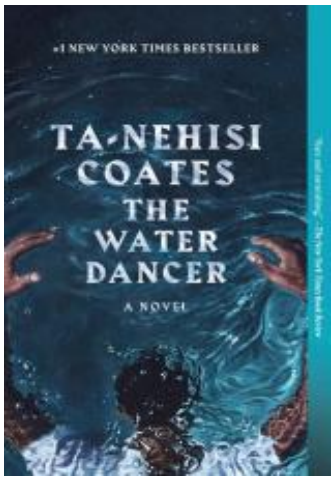
The Water Dancer

by Ta-Nehisi Coates



About the Book

From the National Book Award-winning author of BETWEEN THE WORLD AND ME, a boldly conjured debut novel about a magical gift, a devastating loss, and an underground war for freedom.

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 utopic 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.

Discussion Guide

1. Why do you think Coates uses terms like ?Tasked? and ?Quality? instead of ?slaves? and ?masters?? What do you think the novel gains from this altered language?

2. Hiram says that the Tasked are ?Blessed, for we do not bear the weight of pretending pure.? How does Coates define

morality in the novel? In what ways does Hiram?s notion of morality differ from that of the Quality, or even Corinne?

3. What do you make of Howell Walker?s apology? To what extent does Coates humanize Howell? Why do you think he does this?

4. What roles do the concepts of motherhood and fatherhood play in the novel? How does Hiram define family?

5. Sophia tells Hiram, ?But what you must get, is that for me to be yours, I must never be yours.? What is Coates saying about the particular struggles of black women in this novel? How does Hiram?s relationship with Sophia change over time?

6. Characters like Corrine risk their lives to work for the Underground, while also allowing Hiram and some of its other members to come to harm for the greater good of the organization. What might Coates be trying to say about the relationship between white people and racial justice with these characters?

7. Discuss Harriet?s role in the story. Did you know immediately who she was? What impact does the inclusion of a historical figure have on the narrative?

8. What is the significance of water throughout the book? Why do you think Coates chooses it as the medium for Hiram?s power?

9. Coates is best known for his works of nonfiction; THE WATER DANCER is his first novel. Why do you think he chose to explore the themes of slavery and the Underground Railroad through fiction? What is gained when the book isn?t tethered to historical fact? What is lost?

10. What does THE WATER DANCER add to our understanding of how enslaved people suffered? What does the novel add to our understanding of the agency, resilience and strength of enslaved people during that time?

11. How are the themes of THE WATER DANCER relevant to modern discussions of race, privilege and power?

Author Bio

Ta-Nehisi Coates is the author of THE BEAUTIFUL STRUGGLE, WE WERE EIGHT YEARS IN POWER, THE WATER DANCER, THE MESSAGE, and BETWEEN THE WORLD AND ME, which won the National Book Award in 2015. He is the recipient of a National Magazine Award and a MacArthur Fellowship. He is currently the Sterling Brown endowed chair at Howard University in the English department.

The Water Dancer

by Ta-Nehisi Coates

Publication Date: November 17, 2020

Genres: Fantasy, Fiction, Historical Fantasy, Historical Fiction, Magical Realism

Paperback: 432 pages

Publisher: One World

ISBN-10: 0399590617

ISBN-13: 9780399590610