

THE GOOD NEGRESS

Questions for Discussion



QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. How does language—diction, idiom, syntax, spelling, and punctuation—show how characters grow and change? How does it show where they come from? How does the way we *use* language go beyond what it is we're actually saying?

2. Why did Margarete, Denise's mother, choose to take Denise "down the country" to Granma'am, while she kept the boys in Detroit with her? What are the differences between the expectations for girls and boys? How are Luke Edward and David treated differently from Denise?

3. What is the dynamic of the Palms family? What impact does not having a father have on them? How does Denise romanticize or idealize the memory of her father? What were Margarete's choices as a widow?

4. When Granma'am punishes Luke Edward early in Luke Edward's childhood, why does she choose that method of discipline? Has Luke Edward transgressed in an alarming way? Does Luke Edward deserve the punishment he is given?

5. Denise idolizes Luke Edward, her older brother closest to her in age. What are the main differences between Luke Edward and Denise's oldest brother, David, and why does Denise feel so connected to Luke Edward? Who is someone you have looked up to in your life and why?

6. What is your impression of Gloria Pearson, Denise's teacher in Detroit? How does she communicate with Denise? What was the behavior that suggested Missus Pearson was interested in Denise's ultimate success? Or, could Missus Pearson's behavior toward Denise be considered discouraging? What might be the most appropriate behavior for encouraging and educating a student Denise's age with Denise's social background, skills, and intellect?

7. What does Missus Pearson mean when she says, "Our families are the families that slavery made" (page 225)? How does slavery loom over American history in the 1950s, when the book takes place, and today? What are several examples from *The Good Negress* of behavior or conditions in the African American family that have continued or evolved from slavery?

8. *The Good Negress* is set in the late 1950s and the early 1960s. These years were segregated times in America. What are some similarities between Denise's era and now? In what ways do the challenges Denise faces still exist today?

9. Denise is pulled between being homebound with her mother and studying with Missus Pearson. Have you

ever felt torn between your loyalties—and if so, how did you cope?

10. What kinds of hardships do the men in the book have? What kinds of hardships do the women have? How are they different? How are they similar?

11. By the end of the novel, Denise surpasses her own—and others'—expectations for herself. What are some examples of moments in your life where you have exceeded your own expectations?

12. How does Denise grow throughout the course of the book? In which ways does she stay the same? What does education and language bring to her life? What are its limits?

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A. J. Verdelle is a novelist, essayist, and working mother. Verdelle won a Whiting Award for Fiction and the Harold D. Vursell Memorial Award for Fiction from the American Academy of Arts and Letters for her novel *The Good Negress*. Verdelle has taught at Princeton University, the University of Kentucky, the University of Vermont, and in summer programs at the University of Iowa, the Fine Arts Work Center, and the Carnegie Center for Literacy in Lexington. Verdelle currently teaches undergraduates at Morgan State University and in the low-residency MFA program at Lesley University. Verdelle lives with her daughter in Washington, D.C.