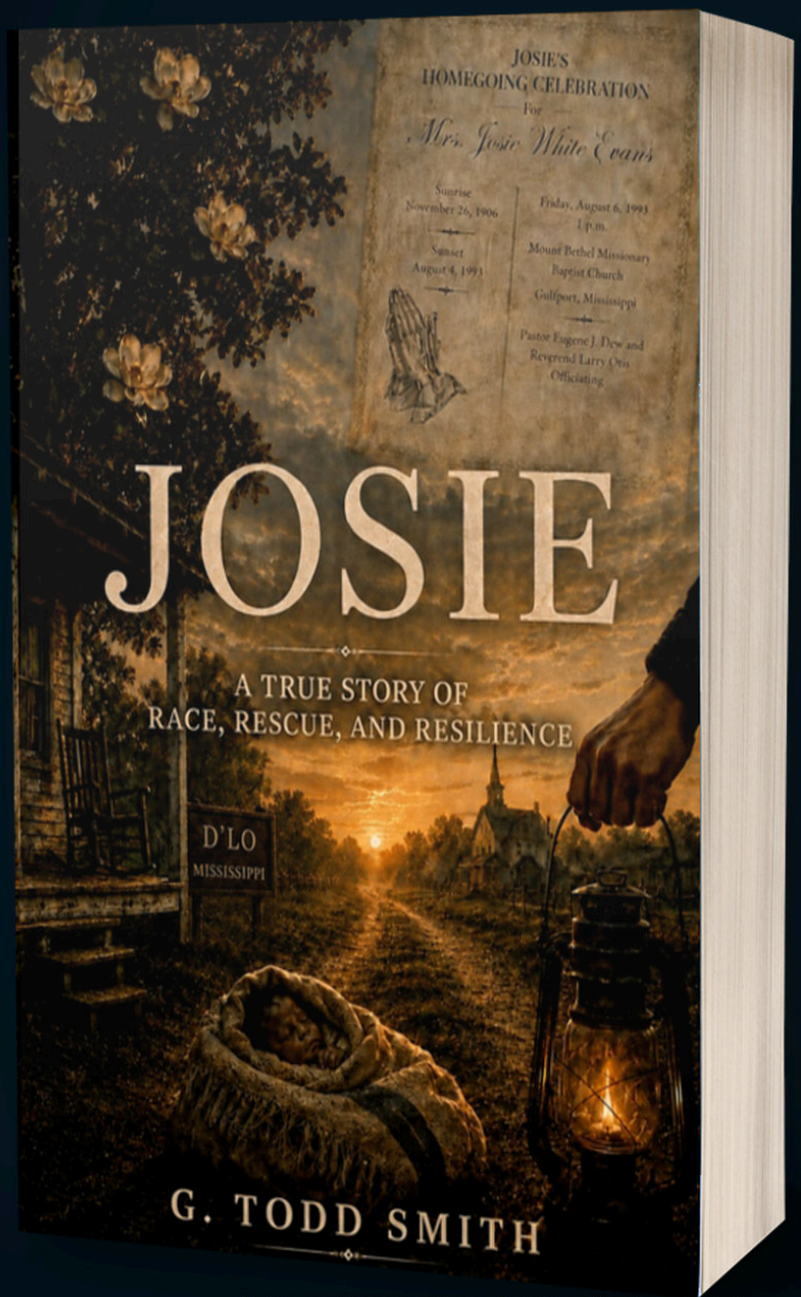
JOSIE

READING & DISCUSSION GUIDE

A companion for readers, book clubs, and classrooms

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A TRUE STORY OF RACE, RESCUE, AND RESILIENCE

BOOK CLUBS • CLASSROOMS • LIBRARIES

READ THE STORY. REMEMBER THE LIFE. CARRY THE LEGACY.

WELCOME TO JOSIE

This guide is designed for book clubs, classrooms, libraries, and individual readers. Use the questions in order, select those that fit your group, or let one question lead to another.

Josie begins with an extraordinary act: in 1906, W.D. and Nora Cook rescue a newborn abandoned in D'Lo, Mississippi. But the novel is not only about the night that changed Josie's life. It follows the life that grew from that moment—through family, education, work, love, racial injustice, faith, loss, and legacy.

CENTRAL QUESTION: How does a life come to be defined—not by the circumstances of its beginning, but by the choices, relationships, and experiences that follow?

FULL-BOOK GUIDE: Spoilers included, including later life events and the ending.

ABOUT THE BOOK & HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

Josie follows Josie White Evans across a changing Mississippi and across generations. Her story is rooted in family history and real people. As the book's foreword and family archive explain, it is historical fiction: family memories, interviews, and historical research provide its foundation, while some scenes, dialogue, and narrative details have been imaginatively reconstructed.

That distinction is an opportunity for discussion. Consider what fiction makes emotionally vivid, what historical records can establish, and why a writer may reconstruct scenes when records are incomplete. The guide does not assume that every dramatized conversation is a verbatim historical record.

FOR BOOK CLUBS: Choose 8–12 questions and leave room for participants to follow the conversation.

FOR CLASSROOMS: Pair close reading with research, historical comparison, reflective writing, and discussion of narrative choices.

FOR INDIVIDUAL READERS: Mark passages that challenge you, move you, surprise you, or leave you with questions.

FOR FACILITATORS: The novel addresses racism, segregation, abandonment, family separation, illness, and death. Establish respectful discussion norms, allow participants to pass on personal questions, and avoid asking anyone to speak for an entire group.

PART I — THE BEGINNING: RESCUE, CHOICE & BELONGING

The novel opens with Josie's abandonment and rescue. How does the opening shape your expectations—and how do those expectations change as you learn about the life that follows?

What do W.D. and Nora's actions reveal about courage, compassion, and responsibility? Is their decision one dramatic act or the beginning of a lifetime of choices?

The book contrasts the circumstances of Josie's birth with the home and relationships that follow. How does that contrast shape the novel's understanding of identity?

What does "home" mean in the early chapters? Is it primarily a place, a set of relationships, a source of security, or something else?

The Cooks' decision crosses racial and social boundaries in the segregated South. What risks and consequences does the novel ask readers to consider?

How does knowing that this decision has consequences across generations affect the way you read the opening chapters?

PART II — A CHILDHOOD BEGINS: EDUCATION, FAMILY & GROWING UP

In "Growing Up in the Forest," Josie's siblings become her teachers. What does this suggest about education as a family practice as well as a formal institution?

How do chores, shared meals, and everyday routines contribute to Josie's sense of belonging? Which ordinary moments become meaningful in retrospect?

What do Josie and Jewel's relationship and shared work in the kitchen reveal about affection, mentorship, and learning?

How does the novel portray the relationship between opportunity and structural inequality, particularly in segregated Mississippi?

What is the difference between being included in a family and being allowed to become fully oneself? How does the novel explore both?

Choose an object or setting—the kitchen, garden, books, porch, or family table. How does it function as more than background?

PART III — EDUCATION, FAITH & THE WIDER WORLD

At Piney Woods School, the motto “Head, Heart, Hands” links learning with character and work. What does each element mean in Josie’s development?

How does education change Josie’s sense of what is possible? What responsibilities accompany the freedom and perspective she gains?

How does the novel portray faith—as belief, practice, community, service, moral instruction, comfort, or a combination?

How does the story of the International Sweethearts of Rhythm broaden the novel’s exploration of race, gender, talent, and opportunity?

How do the settings—from Forest to Piney Woods and beyond—shape Josie’s imagination and ambitions?

Where do you see Josie exercising agency? Where do circumstances or social structures constrain her choices?

PART IV — IDENTITY, REJECTION & THE COURAGE TO KNOW

Why does Josie continue to seek her biological mother even though she has a loving family? What does this desire reveal about identity and belonging?

W.D. fears the search may hurt Josie; Josie believes she needs to know. How do you understand the conflict between protection and autonomy?

What does the one-way ticket to Chicago symbolize beyond the literal journey? At what point does a journey become a turning point?

How does the Chicago encounter complicate the meaning of motherhood, family, and rejection?

What forms of dignity and self-determination does Josie pursue in the chapters involving the Apex School of Beauty Culture and her return home?

How does the novel distinguish between the family that raises someone and the family of origin? Must those relationships compete, or can they hold different meanings?

PART V — BUILDING A LIFE THROUGH HISTORY

How does the novel place Josie's personal life within the larger history of Mississippi and the United States? Which historical moments most change the meaning of her experiences?

Consider the novel's treatment of the Civil Rights era and segregated public spaces. How does it show racism operating through ordinary routines as well as major public events?

What role do marriage, children, extended family, reunions, and intergenerational relationships play in Josie's life story?

The novel includes illness, storms, and loss, including Hurricane Camille. How do hardship and resilience interact? Is resilience individual, communal, or both?

What do recurring images of gardens, hearths, light, storms, and sanctuary contribute to the novel's emotional meaning?

How does the story change when it moves from one person's life to the impact of that life on later generations?

PART VI — LEGACY, MEMORY & THE ENDING

Near the conclusion, the narrative reflects on the idea that the family's defining achievement was love rather than wealth, status, or accomplishment. How does the full novel support—or complicate—that claim?

What does "radical hospitality" mean in the context of the Cook family's decision? How might the idea be understood beyond the novel?

How do the final chapters and family archive change your understanding of the distinction between a private family story and public history?

What can be lost when family stories are not asked for, recorded, or passed on?

The novel returns to images of light, memory, and the magnolia tree. How do these images bring the story's themes together?

Complete the sentence: "Josie's legacy is…" What moments from the novel support your answer?

CHARACTER & RELATIONSHIP DISCUSSION

W.D. and Nora Cook: What different strengths do they bring to the family? How do their actions shape its moral center?

Josie: How does she change over the course of the novel? Which moments reveal her independence, tenderness, determination, or resilience?

Jewel and Josie: What do shared work and daily companionship reveal about sisterhood?

Josie and her biological mother: How does the novel make room for pain, uncertainty, and the limits of what one person can know about another?

The next generations: How do later family members preserve, interpret, or deepen the meaning of Josie's life?

HISTORICAL FICTION: FACT, MEMORY & IMAGINATION

The novel's foreword and family archive explain that real people and family history inspired the narrative, while some scenes, dialogue, and inner experiences are reconstructed. This is an invitation to examine how historical fiction works—not to assume invention and fact are interchangeable.

1. Which scenes felt most historically grounded to you? What details gave you that impression?
2. What can a novel convey about a person's inner life that a photograph, newspaper article, or official record may not capture? What are the limits of that approach?
3. Choose a historical setting or event mentioned in the novel. What would you investigate using primary sources or reputable historical scholarship?
4. Why might an author include a family archive or photographs after a work of historical fiction? How does that material affect your relationship with the narrative?
5. How should readers distinguish a documented event, a family recollection, and an imagined scene? What responsibilities does a writer have when telling a story rooted in real lives?

CLASSROOM & EDUCATOR EXTENSIONS

LITERARY ANALYSIS

- Trace a recurring image—light, garden, hearth, storm, home, or sanctuary—across the novel. Explain how its meaning evolves.
- Map Josie's character arc through three turning points. For each, cite a scene and explain how it changes her understanding of herself or her future.
- Analyze point of view and narrative distance. How does the author balance intimate scenes with broader historical context?
- Compare the opening and ending. How does your understanding of rescue, home, and identity change?

HISTORY & RESEARCH

- Build a timeline placing Josie's life alongside historical events named in the novel. Separate events described in the text from facts you verify independently.
- Investigate Piney Woods School, the International Sweethearts of Rhythm, segregation in Mississippi, the Civil Rights era, or Hurricane Camille. Explain how research deepens—but does not replace—close reading.
- Identify a scene where a law, custom, or social expectation shapes a character's choices. Research its historical context.

WRITING & SEMINAR

- Write a reflective essay: "What makes a family?" Use at least two scenes and acknowledge a possible counterargument.
- Write a spoiler-free review for a reader who has not read the book.
- Create a two-column chart: "What the novel tells us" and "What I would like to verify." Turn the second column into research questions.
- Discuss: "Can one private act of compassion challenge a public system of injustice?" Use textual evidence and historical context.

CREATIVE & PERSONAL REFLECTION PROMPTS

- Write about an everyday ritual, meal, place, or object that carries family meaning. How does its meaning change over time?
- Imagine an oral-history interview with one character. What three questions would you ask, and why?
- Create a memory map of Josie's life, marking places that represent belonging, learning, conflict, loss, and renewal.
- Write a letter to a future generation about a story in your family or community that deserves to be remembered. Share only what you are comfortable sharing.
- Choose a passage that stayed with you. Explain what it made you feel, what it made you question, and what it may ask readers to do.

A 60-MINUTE BOOK CLUB PLAN

0–5 MINUTES — OPENING ROUND

In one sentence, what stayed with you most after finishing Josie?

5–15 MINUTES — FIRST IMPRESSIONS

Which character or relationship most shaped your experience of the book?

15–30 MINUTES — CENTRAL TENSION

Discuss identity, belonging, race, and the difference between protection and autonomy.

30–40 MINUTES — CRAFT & HISTORY

Discuss historical fiction, recurring imagery, and the family archive.

40–52 MINUTES — LEGACY

What does the novel suggest about compassion and the power of an individual or family choice?

52–60 MINUTES — CLOSING REFLECTION

What conversation, question, or action will you carry away from the book? Invite—but do not require—personal sharing.

A NOTE FOR DISCUSSION LEADERS

The strongest discussions make room for multiple interpretations while staying grounded in the text. Ask participants to point to scenes, language, and narrative choices that support their readings. When discussing racism, segregation, abandonment, or family separation, avoid asking any participant to speak on behalf of an entire group or disclose personal experiences.

For classroom use, instructors should select questions appropriate to students' age, course objectives, and curriculum. Historical research activities should distinguish the novel's portrayal from independently verified historical information. The questions are intentionally open-ended; the goal is careful reading, thoughtful inquiry, and respectful conversation.

CLOSING THOUGHT

Josie's story reminds us that a life is never only the circumstances of its beginning. It is also the people who show up, the choices that follow, and the legacy carried forward.

Thank you for reading Josie and helping keep its story alive through conversation, reflection, and sharing.

Read the story. Remember the life. Carry the legacy.

Josie: A True Story of Race, Rescue, and Resilience — G. Todd Smith

https://www.amazon.com/Josie-True-Story-Rescue-Resilience-ebook/dp/B0HJQ7HQCV/