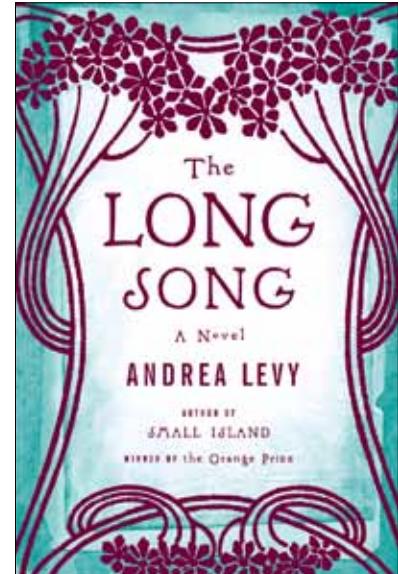


FARRAR, STRAUS AND GIROUX

READING GROUP GUIDE

THE LONG SONG

by Andrea Levy



978-0-374-19217-4
320 pages

"This sensational novel . . . is a masterclass in storytelling . . . The wonder of Levy's writing is that she can confront such things [as slavery] and somehow derive deeply life-affirming entertainment from them." —Holly Kyte, *The Sunday Telegraph* (London)



Laurie Fletcher

INTRODUCTION

ABOUT THIS GUIDE

The questions and discussion topics that follow are designed to enhance your reading of Andrea Levy's *The Long Song*.

The new novel from the Orange Prize-winning author of *Small Island* tells the story of an unforgettable heroine during the last turbulent years of slavery and the early years of freedom following the Baptist War in Jamaica in 1831.

With *The Long Song*, Levy once again reinvents the historical novel. 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 and through 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 heartache and resilience are gradually revealed in this extraordinarily powerful story of slavery, revolution, freedom, and love.

QUESTIONS FOR
DISCUSSION

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?

PRAISE FOR
Small Island

"Andrea Levy's beautifully wrought novel is a window into 1948 England . . . Levy demarcates class lines effortlessly—sparing postwar England nothing of its racism—as she weaves a bristling, funny, angry tale of love and sacrifice."

—*Entertainment Weekly*

"Levy tells a good story, and she tells it well—using narrative voices across time and space as she revisits the conventions of the historical novel."

—Louise Bernard, *The Washington Post Book World*

“There is great skill in the way [Levy] presents characters and dialogue; she has powers of observation and an ear for language that make her books a pleasure to read.”

—*The Times Literary Supplement*

“Levy gives us a new, urgent take on our past.”

—*Vogue*

ANDREA LEVY was born in London in 1956, almost a decade after her parents emigrated to England from Jamaica. She began writing in her mid-thirties and is the author of several short stories and novels, including *Small Island*, which won both the Whitbread Book of the Year Award and the Orange Prize for Fiction: Best of the Best. She lives in London. Visit her website at www.andrealevy.co.uk.