



Colorado Book Club Resource

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FOR WIDE SARGASSO SEA BY JEAN RHYS

1. As a child, Antoinette Cosway wonders why the nuns at the convent do not pray for happiness. When Antoinette and Mr. Rochester arrive at their house after their wedding and journey, they drink a toast with two tumblers of rum punch. Antoinette says, "to happiness." Why does happiness elude her? When is she happy and what happens to those moments of happiness?
2. Antoinette's childhood is heavily overcast by threat. What are the threats from outside her household? What are the threats from within? To whom and to what does she turn for protection?
3. What is the racial situation as Antoinette is growing up? What does it mean that she gets called "white cockroach" and "white nigger?" How well do Antoinette and her mother understand the mindset of recently liberated slaves? What about the outsiders like Mr. Mason and Mr. Rochester?
4. How does Antoinette's experience of her mother's rejection shape her life? Is Antoinette like her mother? Could she have escaped her inherited madness? At what point is it too late? Is she really mad?
5. Sandi, Antoinette's cousin who is black, makes an appearance in each of the three sections of the novel. Were you surprised by Antoinette and Sandi's last scene together? What are the barriers that keep these two characters apart? In your opinion, could these barriers have been surmounted?
6. Mr. Rochester seems to marry Antoinette for money, or perhaps for lust, or perhaps for power. Mr. Rochester makes love to Antoinette in part to gain power over her. Antoinette persuades Christophine to use the power of her obeah to entice Mr. Rochester to her bed. Amelie has sex with Mr. Rochester for her own purposes, and Mr. Rochester sleeps with Amelie for his. What are the relationships between money, lust, sex, and power in the novel?
7. Perspective switches two times in the novel. What is the effect of reading the same story from different people's points of view? Which narrative voice do you trust more? Why?
8. For Antoinette, England is a dream; for Mr. Rochester, the Caribbean is a dream. How do these perceptions keep them from understanding each other? Do they want to understand each other? How does it protect each of them to remain distant?
9. Many of the characters are mad and many are drunk. How do madness and drunkenness serve the characters? Do they give the characters freedom? protection? the ability to see the truth? the ability to hide from it?
10. Whose account of Christophine seems closest to the truth to you? How does her obeah work or not work under these circumstances? How good is her advice? Can Antoinette follow it?
11. Language plays an important role in the novel. Mr. Rochester cannot understand patois. Does this give his "servants" power over him?



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12. Mr. Rochester starts to call Antoinette "Bertha," instead of her real name. "Names are important," she says toward the end of the novel. Does changing her name separate her from her family and her home?
13. In *Jane Eyre* the madwoman in the attic is a very unsympathetic character, an obstacle that stands in the way of the union of Mr. Rochester and Jane Eyre. Charlotte Brontë portrays Mr. Rochester as a man with a dark past who nevertheless is not to blame for the burden with which he is saddled. *Wide Sargasso Sea* obviously sees this situation from a different angle. What are some of the factors that might have led to the difference between Charlotte Brontë's version and that of Jean Rhys?
14. *Wide Sargasso Sea* has two fires—one in the first section and one in the last. How are these fires related? Who dies, who goes crazy, who is set free? Is there a parallel between the parrot in the first fire and Antoinette in the second?

Questions issued by publisher.



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