

A Guide to Discussing *The FOG MACHINE*

Author Message

I grew up in the shadow and silence of Jim Crow—unaware of the march from Selma scarcely 100 miles from my hometown Meridian, MS where three civil rights workers disappeared during Freedom Summer. As an adult, I set out to examine and reimagine the times. *The FOG MACHINE* explores prejudice through the eyes of a 12-year-old white Catholic girl growing up in Mississippi; a young black Baptist woman who leaves Mississippi, as part of the Great Migration, for work as a live-in domestic in Chicago; and a Jewish Freedom Summer volunteer from New York City.

I advocate for using the power of story, to engage students in studying history and to help us all dismantle the stereotypes that divide us. It was Howard Fast’s Reconstruction-era novel *Freedom Road* that made me a student, lover, and writer of history. It’s a passion I work to share, especially with young people. Because knowing the history of Jim Crow-era Mississippi can help us understand and solve challenges we face across the U.S. today.

What began as a very personal, somewhat private mission to answer two questions for myself—*Why didn’t I know the history of my childhood? And what might be different if I had?*—has evolved into a passion for engaging hearts and minds for awareness and change. I’ve become a student of challenges facing our public education system, the school-to-prison pipeline, mass incarceration, and the undermining of voting rights. All intertwine within the tangle of systemic racism (for which the fog machine is a metaphor). And all relate to my appreciation of the 1964 Freedom Schools and principles of Freedom Summer.

Just as shadow and silence were key to sustaining Jim Crow, they are key to sustaining the conditions that have given rise to countless present-day divides with racism at their core. Just as Freedom Summer gave light and voice to injustices in Mississippi through education and canvassing, we today have much to learn and much to talk about. I wrote *The FOG MACHINE* to spark curiosity and conversation. I hope the following questions will assist your group in discussion, and I would love to hear from you with suggestions for additional questions and reactions on how your group engaged around the questions I’ve offered.

—Susan Follett

About the Book

These questions are intended to stimulate conversation about particulars of *The FOG MACHINE* as a work of literary fiction, including characterization, setting, and story.

1. There is an overarching theme to *The FOG MACHINE*. But, each main character also has an individual theme or motivation. How would you characterize these for Joan, C.J., and Zach?
2. What are some of the possible roots of C.J.’s reluctance/apprehension about becoming involved with civil rights efforts? Compare C.J.’s and Flo’s experience and views on becoming involved.

3. What did you note about dialect in *The FOG MACHINE*? How is C.J.'s speech different in Mississippi than in Chicago? What distinguishes her speech from Buddy's? What might explain this?
4. *The FOG MACHINE* is set from 1954 to 1964, with a concluding chapter in 1970. Could the general story play out as well if it were set earlier or later? How might this affect the overarching theme?
5. What is the significance of having the story move between Mississippi and Chicago? Which characters particularly serve to compare and contrast life in either place?
6. C.J. believes Mrs. Gray wants to get to know her because she's a Negro. Flo suggests the possibility that Mrs. Gray simply wants to get to know C.J. What do you believe motivates Mrs. Gray?
7. In what ways does Joan fit the stereotype of a southern white person? In what ways does she break stereotype?
8. What makes Joan vulnerable to Big Daddy? How does he influence her?
9. When C.J., Flo, and Zach first talk in Harry's deli, Flo responds to Zach's questions about the Montgomery boycott by saying "There's lots of Alabamas in Alabama, you understand." What do you think she means, and why do you think she feels the need to say this?
10. Why do you think the author chose three POV characters? How might the story have been different if limited to one point of view?
11. What comparable novels have you read? In what ways are they comparable? In what ways are they significantly different?
12. Of the three POV characters, who do you think changes the most? The least? Why?
13. If you could learn more about a particular character, which would it be and why?
14. What did you take away from reading *The FOG MACHINE*?

About Prejudice

These questions are intended to spark conversation about themes of *The FOG MACHINE* as they pertain to our American history and present-day challenges.

1. How would you characterize the overarching theme of *The FOG MACHINE*? How does the epigraph by Anatole France—*He prided himself on being a man without prejudice, and this itself is a very great prejudice.*—set the stage for the book?
2. Do you believe prejudice is instinctive or learned? What examples of either can you identify in *The FOG MACHINE*?
3. What breeds and sustains prejudice? Does your answer vary by region, whether within the U.S. or the world? Does your answer vary by time, comparing 50 years ago to today?

4. In his May 1965 address to Congress on voting rights, President Lyndon Johnson said: “There is no Negro problem. There is no Southern problem. There is no Northern problem. There is only an American problem.” Prejudice, though, has historically been depicted in literature and the media as a “southern problem,” even a “Mississippi thing.” How does *The FOG MACHINE* contradict the stereotype that the South has a particular claim on prejudice?
5. *The FOG MACHINE* encompasses Jim Crow, the Great Migration, and the Civil Rights Movement. How familiar were you with the history before you read? How did you gain this awareness? What new awareness did you take away from *The FOG MACHINE* about what is going on in our country and world today?
6. What do you think factored into the author’s decision as to whether to have C.J. and Zach end up together? In the various regions of our country today, what ending would you see as realistic? How about in our world?
7. A meritocracy may be defined as a social system in which people’s success depends primarily on their abilities and effort. Was Jim Crow Mississippi a meritocracy? Is America today a meritocracy? If not, what kinds of things might open doors for some through no virtues of their own?
8. How homogeneous is your world compared to that of Joan, C.J., and Zach in 1964? Are you more or less similar to your family, friends, and co-workers? To what extent might this influence your thinking on prejudice?
9. What insights did you gain from reading *The FOG MACHINE* about people whose skin is a different color than yours, who practice a different religion, or who live in a different part of the country or economic setting? What else would you like to know? How might you go about finding out?
10. In another epigraph, Ella Baker says: “Until the killing of black men, black mothers’ sons, becomes as important to the rest of the country as the killing of a white mother’s son, we who believe in freedom cannot rest until this happens.” How do you think the investigation into the disappearance of civil rights workers Chaney, Goodman, and Schwerner might have been influenced by two of the men being white?
11. What do you think enables or disables change in human beings? What role do family, culture, society, politics, personality, religion, what we value, what we fear, and who we meet play in determining what prejudice we feel and our ability to change?
12. Martin Luther King, Jr. said: “We must learn to live together as brothers or perish together as fools.” What would you give up in order to ensure greater equality and justice for everyone?
13. Are prejudice and racism the same thing? If not, what distinguishes one from the other? How do tactics for countering prejudice differ from those for countering racism? Can individuals counter both?

Then and Now

These questions are intended to initiate conversation about events, societal systems that support discrimination and inequality, and methods of opposition, both in the time in which *The FOG MACHINE* is set and today—in order to use history as foundation for understanding and tackling today’s challenges.

1. How would you compare what you learned in school about slavery, Jim Crow, the Civil Rights Movement to what your parents learned? To what your children or grandchildren are learning?
2. How would you compare sources of information in the 1960s to today?
3. Has anything in current times replaced the system of discrimination known as Jim Crow which Freedom Summer sought to dismantle?
4. How would you compare segregation in US schools in 1964 to today? Does your answer vary by region of the country, or by urban vs. suburban/rural? How do you think a voucher system or privatization might affect access to quality education?
5. In 1964, African Americans were prohibited from voting throughout the South. What methods kept them from voting? Do you see any similar obstacles to access to the ballot today? What impact have the 1965 Voting Rights Act and the 2013 US Supreme Court ruling in *Shelby v. Holder* had on access to the ballot?
6. Is the Civil Rights Movement over? Were necessary rights won? Are those rights secure today?
7. What similarities and differences do you see between the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and Black Lives Matter (BLM) or any of today’s movements and social justice organizations?
8. What parallels are there between lynchings before and during the Civil Rights Movement and killing of citizens of color today? Consider Emmett Till in Money, Mississippi in 1955 and Trayvon Martin in Sanford, Florida in 2012.
9. How do you see opportunities to achieve the American dream of home ownership across racial lines? Do you own your own home? Was buying a home made possible/easier for you or your parents because of the GI Bill or a gift/loan from family? Have you been denied the right to buy a home in any neighborhood, or been disqualified for a loan depending on neighborhood?
10. If you went to college, what factors made that possible for you? What particular obstacles might there be for people of color?
11. Do you have access to clean water? What do you know about the Dakota Access Pipeline and the crisis in Flint, Michigan? Who has been most affected by each?
12. What do you know about the following: 2014 killing of Eric Garner; 2015 Charleston church shooting; 2017 Women’s March; 2020 killing of George Floyd and protests in Portland, OR; separation of immigrant children from their parents; 2021 storming of the US Capitol? Is there any connection among these? How closely have they touched your life?