

TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION (from Lerner Publishing Out of Darkness Discussion Guide):
<https://www.lernerbooks.com/digitalassets/Assets/Title%20Assets/16981/9781467742023/Discussion%20Guide.pdf>

1. The book progresses chronologically, with the exception of a section at the beginning. This section, “The Explosion,” is from Wash’s perspective in the brief interval before and immediately after the gas explosion. Why do you think the author begins this way and doesn’t include this section later? How does this introduction set the tone for the rest of the novel?
2. How does Beto and Cari’s “good luck game” work? How does this game tie into the guilt Beto feels after Cari’s death?
3. Naomi believes that “carrying a name was a way of caring for those who’d given it.” How does Henry disrespect this idea?
4. Why, among Henry’s list of rules, does he ask that Naomi, Beto, and Cari refrain from speaking Spanish anywhere (in school, on the street, or elsewhere)?
5. Why do you think Beto decides to get baptized by Pastor Tom while Cari decides not to? How do these decisions reflect the differences in their personalities?
6. Why does Mr. Turner refuse to sell to Naomi during normal store hours? What racist remarks and actions does Naomi encounter throughout the novel, and how is this similar to and different from the racism Wash encounters?
7. Most of the members of Pastor Tom’s church are all too eager to find a scapegoat for their problems, though he preaches that the troubles come as a result of their sins. How do they believe what Pastor Tom preaches, but are quick to blame anyone but themselves?
8. How does Wash’s father advise him to approach Mr. Crane about the green gas idea? In general, what are Wash’s father’s rules when it comes to dealing with the white community, and how does Wash feel about this approach?
9. Why does Estella, Naomi’s mother, choose to cut her braid off and give it to Naomi just before her death? Similarly, what about Naomi’s choice to give the braid to Beto and his decision to put it in Cari’s coffin? What might the braid symbolize in these situations?
10. Why doesn’t Naomi tell Beto and Cari stories about their mother?
11. Twice in Henry’s room while he’s away, Naomi discovers that his Bible is open to Psalm 77: Thy footsteps are not known. Do you think this psalm resonates with Henry in a particular way, or has he simply left the Bible untouched? How might Naomi read these words in relation to Henry?
12. When Henry forces Beto to come along with him on a hunting trip, he tries to make Beto shoot a dove. What events later in the novel does this foreshadow?

13. Pastor Tom knows about Henry's weakness for alcohol and has some idea that he can be sexually impulsive. If he knows that these desires can override his responsibility to care for Naomi and the twins, why does the pastor nevertheless encourage Naomi to marry Henry?

14. What are the reasons Abuelita gives for why Naomi should marry Henry? How does her reasoning compare to Muff and Tommie's reasoning? What do these perspectives on Naomi's situation say about the time period and cultural context of the novel?

15. What experiences make Henry believe that he's bad luck? How does his conception of luck as something that's inherent and unchanging contrast with the twins' idea of luck?

16. Why do Naomi, Wash, Beto, and Henry all feel as if they are to blame for Cari's death? How do they respond to this feeling differently?

17. What happens when Henry tries to make Cari's coffin? What makes Wash's approach to making the coffin different from Henry's approach, and how does this reflect on the characters themselves and on the relationships Henry and Wash have with Naomi and the twins?

18. Do Pastor Tom's actions in response to the lynch mob change how you view his character? Why or why not?

19. Who is revealed to be the narrator of the story at the end of the novel? What is the narrator's motivation for telling Wash and Naomi's story?

20. The novel offers a range of dramatically different notions of what "love" and "family" mean and how they can drive action. Describe at least two contrasting understandings of these notions and explain what accounts for their differences.