

SESSION 1 | Chapters 1-5

Who Gets to Define a Human Life?

Session aim: Establish a trusting discussion culture and examine how language, institutions, and social position shape how humanity is recognized.

Opening prompt

Choose one word for the atmosphere of the opening chapters. What created that feeling?

Core discussion questions

- What do we learn about Jefferson before we hear much from Jefferson himself? Why does that matter?
- How does the defense strategy attempt to save Jefferson while also harming him?
- Where do you see formal power, social power, and moral influence operating differently?
- What is being asked of Grant—and what explains his resistance?
- How do Miss Emma and Tante Lou exercise agency within a system designed to limit them?
- What questions should this community of readers keep open rather than answer too quickly?

Interactive activity

Power Map. In small groups, name the institutions and relationships affecting Jefferson. Draw arrows showing who can decide, persuade, delay, witness, or care. Discuss where moral authority appears even when formal authority is absent.

Closing reflection

Complete: 'Dignity is threatened when...' or pass.

Reading invitation

As you read Chapters 6-11, notice spaces: the plantation house, school, jail, church, and road. What does each space permit or restrict?

Facilitator notes

What surfaced: _____

Voices or questions to return to: _____

SESSION 2 | Chapters 6-11

Education, Place, and the Limits of Choice

Session aim: Explore how segregation, economic dependence, and inherited expectations shape Grant's work and sense of possibility.

Opening prompt

Which setting felt most powerful in this section, and why?

Core discussion questions

- How does Grant's education separate him from—and bind him to—the quarter?
- What expectations does his community place on Grant? Which are fair, and which feel burdensome?
- How do Sheriff Guidry and Henri Pichot use delay, permission, and procedure as forms of power?
- What does the school reveal about what Black children are expected to receive and become?
- Where do we see people adapting for survival? What might adaptation cost them?
- When Grant imagines leaving, what is he seeking: freedom, relief, safety, or something else?

Interactive activity

Place Speaks. Assign each group one setting. Ask: Who belongs here? Who controls it? What behaviors are expected? What history can be felt? Groups share one sentence beginning, 'This place teaches people that...'

Closing reflection

What is one form of education occurring outside the classroom?

Reading invitation

In Chapters 12-17, track small changes in Grant and Jefferson. What creates movement when direct persuasion fails?

Facilitator notes

What surfaced: _____

Voices or questions to return to: _____

SESSION 3 | Chapters 12-17

Resistance, Relationship, and Reclaimed Dignity

Session aim: Notice the slow formation of trust and consider the difference between fixing a person and being present with a person.

Opening prompt

Name a small moment that signaled change—or the possibility of change.

Core discussion questions

- What forms does Jefferson's resistance take? What might his behavior communicate?
- How does Grant's approach shift as he begins to see Jefferson differently?
- What is the difference between telling someone who to be and helping them recover their own voice?
- How do food, touch, silence, and presence function as communication?
- What does Vivian understand about Grant that he struggles to name himself?
- Where do you see dignity as relational rather than purely individual?

Interactive activity

Listening for Need. Choose one tense exchange. Identify the spoken position, the possible underlying need, and a response that could preserve dignity without pretending the conflict is solved. Keep answers grounded in the scene.

Closing reflection

Complete: 'Trust begins when...'

Reading invitation

As you read Chapters 18-23, notice what different people believe Jefferson needs and how they try to provide it.

Facilitator notes

What surfaced: _____

Voices or questions to return to: _____

SESSION 4 | Chapters 18-23

Care, Faith, Music, and Competing Visions of Hope

Session aim: Examine how community care can carry both love and pressure, and how music, faith, and material gifts create connection.

Opening prompt

Which act of care in this section felt most meaningful—or most complicated?

Core discussion questions

- What does the radio represent to Jefferson, Grant, Miss Emma, and Reverend Ambrose?
- How do Grant and Reverend Ambrose define hope differently? What does each fear?
- When do the community's expectations support Jefferson, and when might they weigh on him?
- What is the role of pleasure, music, and ordinary human desire when time is limited?
- How does the novel portray faith as belief, practice, duty, survival, or community language?
- Can care be genuine when the caregiver also needs something from the person receiving care?

Interactive activity

Four Corners of Care. Label four areas: Presence, Practical Support, Meaning/Faith, and Voice/Choice. Place key acts of care in one or more areas. Discuss what is abundant and what Jefferson still lacks.

Closing reflection

What kind of care helps a person feel seen rather than managed?

Reading invitation

In Chapters 24-28, mark where Grant's definition of courage is challenged or enlarged.

Facilitator notes

What surfaced: _____

Voices or questions to return to: _____

SESSION 5 | Chapters 24-28

Courage, Responsibility, and the Meaning of Manhood

Session aim Interrogate the novel's language of manhood and consider courage as vulnerability, responsibility, resistance, and care for others.

Opening prompt

Where did you see courage in this section? What made the act courageous?

Core discussion questions

- How does Grant define a hero? What is persuasive or troubling about his definition?
- What pressures are placed on Jefferson to represent more than himself?
- How does the novel complicate the idea that strength means emotional control?
- What do Grant and Reverend Ambrose misunderstand about each other? What truth does each hold?
- Who is teaching whom now—and what evidence supports your answer?
- How might we discuss dignity without tying it narrowly to gender or a single model of manhood?

Interactive activity

Courage Continuum. Offer four lenses: enduring, speaking, choosing, and connecting. Participants place moments from the reading along the lenses and discuss which forms the community recognizes or overlooks.

Closing reflection

Complete: 'Courage can look like...'

Reading invitation

Read Chapters 29-31 slowly. Notice voice, silence, witnessing, and what changes after Jefferson's death.

Facilitator notes

What surfaced: _____

Voices or questions to return to: _____

SESSION 6 | Chapters 29-31

Voice, Witness, Grief, and the Lesson That Remains

Session aim: Honor the ending, examine Jefferson's self-authored voice and legacy, and connect the novel's lessons to community responsibility.

Opening prompt

What feeling or question did you carry after finishing the novel? Passing is welcome.

Core discussion questions

- What changes when Jefferson's voice becomes direct rather than filtered through others?
- What does the notebook allow Jefferson to claim, create, or leave behind?
- How do different characters bear witness—and where do they fall short?
- What has Grant learned about teaching, love, commitment, and courage?
- What does Paul's role suggest about witnessing across racial lines? What responsibilities follow witnessing?
- What is the 'lesson before dying'? Is there one lesson, several, or an intentionally unresolved question?
- What should a community do with a story like Jefferson's after the public moment has passed?

Interactive activity

From Insight to Community Practice. In groups, complete three statements: 'Human dignity requires...' 'A witness is responsible for...' and 'In our community, courage could look like...' Collect responses for a shared closing display or post-read commitment statement.

Closing reflection

Invite each person to offer one word, one sentence, or silence in response to: 'What will you carry forward?'

Reading invitation

Thank participants, share evaluation options and related Big Read events, and invite continued reading and community conversation.

Facilitator notes

What surfaced: _____

Voices or questions to return to: _____