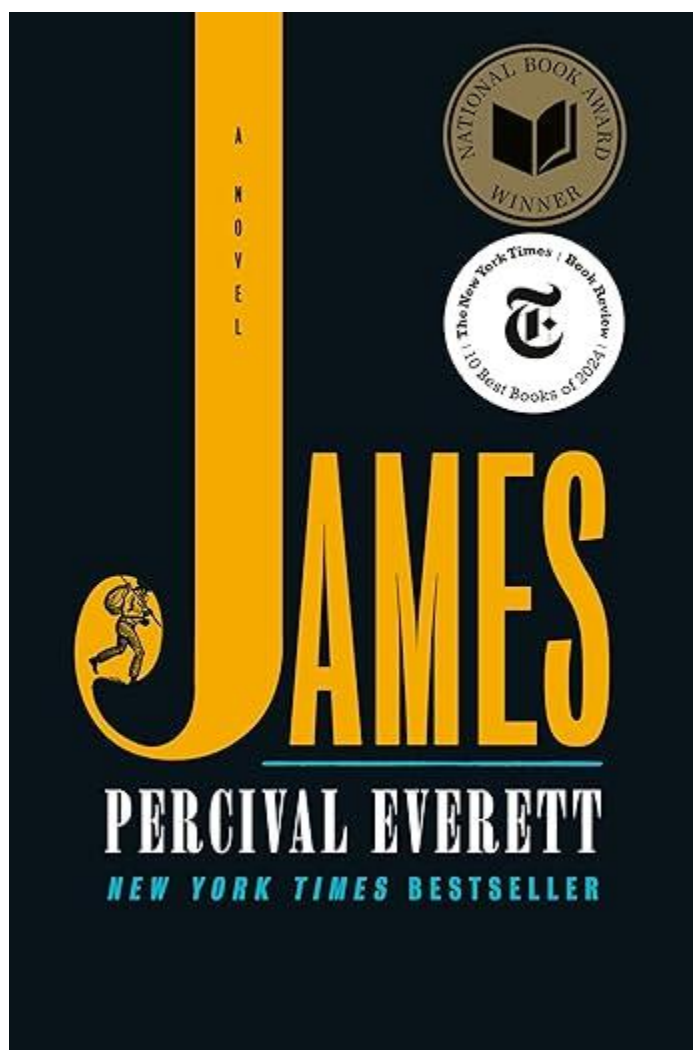


Book Club Kit

for

James by Percival Everett



BOOK SYNOPSIS

When the enslaved Jim overhears that he is about to be sold to a man in New Orleans, separated from his wife and daughter forever, he decides to hide on nearby Jackson Island until he can formulate a plan. Meanwhile, Huck Finn has faked his own death to escape his violent father, recently returned to town. As all readers of American literature know, thus begins the dangerous and transcendent journey by raft down the Mississippi River toward the elusive and too-often-unreliable promise of the Free States and beyond.

While many narrative set pieces of Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* remain in place (floods and storms, stumbling across both unexpected death and unexpected treasure in the myriad stopping points along the river's banks, encountering the scam artists posing as the Duke and Dauphin...), Jim's agency, intelligence and compassion are shown in a radically new light.

[James](#), published by Doubleday in 2024, is a re-imagining of [Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*](#) from the perspective of the runaway slave character [Jim](#). Everett humanizes the character, who goes by James, re-inventing him as a wise and literate man, who has conversations with enlightenment philosophers in his dreams and teaches other enslaved people to read. James and the other black characters in the book purposefully hide their literacy and wisdom from the white characters who will undoubtedly feel threatened by educated blacks and further punish them.

CHARACTERS

James: Enslaved man in Hannibal, Missouri

Sadie: James' wife

Elizabeth (Lizzie): James' daughter

Doris, Old Luke, Albert: other men enslaved with James

Huckleberry Finn (Huck): white boy living in Hannibal, Missouri

Tom Sawyer: white boy and friend of Huck's

Miss Watson: white woman who keeps James enslaved

Judge Thatcher: local judge who safeguards Huck's money

Young George, Old George, Josiah and Pierre: four Black men James and Huck meet in Illinois

The King and the Duke: two white swindlers along the river

Mr. Wiley: white man who owns a livery

Easter: enslaved Black man held by Wiley

Daniel Decatur Emmett: white minstrel performer who leads a minstrel crew

Norman: Black man in Emmett's crew passing as white

Henderson: white man that Norman sells James to

Luke: enslaved man at Henderson's

Sammy: enslaved girl at Henderson's

Brock: Black man shoveling coal on a riverboat

Katie and Cotten: enslaved couple at Miss Watson's living in James' shack

Hopkins: overseer at Miss Watson's

Holly and April: Black couple James meets on his way to Edina

Morris, Harvey, Llewelyn, Buck: four enslaved men at the Graham place in Edina

QUOTES FROM PERCIVAL EVERETT

“I hope that I have written the novel that Twain did not and also could not have written. I do not view the work as a corrective, but rather I see myself in conversation with Twain.”

[The Booker Prizes](#)

"The book will do what it does in the world. I am a novelist and artist. I'm just trying to represent the world as I see it."

[Santa Barbara Independent](#)

“The idea that I adhere to quite, quite rigidly, is that the most subversive thing we can do is read, for the mere fact that no one knows what’s going into us when we attend to a text. Even if someone reads over our shoulder and sees the very words that we’re seeing, they don’t know what those words are doing to us.”

[Santa Barbara Independent](#)

Although opposed to book banning, Everett commented that he hoped his re-imagined version would get banned "only because I like irritating those people who do not think and read."

LISTEN TO EVERETT SPEAK ABOUT HIS WORK IN SELECT RADIO, TV, & PRINT INTERVIEWS:

Late Night with Seth Meyers - [Percival Everett Explains Why He Hopes His Book James Gets Banned](#)

CBS / Sunday Morning – [Writer Percival Everett: "In ownership of language there resides great power"](#)

Read the entire BBC article “Percival Everett: Why I rewrote Huckleberry Finn to give slave Jim a voice” here: <https://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-68762352>

Vulture – [Percival Everett Can’t Be Pinned Down. His masterful new novel, James, cements his status as one of our most idiosyncratic writers.](#)

ELLE – [James Author Percival Everett on Freedom, Violence, and the Lure of Huckleberry Finn](#)
[Garden & Gun – Percival Everett Discusses His Acclaimed New Novel, James](#)

WGBH (Boston NPR) / The Culture Show – [Author Percival Everett talks 'American Fiction' and his new book 'James'](#)

SELECTED REVIEWS FOR JAMES

Use these selected Goodreads reviews to compare with your own experience of the book. Do you agree or disagree with the reviews?

“Some books should never be touched – Huck Finn being one of them. Unless it’s Percival Everett. [*James* is] a retelling of Huck Finn from the eyes of James, “Jim”, a runaway slave. It will enthrall you, sicken you, make you cry, laugh (though the “humor” is not easy), root for or against the soul of America, and make you wonder – have we ever really got over the shackles of slavery?”

“All through the book, Everett is showing us the psychological (and physical) cost of being a man in your mind while your body is, in law, owned by somebody else. The language switching is just part of that. The easy thing for Jim would be to surrender and think of himself as the slave the white world says he is.... but Jim refuses. The way that refusal is portrayed gives this book great power.”

“Everett is not the kind of writer to sketch out grand emotional scenes. There are several moments in the book that are sad, heartbreaking, and tragic from a plot and characterization standpoint. But he doesn’t write them in elongated, passionate crescendos that we’re used to from other writers. The writing style is matter-of-fact and the tone is blunt. And weirdly enough, that hit me in the gut a lot harder. We don’t need to be told when to scream or cry because what’s playing out in front of us paints a grim enough picture.”

“Maybe it’s the overload of satire that kept me at the arm’s length (or at least I sincerely hope I read that right as a satire). We went from one extreme to another – from Twain’s Jim being simple and childlike to Everett’s James being a sarcastic Voltaire-conversing erudite. I guess I was hoping for Jim/James to be explored more as a person... not extreme but a regular guy – a father, a husband, a friend – with no exaggerations needed to show his actual humanity and not a caricature or a statement and a channel for angry satire.”

"Genius"—*The Atlantic*

"A masterpiece that will help redefine one of the classics of American literature, while also being a major achievement on its own."—*Chicago Tribune*

"A provocative, enlightening literary work of art."—*The Boston Globe*

"Everett’s most thrilling novel, but also his most soulful."—*The New York Times*

THEMES OF JAMES

Racism and antiracism

James thinks about Emmett, “A man who refused to own slaves but was not opposed to others owning slaves was still a slaver, to my thinking.” page 176

And later thinking about whether Norman may be duplicitous, James thinks, “Norman might sell me once and take off for the hills, never to be seen again. But he might just as well have done that if he were a black man. Bad as whites were, they had no monopoly on duplicity, dishonest or perfidy.” page 195

Both of these quotes bring to mind Ibram X. Kendi who, in [How to Be an Antiracist](#), defines racist and antiracist as follows:

Racist: One who is supporting a racist policy through their actions or inaction or expressing a racist idea.

Antiracist: One who is supporting an antiracist policy through their actions or expressing an antiracist idea.

And also says

“‘Racist’ and ‘antiracist’ are like peelable name tags that are placed and replaced based on what someone is doing or not doing, supporting or expressing in each moment. These are not permanent tattoos.” page 23 in *How to be an Antiracist*

Kendi focuses on individuality and separating individual actions from individuals being representative for an entire racial group, much like James is doing in thinking about what Norman might do. In addition, not acting or inaction against a racist policy is racist behavior. What do you think? When have you seen a bystander neither support nor condemn a racist policy? Have you been such a bystander? How does inaction against oppressors or oppressive policies sit with you? What are the racist policies in your country or community? How can you work to change those policies?

Also recommended are [The Color of Law](#), [The Great Divide](#), [The Heaven and Earth Grocery Store](#) and [The Personal Librarian](#), among many other books to continue a discussion of racism with your book group.

Perspective

Clearly the entire novel is on perspective. The novel is sharing the perspective of James who didn't get to share his story in Huckleberry Finn.

Can you think of a time when you have heard different perspectives of an occurrence or a relationship? A time when each storyteller told the truth as they saw it and yet the perspectives offered different versions of events? How does having multiple perspectives provide you insight to the truth? What is truth to you when a story is shared from different viewpoints?

How do you enter someone else's space when they are sharing their perspective? Has it even been jarring to hear a perspective that was very different from your own in the same time and place? Can you think of a time when hearing a new perspective changed your view?

Rage

Throughout the novel James feels rage and yet is unable to express his rage as an enslaved man. "I was as much scared as angry, but where does a slave put anger? We could be angry with one another; we were human. But the real source of our rage had to go without address, swallowed, repressed." page 35

Do you express or suppress your rage? Does it depend on where you are and who you are with? What compels you to hold your rage in? Do you know others who feel they cannot express their rage because of who they are whether that is their race, or their age, or their gender or their place at work or any other reason? How fair, unfair, or important do you think these limitations are? What are appropriate ways and places to share rage?

Storytelling

James is storytelling layered in myriad ways. James is telling his story of traveling with Huck. James and Huck create stories throughout their travels that they adapt to the individuals they meet. They are both very observant, seeing and hearing the folks around them to ascertain what their stories may be. James is focused on writing down his story. In a conversation with George, George says,

“‘Tell your story,’ he said.

‘What do you mean, Young George? Tell my story? How do you suggest I tell my story?’

He looked at his feet. I did, too. They were bare, his toes grabbing the wet grass. He looked at my face. ‘Use your ears,’ he said.

‘What’s that?’

‘Tell the story with your ears. Listen.’

‘I’ll try, Young George.’” page 91

And then after James begins writing he thinks,

“With my pencil, I wrote myself into being. I wrote myself to here.” page 93

How do you engage with storytelling? When are you a storyteller and when are you a listener? How have you told your own story? To whom? How do you listen to what is going on in your life and in the lives around you and incorporate that into your own story?

In his conversation on #PouredOver, Everett says

“Every person does have agency. What he’s seeking in this world is a recognition of his agency. And that’s what writing becomes for Jim.”

Where do you seek your agency? How does writing figure in? What do you imply to express your agency or have your agency recognized?

Relationship to a book

While Huck is asleep, James wants to read. He thinks,

“It was a completely private affair and completely free and, therefore, completely subversive.” page 73

I have heard many authors talk about how once they have published the book and it is in the hands of the reader, what the reader sees or feels or interprets is between the reader and the words; the author is no longer part of the relationship.

That’s actually one of my favorite parts of reading. I focus on the connections that mean the most to me. Books may bring up all sorts of connections to your life that an author couldn’t possibly foresee.

What came up while reading James that was an ah ha moment to your life? What else have you read that has created a strong connection between the book and your life? Where and how do you

explore those feelings? What connections did you make between James and other books you have read? How did the differing perspectives add depth to those connections?

Power of naming yourself

James takes a new name— he’s been called Jim and near the conclusion of the novel he chooses James for his name going forward.

There is a lot of power in naming yourself, taking a new name, especially following a transformation such as James transition to escaping from being enslaved.

The fact that Percival Everett chose to call this book James seems to me to be a proclamation of how important he thinks the naming is. At least that’s my interpretation.

Think about times when naming has been significant in your life. For instance as a parent you may have given a lot of thought to names of your children.

Then there are the times when an individual claims a name for themselves. When have you considered taking a new name or known others who have? Transgender individuals may take a new name and refer to their name at birth as their dead name. That moment can be both powerful and painful for the individual and those that love them. Where have you experienced the power of taking on a new name?

Accepting lies and denying truths

As Huck and James first attempt to flee from the King and the Duke Huck asks James about the lies the King and Duke told to their audiences,

““Yes, but them people liked it, Jim. Did you see their faces? They had to know them was lies, but they wanted to believe. What do you make of that?”

‘Folks be funny lak dat. Hey takes the lies dey want and throws away the truths dat scares ‘em.’”
page 126

What do you think? Where have you seen people hold onto lies even as they disregard the truths that are shared as well? Do you think people throw away the truths that scare them?

There is an adage (sometimes misappropriated to Mark Twain), about how fleet of foot lies can be.

Jonathan Swift wrote in The Examiner,

“Falsehood flies, and the Truth comes limping after it.”

Do you think falsehoods travel faster than truth? If so, what slows the truth down or speeds up lies? How can we be more adept at hearing the truth ourselves? At helping others hear the truth?

Keeping and teaching horrific history

When Norman finds James writing he suggests that James write some poetry like Emmett's. Emmett and his minstrel show sing songs in blackface mocking Black people. These minstrel shows were exploiting Black culture to entertain whites. James is keenly aware of that exploitation. Note that Emmett's notebook is excerpted in the front of the novel.

Later when Norman suggests James should write poetry like Emmett's, James responds, "I thought about tearing out his songs and burning them, but they would still exist. Those crackers would still sing them. Better to know they exist. Don't you think?" page 203

What do you think? Should the horrors of history be forgotten or be taught in schools and shared in conversation?

What historical horrors have you learned about— events that occurred before you were born— and how did learning that history shape your thinking and your actions? Do you personally create conversation around the Tulsa Oklahoma race massacre, the Holocaust, the Spanish inquisition, the Japanese interment in the United States during World War II, the partition of India, the European and American witch hunts or any of hundreds of other genocides that were perpetuated on a population? What have been the challenges and benefits of holding those conversations?

QUOTES FROM THE BOOK

“At that moment the power of reading made itself clear and real to me. If I could see the words, then no one could control them or what I got from them. They couldn’t even know if I was merely seeing them or reading them, sounding them out or comprehending them. It was a completely private affair and completely free and, therefore, completely subversive.”

“Belief has nothing to do with truth.”

“If you're not making mistakes, you're not learning.”

“I had never seen a white man filled with such fear. The remarkable truth, however, was that it was not the pistol, but my language, the fact that I didn’t conform to his expectations, that I could read, that had so disturbed and frightened him.”

“Religion is just a controlling tool they employ and adhere to when convenient.”

“I hated the world that wouldn’t let me apply justice without the certain retaliation of injustice.”

“Dey takes the lies dey want and throws away the truths dat scares ’em.”

“With my pencil, I wrote myself into being.”

“I considered the northern white stance against slavery. How much of the desire to end the institution was fueled by a need to quell and subdue white guilt and pain? Was it just too much to watch? Did it offend Christian sensibilities to live in a society that allowed that practice? I knew that whatever the cause of their war, freeing slaves was an incidental premise and would be an incidental result.”

“Papa, why do we have to learn this?”

“White folks expect us to sound a certain way and it can only help if we don’t disappoint them,” I said. “The only ones who suffer when they are made to feel inferior is us. Perhaps I should say ‘when they don’t feel superior.’”

“I was as much scared as angry, but where does a slave put anger? We could be angry with one another; we were human. But the real source of our rage had to go without address, swallowed, repressed.”

“We’re slaves. We’re not anywhere. Free person, he can be where he wants to be. The only place we can ever be is in slavery.”

“How strange a world, how strange an existence, that one’s equal must argue for one’s equality, that one’s equal must hold a station that allows airing of that argument, that one cannot make that argument for oneself, that premises of said argument must be vetted by those equals who do not agree.”

“What you’re saying is that if someone pays you enough, it’s okay to abandon what you have claimed to understand as moral and right.”

"To fight in a war," he said. "Can you imagine?"

"Would that mean facing death every day and doing what other people tell you to do?" I asked.

"I reckon."

"Yes, Huck. I can imagine."

"I am the angel of death, come to offer sweet justice in the night. I am a sign I am your future. I am James."

"Is she dead?" Norman asked. I rolled her onto her stomach to try to force the water out of her. I pushed on her chest and her shirt came up to reveal a hole. "Is that..." Norman stopped. I touched the blackened indentation. "She's been shot," I said. "Good Lord," Norman said. "She's dead." "We should have left her where she was," Norman said. "At least she'd be a live slave. Not just another dead runaway." I studied the lifeless body on the ground before me. "She was dead when I found her," I said. "She's just now died again, but this time she died free."

"It's a horrible world. White people try to tell us that everything will be just fine when we go to heaven. My question is, Will they be there? If so, I might make other arrangements."

"I hope they never find you," Huck said. "You'll be wishin' you was drowned in the Mississippi."

"Yes?"

"They want to hang you twice."

I nodded. I realized I couldn't be made more afraid than I was, than I had been my entire life."

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. *“White folks expect us to sound a certain way and it can only help if we don’t disappoint them.”*

Discuss the way James and the other slaves change their speech (code-switching) when around white people versus in private. Why was code-switching necessary? In what ways does the author portray code-switching as an act of irony?

2. Discuss the importance of Jim renaming himself James. How is his name change symbolic of many of the themes of this novel? Does your name hold any deeper significance to you?
3. *“Good ain’t got nuttin’ to do wif da law. Law says I’m a slave.”*

Despite his relationship with James, Huck grapples with the fact that, by law, he is ‘stealing’ James by not returning him to Miss Watson. Discuss the relationship between law and morality. Should individuals hold themselves accountable to laws that violate a moral code?

4. Discuss the dynamic between James and Huck. How did their relationship evolve throughout their travels, especially as James reveals their connection?
5. Throughout the novel, James meets several other slaves and runaways (Young George, Easter, Norman, Luke, Sammy, Brock, and several others). How did the author use these interactions to demonstrate the various experiences and mindsets of slaves? Did any of these characters or interactions surprise you?
6. How is religion portrayed in *James*? Do you believe this perspective is justified?
7. Talk about ‘the pencil’. What does the pencil represent to James? Have you ever assigned a deeper meaning to a physical object?
8. In what ways did James’ character change throughout the novel? Were there any key moments that you felt most contributed to his evolution?
9. What do you think about Norman’s decision to maintain his identity as a black man and runaway slave, even though he was white-passing? Why do you think the author chose to include this narrative?
10. Have you read *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, and if so, how did that impact your reading of *James*?
11. Bonus Question (excerpt from BBC discussion with author Percival Everett):

“The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn is no longer on the GCSE or A Level syllabus. To modern eyes, it’s too problematic. It’s even been banned by certain schools in America. Everett is opposed to book banning – although he said, he hopes they might ban his new book ‘only because I like irritating those people who do not think and read.’”

What is your position on book-banning in America and/or in the educational system? Should books portraying specific themes, language, or viewpoints be banned and who, if anyone, should make that decision? Can 'problematic' books still teach us something?

BOOK CLUB DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

(from the publisher; contain spoilers)

1. James is a retelling of Mark Twain's 1885 novel *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, which is widely regarded as a classic work of American literature. Have you read *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* before? How does Everett subvert Twain's original text? Did this reimagination change your perspective on the original novel?
2. Twain is well-known for his satirical writing. Where does Everett use humor and satire in *James*? What social and cultural conditions does the novel's satire mock or critique?
3. Reflect on Jim's narration. Why does he switch between vernacular and standardized English? How did this codeswitching affect your reading experience?
4. Describe Huck's role in the story. How does Jim's fugitive status, as well as race, color, class, age, and education, influence the relationship between the two characters?
5. *James* depicts the brutalities of slavery, particularly the violence inflicted upon enslaved women and girls, through the stories of Sadie, Lizzie, Sammy, and Katie. What are the unique threats that these characters must navigate? How does Jim react to the gendered violence that he encounters?
6. Return to Jim's travels with the minstrel group. What does the novel say about the performance of race? How do blackface minstrelsy and racial passing complicate or undermine racial classification? Can all the characters be seen as performers of race?
7. Jim's quest for freedom parallels his quest for literacy. Discuss the key moments on his journey to writing his story. What are the texts that he studies? Who are the characters who give him the tools and encouragement to write?
8. *James* references author William Wells Browning, composer Daniel Decatur Emmett, and philosophers John Locke, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and Voltaire. Consider researching these figures. How do they influence your understanding of the historical period?
9. Discuss the use of religion and superstition in the story.
10. Were you surprised by Jim's revelation in chapter one of part three? Returning to earlier passages, can you identify any moments of foreshadowing from Everett? How would you characterize Huck's reaction? Have you ever learned something shocking about your family's history?

11. James features an ensemble of fugitive and enslaved characters. How does Everett affirm the humanity of these characters in his writing? Was there one who was particularly memorable to you?
12. The Mississippi River is central to the landscape of the novel. What is the role of the river? How did it shape the political landscape of the region and the events of the novel?
13. Reflect on the title, James. What's the significance of Jim renaming himself? Why do you think Everett chose to title the novel in this way?
14. What was your reaction to the novel's ending? What do you think the future holds for James and his family?
15. After reading James, can you think of another character from a classic text that you would like to read as the narrator of their own story?

AWARDS

Pulitzer Prize for Fiction Winner

#1 *New York Times* Bestseller

National Book Award for Fiction Winner

National Book Critics Circle Award Finalist

Shortlisted for the Booker Prize

Kirkus Prize for Fiction Winner

Pen/Faulkner Award for Fiction Finalist

A Best Book of the Year: *The New York Times Book Review*, *LA Times*, *The New Yorker*, *The Atlantic*, *The Economist*, *TIME*, and 27 others.



AUTHOR BIO: PERCIVAL EVERETT

Percival Everett is a Distinguished Professor of English at USC. He is the author of more than 30 books. His most recent books include *Dr. No* (finalist for the NBCC Award for Fiction and winner of the PEN/ Jean Stein Book Award), *The Trees* (finalist for the Booker Prize and the PEN/Faulkner Award for Fiction), *Telephone* (finalist for the Pulitzer Prize), *So Much Blue*, *Erasure*, and *I Am Not Sidney Poitier*. He has received the NBCC Ivan Sandrof Life Achievement Award and The Windham Campbell Prize from Yale University. *American Fiction*, the feature film based on his novel *Erasure*, was released in 2023 and was awarded the Academy Award for Best Adapted Screenplay. He was born on December 22, 1956 in Georgia. He grew up in South Carolina, and he was educated at the University of Miami (BA) and Brown University (MA). His great-grandmother was, at one point, enslaved. He lives in Los Angeles with his wife, the writer Danzy Senna, and their children.

BROOKLYN PUBLIC LIBRARY BOOKMATCH READALIKES

Did you enjoy James? Want to read something similar?

Check out these readalike titles below.



Flight to Canada by Ishmeal Reed

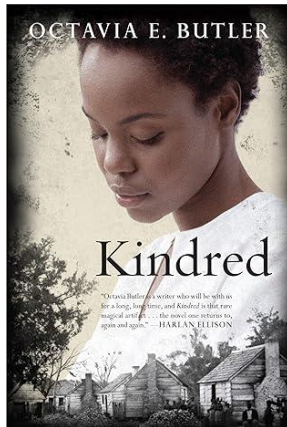
The Sellout by Paul Beatty

Demon Copperhead by Barbara Kingsolver

Yonder by Jabari Asim

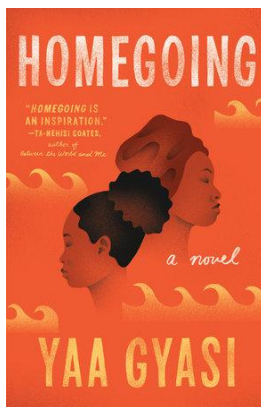
The Hacienda by Isabel Cañas

MORE BOOK RECOMMENDATIONS IF YOU LIKED JAMES



[Kindred](#), Octavia Butler

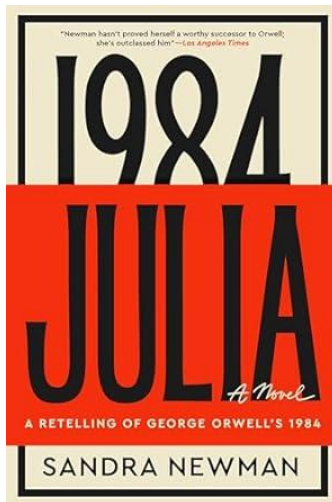
Kindred is the story of a young black woman living in 1970's California who is inexplicably transported back in time to a plantation where her ancestors lived in early 1800's Maryland. This novel explores life as a slave from a historical lens, but also from our main character's "modern" view, as she struggles to survive long enough to return to her life in real time. This is an excellent choice if you'd like to explore more of the themes of slavery but also examine their lasting impacts on society.



[Homegoing](#), Yaa Gyasi

Yaa Gyasi's *Homegoing* is a multi-generational family saga that takes the reader down the two distinct paths of half-sisters Effia and Esi, one of whom is married into a British family living in Ghana, and the other of whom is sold into the slave trade and sent to America. *Homegoing* is full of themes that will create lively discussion at your next book club, including discussions of

slavery and racism in America, the impacts of colonization and the slave trade in Africa, and many others.



[Julia](#), Sandra Newman

If you enjoyed reading a familiar story from a new perspective in *James*, try *Julia* by Sandra Newman. This novel is a clever retelling of George Orwell's *1984*, from the perspective of the main character Winston's love interest, Julia. Experiencing the tyrannical and terrifying world of *1984* from a woman's perspective adds new layers to the original classic.