

Homegoing By Yaa Gyasi

Summary

Spoiler Alert: The following summary and discussion questions reveal plot details that some readers may prefer to encounter as surprises.

[*Homegoing*](#) follows the lives of half-sisters, Effia and Esi, born unknown to one another in 18th-century West Africa. Slavery binds their blood, its legacy inscribed on their descendants over three centuries of African and African-American experience.

Effia is born in Fanteland on the night of a terrible fire; considered cursed, she is married off to the governor of the nearby British colony. She lives well at Cape Coast Castle, the huge British fort and slave port. Effia learns that her real birth mother was an Asante woman enslaved by her father, who escaped during the fire. (We later learn that her name is Maaman. After her escape, she married an Asante leader and bore a second daughter: Esi.) As the British inflame tribal rivalries, Fante and Asante raid one another capturing prisoners to sell to the whites.

Effia's son Quey continues his father's slave trade, advising the Fante leaders, Badu and Fiifi (Quey's uncle). Ever-hungry for gold and glory, they rashly kidnap the Asante king's daughter and Quey must marry her to avert war with the Asante. Their unhappy marriage convinces their son, James, to reject the slave trade. He runs away with an Asante woman. The star-crossed lovers flee deep into Asanteland, eking out a living as farmers. Abena, their daughter, blames her parents' nameless past for her lack of suitors. Shamed by a lover's final rejection, she runs away to a mission to give birth to her daughter, Akua.

Abused for years by the priest, at sixteen Akua escapes the mission to marry Asamoah, an Asante warrior; soon they have two young daughters. The British exile the Asante king. As the enraged Asante nation rises up to do battle, Akua has terrible visions of a fire-woman; they worsen over the months Asamoah is away at war. Angry over Akua's screaming nightmares, her mother-in-law locks her up without food or water. Asamoah, badly wounded, returns a week later. She is saved, but imprisonment has shattered her mind. They console one another and conceive a son, Yaw. Tragically, just after Yaw's birth Akua is "possessed" by the fire-woman and sets fire to her children. Only Yaw survives. Asamoah defends her, telling the villagers she must live to raise his son.

Badly scarred, Yaw is a reserved, scholarly, and kind. He marries late in life and dotes on his daughter Marjorie. She spends many summers with her "crazy" grandmother Akua, who has gradually recovered her senses (and been granted some forgiveness by Yaw). Inspired by Akua's old stories, Marjorie becomes a gifted writer. She meets a fellow grad student named Marcus and they visit Cape Coast Castle together. Unaware of their distant blood ties, they bring Effia and Esi's stories full circle.

Meanwhile, Esi grows up in Asanteland. A Fante girl, captured and enslaved as their house-girl, is the one that tells Esi her own mother was a slave in Fanteland. Contrite, Esi innocently agrees to send a secret message to the girl's father. Fante warriors arrive, and Esi is soon imprisoned as "cargo" in the dungeons of the very fort where Effia lives. She is raped by a soldier and shipped to America for sale. Esi's daughter Ness endures all the horrors of slavery. Resolving that her son Kojo will be free, she sacrifices herself to ensure his escape.

In Baltimore, "Jo" lives free under faked papers. His wife Anna's are real, but that matters little after the Fugitive Slave Act passes: Anna, pregnant, is kidnapped and sold as a slave. Their son H, born a slave, becomes a coal miner after the Civil War. Active in the labor unions, H brings his daughter Willie to sing the national anthem at union meetings. There she meets Robert Carson, the lightest-skinned black man she has ever seen. They marry and move to Harlem, where Willie looks forward to singing in jazz clubs. While Club owners tell Willie she's "too black" to be onstage, Robert eagerly embraces his ability to pass as white. The conflict drives them apart. Willie struggles to raise their son Carson alone, but finds renewed joy singing in her church's choir.

Carson (aka "Sonny") grows up angry over the injustices blacks still face at every turn. As a housing rep for the NAACP in Harlem, he is frequently jailed for his activism. Increasingly demoralized, Sonny turns to drugs. His involvement with a sultry but self-destructive jazz singer produces a child, Marcus. Marcus is a PhD student at Stanford when he spots a fascinating young woman named Marjorie. In the final chapter, he and Marjorie travel to Ghana together. A sense of promise hangs in the air as they splash in the ocean beside Cape Coast Castle.

Discussion Questions

The discussion points offered here should spark discussion, but are not all there is to say. Enjoy your discussion -- starting with these ideas!

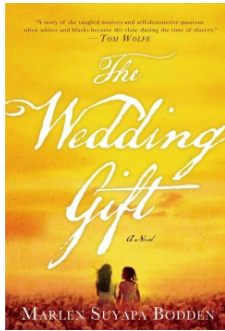
- What does fire symbolize throughout the novel?
- Which characters do you find most -- or least -- sympathetic and why?
- What does the novel say about women's relationships with one another?
- The novel critiques slavery as universally wrong -- how does it explore the ways it causes harm within Fante and Asante cultures?
- What is the role of religion and spirituality in the novel?
- How do the actions of "Big Men" among the Fante/Asante impact characters' lives?

About the Author

Born in Ghana and raised in Huntsville, Alabama, [Yaa Gyasi](#) graduated with a degree in English from Stanford University and completed her MFA at the Iowa Writers' Workshop. Her short stories have appeared in numerous journals, including *African American Review*, *Callaloo*, and *Guernica*. Gyasi garnered international acclaim after the 2015 London Book Fair, when North American publishing rights for her debut novel, *Homegoing* (2016), were rumored to have sold for a remarkable seven-figure sum.

Further Reading

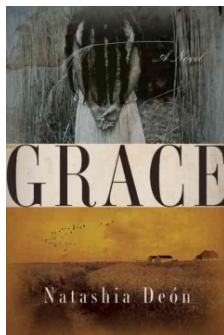
Fiction:



[The wedding gift](#)

[Marlen Suyapa Bodden](#)

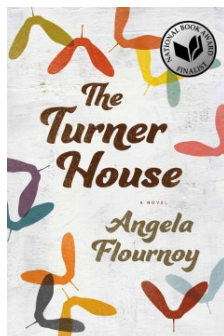
Like *Homegoing*, *The Wedding Gift* presents a uniquely compelling look at the painful impact of slavery on the blood-tie between half-sisters. Clarissa, the daughter of a plantation owner receives a unique wedding gift from her father: Sarah, her slave and her half-sister. Clarissa feigns propriety, longing to follow her heart; Sarah plays the role of a docile house-girl while plotting her escape. Their secrets and desires ignite tumultuous events in a tangled web of misogyny, scandal and violence.



[Grace](#)

[Natasha Deon](#)

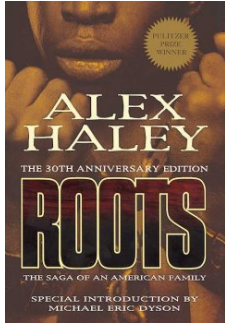
The dual stories of a runaway plantation slave and the child she never knew are woven through the historic events of the mid-19th century, including the Civil War and the Emancipation Proclamation.



[The Turner house](#)

[Angela Flournoy](#)

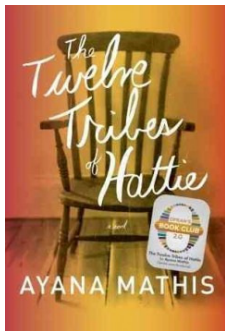
Thirteen siblings in an African-American family gather to determine the fate of a family home that representing decades of their family's history. Located on Yarrow Street in Detroit's Upper East side, the home once marked their black working-class parents' hard-won success. As their stories emerge -- the oldest son often feels like a parent to his younger siblings, the youngest daughter has secretly moved into the home after being evicted -- *The Turner House* brings warmth and humanity to its panoramic exploration of African-American lives.



[Roots: the saga of an American family](#)

[Alex Haley](#)

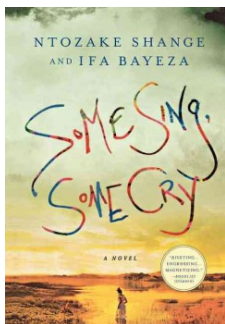
While many novels describe the lives of slaves and their descendants in America, Haley broke new ground with his compelling, detailed, and sympathetic portrait of the lives in Africa from which captured slaves had been taken. *Roots* is the now-iconic story of Kunta Kinte, an 18th-century African prince sold into slavery, and the successive generations of his descendants in America. A fictionalized account of the author's family history, the novel concludes with his birth.



[The twelve tribes of Hattie](#)

[Ayana Mathis](#)

Swept up by the tides of the Great Migration, Hattie Shepherd flees the Jim-Crow South in 1923. She settles in Philadelphia, and is soon married. Hattie's heart hardens as her hopes are dashed -- beginning with the needless death of her firstborn twins. Over the next sixty years, Hattie raises nine children (and one grandchild) with ruthless determination. In turn, they struggle to breach her cold implacability. If you enjoyed Gyasi's complex, flawed, yet sympathetic characters, you will relish the stories of Hattie's twelve tribes.

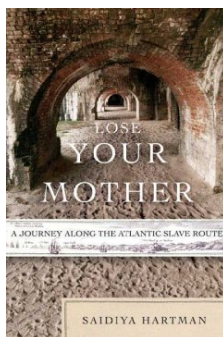


[Some sing, some cry](#)

[Ntozake Shange and Ifa Bayeza](#)

Some Sing Come Cry follows seven generations of a Mayfield women -- a family of tangled roots and exceptional musical genius. It begins with Betty, a South Carolina slave whose master was not only her father, but also the father of her children. Displaced after the Civil War, the "colored Mayfields" make their way, always strengthened by the power of music: from gospel and minstrel shows to opera and hip-hop of the present day. Inspired by the co-authors own remarkable family history, this bittersweet family saga combines emotional truth and historical reality.

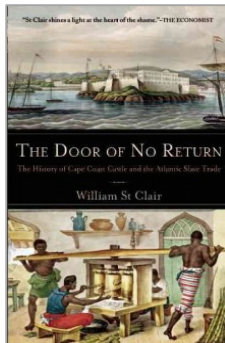
Nonfiction:



[Lose your mother: a journey along the Atlantic slave route](#)

[Saidiya V. Hartman](#)

In *Lose Your Mother*, Saidiya Hartman traces the history of the Atlantic slave trade by recounting a journey she took along a slave route in Ghana. Following the trail of captives from the hinterland to the Atlantic coast, Hartman reckons with the blank slate of her own genealogy and vividly dramatizes the effects of slavery on three centuries of African and African-American history.



[The door of no return: the history of Cape Coast Castle and the Atlantic slave trade](#)

[William St. Clair](#)

Ghana's Cape Coast Castle was the last sight of home glimpsed by more than three million men, women and children sold into the 17th-century slave trade from its port. St. Clair's richly detailed, engaging and authoritative history, drawn from previously unexplored primary sources in the British Naval Archives, is a must-read for those interested in the historical events described in *Homegoing*.



[Proud shoes: the story of an American family](#)

[Pauli Murray](#)

In *Proud Shoes*, author Pauli Murray explores her family's mixed race heritage, and discovers a family secret tied to historical issues of racial identity, miscegenation, and slavery. Readers intrigued by the fate of Esi's American descendants will find Murray's warm, thoughtful, and poignant family history especially appealing.

*This NoveList Book Discussion Guide was developed by NoveList Editor/Bibliographer Kimberly Burton. A librarian specializing in genre fiction and adult RA services, Kim creates innovative RA content throughout the NoveList databases and writes [NoveList Book Squad](#) newsletters, *Club Scene* and *Beyond Genre*. [Sign up!](#)*