

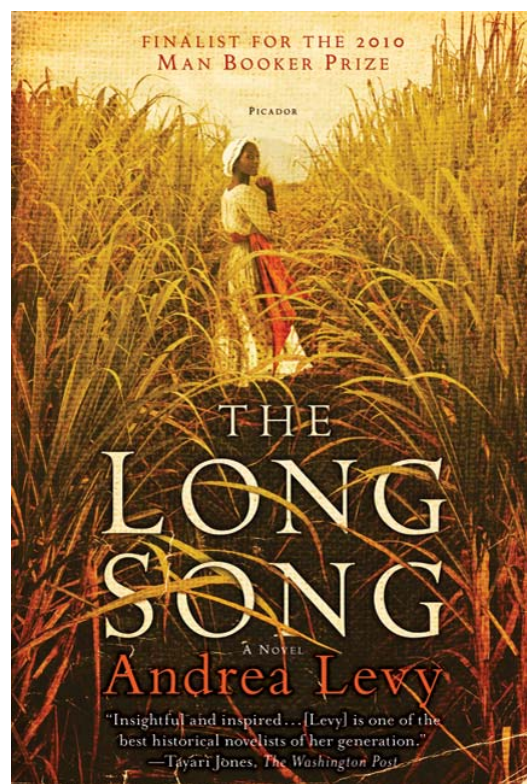
READING GROUP GUIDE

The Long Song

A Novel

by Andrea Levy

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About this Guide

The following author biography and list of questions about *The Long Song* are intended as resources to aid individual readers and book groups who would like to learn more about the author and this book. We hope that this guide will provide you a starting place for discussion, and suggest a variety of perspectives from which you might approach *The Long Song*.

About the Book

Told in the irresistibly willful and intimate voice of Miss July, with some editorial assistance from her son, Thomas, *The Long Song* is at once defiant, funny, and shocking. The child of a field slave on the Amity sugar plantation, July lives with her mother until Mrs. Caroline Mortimer, a recently transplanted English widow, decides to move her into the great house and rename her “Marguerite.”

Resourceful and mischievous, July soon becomes indispensable to her mistress. Together they live through the bloody Baptist war, followed by the violent and chaotic end of slavery. Taught to read and write so that she can help her mistress run the business, July remains bound to the plantation despite her “freedom.” It is the arrival of a young English overseer, Robert Goodwin, that will dramatically change life in the great house for both July and her mistress. Prompted and provoked by her son’s persistent questioning, July’s resilience and heartbreak are gradually revealed in this extraordinarily powerful story of slavery, revolution, freedom, and love.

About the Author

ANDREA LEVY was born in England to Jamaican parents. Her fourth novel, *Small Island*, won both the Whitbread Book of the Year Award and the Orange Prize for Fiction: Best of the Best. She lives in London.

Discussion Questions

1. When a young woman asked the author how one could possibly take any pride in one’s ancestry when all one’s ancestors were slaves, she planted the seed that would eventually become *The Long Song*. By telling such a story and writing this novel, Andrea Levy wanted to make her questioner feel proud of her heritage. Discuss how the novel does this.
2. In *Small Island*, Andrea Levy told the story of Jamaicans in London just after World War II; in the *The Long Song*, she goes further back, to the nineteenth century. Both books explore the relationship among the Caribbean, Jamaica, and Britain. What did you learn from *The Long Song* that surprised you and that you didn’t know before? How do you think novels bring the past to life in a way that history books don’t?
3. When she was doing research for the novel, Andrea Levy found plenty of accounts of slavery in Jamaica by white plantation owners, but the voices of the plantations’ slaves seemed silent or lost. In *The Long Song* she saw a way to fill the silence with a fictional voice, and to give us a sense of life as it was lived on a daily basis during the period. How successful is the novel in achieving both these aims?
4. July is clearly an unreliable narrator, but what does that mean? How did your feelings for her develop or change in the course of the novel?
5. Caroline Mortimer takes July away from her mother without any thought. Discuss how the relationship between master and servant develops. Does it change once July is “free”?
6. Discuss the author’s use of language and of voice in the novel. How does she use humor in tackling the grim and disturbing subject of slavery?
7. Discuss the differences between men’s power and women’s power in *The Long Song*. Who are the most vulnerable characters?

8. What role does religion play in the novel? What motivates the leaders of the Baptist revolution, some of whom are tortured for their abolitionist beliefs? What does Christianity mean to the characters?
9. What does Robert Goodwin learn about the nature of work and worth? How do his beliefs about coercion and punishment change? How is this reflected in his feelings for July?
10. In the novel, how do Jamaicans perceive England and the monarchy? What does living in England or leaving England mean to them? Who honors an English identity? Who rejects it?
11. What is special about the structure of the novel? What is the effect of the format, including Thomas's foreword and July's frequent comments aimed directly at the reader?
12. What do you think happened to Emily? Discuss how July portrays motherhood and fatherhood. How do the characters handle the estrangement between mothers and their children?
13. Discuss your own family legacies. What are the chapters that no one wants to speak of, as well as the ones that spark pride?



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