

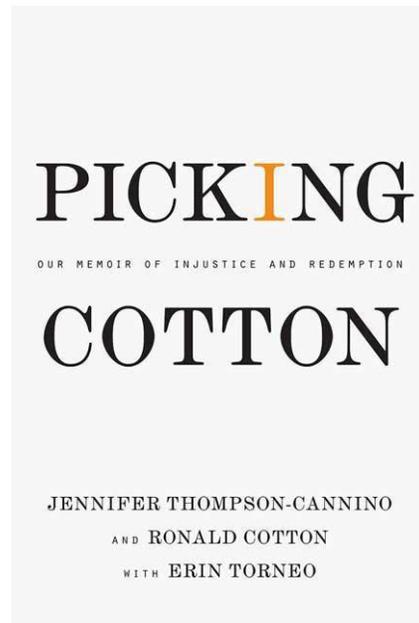
READING GROUP GUIDE

Picking Cotton

By Jennifer Thompson-Cannino and Ronald Cotton

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About this Guide

The following author biography and list of questions about *Picking Cotton* 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 *Picking Cotton*.

About the Book

Jennifer Thompson was raped at knifepoint by a man who broke into her apartment while she slept. She was able to escape, and eventually positively identified Ronald Cotton as her attacker. Ronald insisted that she was mistaken-- but Jennifer's positive identification was the compelling evidence that put him behind bars. After eleven years, Ronald was allowed to take a DNA test that proved his innocence. He was released, after serving more than a decade in prison for a crime he never committed. Two years later, Jennifer and Ronald met face to face-- and forged an unlikely friendship that changed both of their lives.

In their own words, Jennifer and Ronald unfold the harrowing details of their tragedy, and challenge our ideas of memory and judgment while demonstrating the profound nature of human grace and the healing power of forgiveness.



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About the Author

Jennifer Thompson-Cannino lives in North Carolina with her family. She speaks frequently about the need for judicial reform, and is a member of the North Carolina Actual Innocence Commission, the advisory committee for Active Voices, and the Constitution Project. Her op-eds have appeared in *The New York Times*, *The Durham-Herald Sun*, and *The Tallahassee Democrat*.

Ronald Cotton lives with his wife and daughter in North Carolina. He has spoken at various schools and conferences including Washington and Lee University, University of Nevada Las Vegas, Georgetown Law School, and the Community March for Justice for Troy Anthony Davis in Savannah, Georgia.

Erin Torneo is a Los Angeles-based writer. She was a 2007 New York Foundation for the Arts Nonfiction Fellow.

The authors received the 2008 Soros Justice Media Fellowship for *Picking Cotton*.

Discussion Questions

1. *Picking Cotton* is told through a unique pattern of alternating first-person narration. The first section is Jennifer's voice, the second is Ronald's and the final section alternates between the two voices. What did you think of this style? Why do you think the authors chose to present their stories this way?
2. This memoir opens with a graphic description of Jennifer's rape and the hours following it. What did you think of the choice to describe the crime in such detail? Do you think that it was important for you, as a reader, to experience the crime from Jennifer's perspective? What did *Picking Cotton* demonstrate about how rape victims are treated and/or how rape cases are handled in the hours and days after the crime?
3. Compare the experience of reading about Ronald's arrest and first trial from Jennifer's perspective to the experience of reading about the arrest and first trial from Ronald's perspective. How were their recollections different? Was it important to read descriptions of the same events from two utterly opposite viewpoints? Did your sympathies change or grow from Jennifer's descriptions of the events to Ronald's?
4. Were you surprised by what happened at Ronald's second trial? How did you react to the knowledge that Bobby Poole had been bragging about his crimes? How did you feel when Jennifer looked Bobby Poole in the eye and did not recognize him? How did you respond when Ronald was convicted a second time?



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5. Throughout *Picking Cotton*, Ronald describes the extreme challenges of serving time in prison as an innocent man. He writes, “Put a man in a cage with beasts and throw away the key, and it’s usually not very long before the man is a beast himself.” In what ways does this apply to Ronald’s time in prison? How did you react to his descriptions of prison life? What do you think sustained Ronald while he was in prison?

6. How much of a role, if any, do you think race played in this case?

7. In *Picking Cotton*, Jennifer comes to learn that memory can be “contaminated.” Did you realize this about memory? What actions by the investigating detectives inadvertently led to this happening? Have you ever experienced a situation where your memory proved unreliable?

8. What role does the act of asking for forgiveness play in the narrative? What about the act of granting forgiveness? Were you surprised by how strongly Jennifer felt about asking to be forgiven for her mistakes? Were you surprised that Ronald chose to forgive Jennifer? How did you feel about Jennifer’s choice to forgive Bobby Poole?

9. Jennifer writes of Ron, “To say we were friends just wasn’t enough.” How would you characterize Ronald and Jennifer’s friendship? What purpose does the friendship seem to serve in both their lives? Were you surprised that they were able to become such good friends?

10. How do you feel about the reliability of eyewitness testimony after reading *Picking Cotton*? Did *Picking Cotton* change any of your opinions about the judicial system?

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