white slave owners and "genteel" society? Do any of the so-called members of the Quality seem to be aware of their horrific abuses of power and the gross contradiction between their actions and professed morals and ideals? Consider also how the use of the term opens up a more expansive dialogue around what "quality" means. Does the book ultimately propose an answer to the question of what it means to live a quality life or be a quality person?
4. Who are the Low and what is their relationship to the Quality? Why does Hiram say that this class always amazed him? How and why do the Quality treat the Low, like Harlan, differently in public than in private? Why do the Low accept this? How, in turn, do the Low treat the Tasked?
5. Why do you think the author chose to begin the story on a declining tobacco plantation in 19<sup>th</sup> century Virginia? What other sites are represented in the book and how do they contribute to a more complete picture of slavery and its tangible effects? How does life for the Tasked in Virginia compare to life in Philadelphia and farther North?
6. What is Conduction and how does Hiram first learn about it? Who does Hiram choose to go to after his first experience with Conduction? Were you surprised by this choice? What does Hiram believe that he has in common with this person? What can he see in them that others cannot? Consider other meanings of "conduction" within the book. For example, what is the relationship between conduction and the Underground? Besides Hiram, who else within the book is revealed to be a Conductor? What are some of the challenges that come with having this power?
7. Who is Hiram's father and what is their relationship like? How does Hiram initially feel when his father calls him to the house at Lockless? Despite Thena's warning, what makes Hiram feel "a teasing share of [his] inheritance" (33)? How does this feeling change as Hiram experiences life at Lockless? What does his father say is a duty that belongs to all of them—and what is problematic about this notion?

**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**  
(CONTINUED)

8. Memory is one of the novel's key themes. What kinds of memories seem to hold the greatest significance for the characters in the book? What causes some characters to be unable to access particular memories? What key memories is Hiram missing? Is he ever able to recover them? While many of the characters experience instances of repressed memory, what does the novel ultimately have to say about "the awesome power of memory" (3) and the importance of remembrance?
9. Explore ways in which *The Water Dancer* crosses boundaries and challenges conventional notions of genre. For instance, how does Coates's book compare to other slavery narratives that you have read? How did it surprise you or defy your expectations? While *The Water Dancer* can be categorized as a work of historical fiction, consider also how the book functions as an example of speculative fiction. Why do you think that the author chose to inject magical elements into a historical narrative? What might this have allowed the author to accomplish that may not have been possible working within a single genre? The author has also said that he considers *The Water Dancer* a love story, but how does the book challenge conventional notions of what a love story is? What kinds of love are represented in the book? How does love seem to be defined within it and what does the book ultimately reveal about what it means to love?
10. Resistance emerges as a recurring motif within the novel. What do the characters resist and how do they resist it? Consider also how the writing of the book itself could be considered an act of resistance. What myths and tropes about slavery in America does the author seem to make a point to resist or overturn? How does the author's reinterpretation of the traditional hero narrative make way for a new story about the strength and power of family and community?
11. Evaluate the treatment of women in the story. How would you describe the female characters? What do they share in common? How does Coates challenge gender stereotypes via his depiction of characters such as Sophia, Corrine, and Harriet? How is Hiram's relationship with Sophia particularly effective at demonstrating this? What is it that Sophia says she needs from Hiram? Is he ultimately able to give her this? What lessons does Hiram learn as the result of his relationships with these women and how is he changed as a result? Would you say that Hiram saves the women or that the women save Hiram?
12. The novel reveals a stark portrait of the horrors of family separation and its lingering long-term effects. Who separates or breaks up the families in the novel and what is their motivation for doing so? How do these forced separations affect the people in these families? What are some of the long-term consequences? How does Coates remind readers of the importance and the strength of family and the parent-child bond? What might Coates's book contribute to contemporary dialogues about the continued, unlawful separation of families in America?
13. How does *The Water Dancer* create a complex and nuanced dialogue about freedom and whom do you think Coates is hoping to engage in this dialogue? What does it mean to be free? What responsibilities come with freedom and how do Hiram and members of the Underground recognize and honor this? What does Hawkins say about the relationship between freedom and free will? Discuss how, in your own life, you have used your own freedom and privilege in order to help and lift up others.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS  
(CONTINUED)

14. Explore water as a major symbol in the novel. How does Coates create a sense of water both as conductor and connector? What other meanings and associations does water carry, both within our broader culture and within the narrative? What might be the historical significance of water within the context of the story? What meaning did water have for those desperately trying to escape their enslavement?
15. In Coates's well-known essay "The Case for Reparations" (*The Atlantic*, 2014), he addresses the theft of resources and cultural pillaging that took place via American slavery and which continued in other ways long after the abolishment of slavery. How does *The Water Dancer* pick up this thread? How does the novel illuminate this theft of resources? In Chapter 20, when Hiram attends the convention, what other examples of cultural pillaging does he learn about? Coates has proposed that a first step in reparations is the necessary acknowledgement of the crime. Is Hiram's father or any other slave-owner able to take this first step in making reparations?
16. Truth—and the difficulty of truly facing and accepting what is true—emerges as another central theme of the book. How is this theme central to the American story? What truths about American history and culture does Coates's novel reveal? How do the characters in the novel reckon with their own hard truths? Who fails to reckon with the truth and why do you think this is? What impact does their failure to reckon with the truth have on them and those around them? What truths do we still have to reckon with as a culture?
17. Explore ways in which *The Water Dancer* challenges our ways of thinking about power and the corresponding topics of humanization and dehumanization. For example, how do Coates's characterizations throughout this narrative restore power to those from whom it was stolen? How does the author reveal the undiminished and untouchable humanity of Hiram and those in slavery forced to live under the most dehumanizing of conditions? How does Coates also challenge our thinking about dehumanization? How does Coates expose who is truly "dehumanized" when one human being grossly mistreats another?

ABOUT THIS  
GUIDE'S WRITER

JE BANACH was an original member of the Resident Faculty in Fiction at the Yale Writers' Workshop. She has written for *PEN*, *Vogue*, *ELLE*, *Esquire*, *Granta*, *The Paris Review*, *Electric Literature*, and other venues and was a long-time contributor to Harold Bloom's literary series. She is the author of more than 80 literary guides including guides to works by Maya Angelou, Salman Rushdie, His Holiness the Dalai Lama, Haruki Murakami, and many others.

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