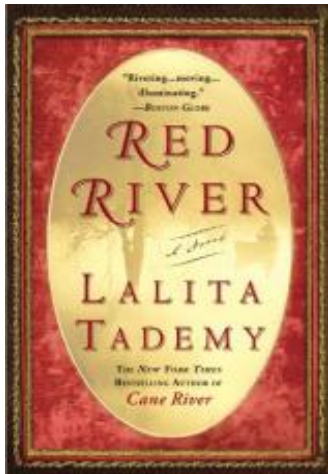


Red River

by Lalita Tademy



About the Book

Come closer. This is not a story to go down easy, and the backwash still got hold of us today. The history of a family. The history of a country. From bondage to the joy of freedom...and then back into darkness, so fearsome that don't nobody want to talk about the scary time. 1873. Wasn't no riot like they say. It was a massacre...

-From RED RIVER

Hailed as "powerful," "accomplished," and "spellbinding," Lalita Tademy's first novel *CANE RIVER* was a *New York Times* bestseller and the 2001 *Oprah Book Club Summer Selection*. Now with her evocative, luminous style and painstaking research, she takes her family's story even further, back to a little-chronicled, deliberately-forgotten time...and the struggle of three extraordinary generations of African-American men to forge brutal injustice and shattered promise into a limitless future for their children... RED RIVER

For the newly-freed black residents of Colfax, Louisiana, the beginning of Reconstruction promised them the right to vote, own property-and at last control their own lives.

Tademy saw a chance to start a school for his children and neighbors. His friend Israel Smith was determined to start a community business and gain economic freedom. But in the space of a day, marauding whites would "take back" Colfax in one of the deadliest cases of racial violence in the South. In the bitter aftermath, Sam and Israel's fight to recover and build their dreams will draw on the best they and their families have to give-and the worst they couldn't have foreseen. Sam's hidden resilience will make him an unexpected leader, even as it puts his conscience and life on the line. Israel finds ironic success-and the bitterest of betrayals. And their greatest challenge will be to pass on to their sons and grandsons a proud heritage never forgotten-and the strength to meet the demands of the past and future in their own unique ways.

An unforgettable achievement, a history brought to vibrant life through one of the most memorable families in fiction, **RED RIVER** is about fathers and sons, husbands and wives-and the hopeful, heartbreaking choices we all must make to claim the legacy that is ours.

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Discussion Guide

1. **Red River** gives a rich impression of a family history expansively and proudly told. Yet in her "Author's Note," Lalita Tademy tells us that extracting the history of her father's ancestors was sometimes painful: "a different type of family story, lacking shape and enthusiasm, only stingily disclosed, rationed with vague hints or whispers, and only then with great reluctance and obvious discomfort by the teller." Why would there be such reluctance to repeat these stories?

2. It's a tragic fact that the voices of many African-Americans who endured slavery in America were never recorded. Lalita Tademy's decision to re-create these lost voices by using the format of a historical novel is her artistic response to this gap in our national history. Does her artistic decision work for you?

3. The Prologue is written in the voice of Polly Tademy as she turns 100 in 1935. As the wife of Sam Tademy, she had lived through the Colfax massacre of Easter Sunday 1873. Of herself and her women friends, she writes: "Outlasting our men ? our husbands, our sons, even some grandsons. We all had it hard, but the men, they had it worse, specially those what come up on life from the front." From what you read in **Red River**, do you agree that the African-American males in this historical novel "had it worse"? Discuss why you agree or disagree.

4. One premise of **Red River** seems to be that after the Civil War-leading all the way up to the present-black men suffered a particular kind of degradation different from that which black women suffered. Do you agree with this basic premise? Furthermore, in **Red River**, would you say that the author deliberately sets out to explore more deeply the struggles of the male characters than those of the female characters?

5. Again in the Prologue, Polly Tademy extols the achievements of African-American males of her era: "What our colored men try to do for the rest of us in Colfax matter. They daren't be forgot. While we women keep the wheel spinning, birthing the babies and holding together a decent home to raise them in, taking care of them what too young or too old to take care of theyself, our menfolks does battle how they got to in a world want to see them broke down and tame." In this novel, do you see a comparison between the female struggling to tend the home fires, and the male struggling to compete and survive with dignity in the hostile world outside the home?

6. In Chapter 1, Israel Smith describes his obligation to occupy the Colfax Courthouse as "a citizen's job." Discuss the special significance of a black man's progressing from slave status to that of a full-fledged, free citizen of the United States.

7. In Chapter 2, Isaac "McCully" McCullen talks about his brown fedora as his "voting hat." When he first exercised his right to vote (casting his vote for the Republican Party), he wore this hat. He placed a heron feather in its brim and called it "a rare feather from the phoenix bird what lived in the desert for five hundred years, go up in flames, raise itself up brand new from the ashes." Discuss why the phoenix rising from the ashes is an inspiring image for African-Americans

emerging from the slave era in America.

8. McCully's brown fedora is passed down from generation to generation. Discuss why an authentic relic from a historic event acquires deeper and deeper meaning with the passage of time. Do you agree that each new generation should be taught to understand and preserve and cherish these relics that commemorate an ancestor's achievements?

9. Scattered throughout **Red River**, there are over forty-four "Figures," which are actual documents, photographs, and drawings from the historical record. Discuss how the author's inclusion of historical documentation in the midst of her novel's fictional world enhances **or detracts** from your reading experience.

10. In Chapter 6, Sam Tadey learns that Spenser stole large quantities of foodstuffs from Craft's store to feed the men and their families who had been uprooted to occupy and defend the Colfax Courthouse. Sam opposes this theft on principle; others support it for a variety of reasons. Discuss both views: those opposing the theft, and those supporting it.

11. In the days leading up to the Colfax massacre, Jessie McCullen is murdered by a band of white men, and at the memorial service for Jessie, Sam Tadey expresses his opposition to the impending conflict. He says: "One day, Lord willing, we build a colored school right here in Colfax...We need education, not bullets. That the only way we win? We got to make stepping stones out of stumbling blocks. That the only way progress last." Despite Sam's speech, the Colfax massacre occurs. Yet Sam, years later, will achieve his dream of a colored school in Colfax. Do you agree with Sam Tadey that the Colfax massacre ought not have happened? As he preaches nonviolence, does Sam Tadey remind you of other figures from the civil rights era in the middle of the 20th century who also preached nonviolence?

12. In Chapter 7, Sam Tadey's childhood recalls the small cabin in which his mother raised him and his brother, Doe, and the brief late-night visit of a man his mother introduces as his father. This father impresses upon his sons Sam and Doe: "We from far away. We wasn't brought to this country as no slave. We come free, of our own will. We come from the Nile Delta, and my daddy pay passage by his sweat-work on a ship supposed to take him to a land of opportunity...Our real name Ta-ta-mee. Say it." How does this scene affect you? Imagine a young boy meeting his father only once, in one desperate and fleeting encounter. Discuss the cataclysmic effect of such a meeting.

13. During the Colfax massacre, Israel Smith endures and witnesses cruelties almost beyond what the human mind can fathom. His physical body, grievously wounded, does manage to survive; however his psyche never fully recovers. Nowadays, the medical/psychiatric professions have given a diagnostic name to Israel's mental state. Post-traumatic stress syndrome is a diagnosis for soldiers, especially infantrymen who have fought in the front lines in ground combat. Do you think Israel Smith suffered from this disorder?

14. At one point, Jackson, comparing his race to the Caucasian race, says: "We farm better, we breed better, we [survive] better..." How does his statement affect you, a reader in the 21st century?

15. At Noby Smith's funeral, his brother David comes to pay his respects, and his relatives whisper in his ear, "You're not welcome here." What, in your estimation, was David's most unforgivable crime? And do you think that by this time David's family and extended family should have forgiven him for the crime?

16. In **Red River**, Lalita Tademy re-creates, in vivid scenes, numerous incidents of racially motivated hate crimes. Which incidents stayed with you the most powerfully? Why?

17. When Green, Jackson, and Noby go out night-hunting in Chapter 22, Green is accidentally killed. In what way is his death a catalyst in this historical novel?

Author Bio

Lalita Tademy is the author *CANE RIVER*, a *New York Times* bestselling novel and the 2001 Oprah Book Club Summer Selection, and its critically acclaimed sequel *RED RIVER*. She lives in Northern California.

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